

Harry Potter

Frayed Ends

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Frayed Ends

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Chapter 1

Lost and Insecure... Lying On The Floor

It was frustrating, feeling like your life was going nowhere—stagnant and still while the world passed you by. It felt like if she stood on a street corner long enough, the entire earth would revolve in front of her, too fast for her to insert herself into it, and too slow to really make her think that she stood a chance of making a difference in it anyway.

Ron said she'd taken herself out of the game of life, as well as Quidditch.

Hermione said that she just needed some time to find herself.

Tonks seemed to be on the verge of understanding some days, and then she'd swing completely the opposite way the next day. It was hard to keep up with the witch, honestly.

Her mother, well Ginny didn't like to think of what her mother said, because it usually ended in her calling Ginny selfish and unreasonable. Although, that had been right after Ginny decided to move away, she'd calmed down considerably since then.

And maybe that's what she was being—selfish. Maybe they were all right in some way. Her other brothers had been suspiciously silent about most of what had happened over the past two years. They all had their opinions, yes, but they kept them mostly to themselves.

Two years.

It didn't seem that long and yet it seemed forever since Ginny had had a plan about her life. And then in the blink of an eye, in the crack of a bat and one blinding impact, everything she'd dreamed about was gone, leaving her with some semblance of life that she'd managed to scrape up for herself.

She was tired of people looking at her with pity, of talking about what might have been, whispering about the rumors in the papers about drugs and who knew what else, and so she'd left, mostly. She still ventured back into that world occasionally, mostly for family events, or the infrequent trip through Diagon Alley with Hermione or Tonks.

But out here in the Muggle world was better sometimes, because no one really knew who she was. No one out here looked at her as a once-promising person who could, and should, really do so much more with their life. Out here she was just Ginny Westin, another young woman fending for herself in the world.

Ginny watched the traffic ebb and flow along the street that ran in front of the pub. It was strange that the road itself reminded her of her life—a metaphor, Hermione would say. It was bustling and busy one minute, and then completely desolate another. Although the life cycle of the road seemed to rotate much faster than Ginny's world right now. In thirty minutes, the road may go through four or five full series of these phases. But Ginny just sat.

She shouldn't complain, really, she supposed. Things were... okay in her life right now. She had a job and she actually enjoyed it. People-watching had always been a habit of hers, even more so now that she spent so much time alone.

She had a decent flat, and two flat mates who definitely kept things interesting; their rather wild lifestyles shocked and awed Ginny at times, while mostly keeping her amused. The front door of the small flat almost needed one of those rotating door things that let people in and out at their convenience.

It wasn't the ideal situation for Ginny, having to keep everything that was a part of her life private, or hidden away at Tonks' or Hermione's. Hermione currently had Ginny's owl, Avery, at her flat. Really, he was more Hermione's owl than not anymore. He rarely even came to see Ginny and when she did make an appearance at Hermione's, he would get huffy with her and turn his back, ruffling his grey feathers in annoyance.

There was currently no boyfriend—that had ended about two seconds after the Healers had announced that Ginny wasn't going to have a career in Quidditch. Seth Phillips had been at the height of his Quidditch career when the accident had happened. He certainly didn't want a girlfriend who wasn't immersed in that world as much as he was. Then again, maybe it was that Ginny wasn't immersed completely in *him* that was the sticking point. They'd never had the ideal relationship, truthfully. It was convenience more than affection that kept them together for six whole months. Who needed men right now anyway?

"You've got that look again," Alannah, one of Ginny's flat mates who also worked at the pub with her, leaned her chin on Ginny's shoulder and stared out the same window Ginny was. "The one that says you're thinking entirely too much."

Ginny forced a laugh and nudged her shoulder free. Alannah was nice, but she was one of those people who were very clingy, always hanging off of someone, touching someone's arm when she spoke to them. It was rather off-putting to Ginny, anyway. Blokes seemed to love it—then again, perhaps they allowed it simply because of the package it came in.

"You know me," Ginny muttered, thinking that it was the furthest thing from the truth. Neither of her flat mates knew her at all, honestly. In their presence, she was simply who she needed to be to make it out here in this world: a slightly odd young woman with mysterious friends and an even more mysterious past. She was like a puzzle to the two girls and they rarely tired of poking and prodding her for answers.

"I think you need a night out," Alannah sighed dramatically, throwing her hands wide in the almost empty seating area of the pub. "You need to get pissed and go home with someone you don't know—and possibly never even ask his name!"

Ginny forced herself not to be sick all over the counter. It sounded like exactly the thing she wanted to avoid, actually. She wasn't opposed to drinking—not at all, in fact—but Ginny was always careful when she did drink. The few times she'd been really pissed stood out enough in her mind that she didn't want to repeat them.

As for seeking out a one night stand, the whole idea made her stomach roll uncomfortably. She

wasn't that type of girl, at all. Even through the small handful of men she'd dated—both during Hogwarts and after—she'd never found anyone she felt comfortable enough with to allow them that close. Seth had been after her since they first started seeing each other to let that guard down, but she never had, and after awhile he stopped asking. She had the feeling he had plenty of witches willing to let him see what was in their knickers.

"No thanks," Ginny grimaced. "You know I don't go in for all that type of stuff."

Alannah sighed and hopped up on the low counter, swinging her legs back and forth. "I know. I just wish you'd let me set you up with this one—"

"Nope," Ginny shook her head firmly. "I'm not interested."

"How do you know unless you—"

"I know," Ginny assured her with a chuckle. "I just... I'm just not ready to date anyone yet."

"Are you still pining over that one... what was his name?"

Ginny laughed and shook her head. "Not at all. He was so arrogant he needed to date himself."

"I think I've met him," Alannah joked, "unless he has about a hundred twin brothers."

Ginny smirked and nudged her friend off the counter as an elderly couple came into the pub. The old woman was scolding her white haired husband.

"You're a dirty old man, Albert Wiggins," she hissed, swiping her hand at his shoulder. "You were ogling a girl who is young enough to be your great-granddaughter."

"Was not," Albert grumbled, shuffling in and taking his hat off. "What do you want to eat, old woman?"

"Same thing I always order, you dirty old man. What am I going to do with you?"

Albert grinned and leaned forward to kiss his wife before winking at her. "Spend another sixty years with me?"

"Haven't I suffered enough?" the woman said, the sting from her words now gone.

Ginny bit her lip as she watched Albert lead his wife to a seat and tried to ignore Alannah's snorted laugh from where she'd ducked behind the bar.

How wonderful would it be to find someone she could still chide when they were eighty?

She forced the loneliness away and focused on taking Albert's order when he shuffled up to the bar.

"I'll bring that out when it's finished," she smiled.

Albert winked at her before turning and she couldn't help but giggle at him. Maybe he really was a dirty old man.

Harry tossed the last box into the pile of flattened cardboard and looked around the house. It was small and identical to those on each side of the row, but it was all his. He'd been excited to finally have a place of his own that didn't have to be hidden away after so many years of living under a Fidelius Charm. Sirius would have preferred Harry still be under the charm, but Harry was tired of running and hiding. He'd been doing that all his life; he didn't need to do it any longer.

"Home sweet home," he muttered, glancing around, pleased that everything had a place, even if it was a bit sparse in here. It's not like he owned a lot of furniture or things to hang on the walls. A few framed photographs rested on the heavy fireplace mantel, and a few more personal possessions were scattered around, making it feel a bit more like home.

Hedwig hooted from her perch near the one window.

"It does suit us," Harry responded, flopping back in the second hand chair he'd taken from Sirius' house and resting his feet on the coffee table. "Don't worry, girl, we'll fill in the blanks a bit as we go. No rush to fill all the spaces right now."

Hedwig ruffled her feathers and flapped over to Harry's shoulder, lightly nipping his ear and then arranging bits of his hair with her beak. It was a familiar gesture that made Harry smile. Hedwig had been his best friend for a very long time. He wasn't sure what he'd do if she ever got too old to be around anymore.

"Sirius promised he'd come over in a couple days," Harry continued, stroking the soft white feathers on Hedwig's chest. "He promised he wouldn't hover, however," he added with a chuckle. "But I think he'll probably go around the twist up there in that house all by himself."

A sting of loneliness crept in and Harry allowed it to wash over him. He'd been alone a long time. Even with Sirius there... well, it wasn't like having friends he could call up and do something with. He'd never had anyone like that. He and Sirius were family, but it was different.

"You know what he told me?" Harry asked Hedwig indignantly. "He actually told me I'd been cramping his dating style for the last twenty years." He let out a laugh that echoed through the rather empty house, bouncing off the magnolia walls and lending very little light and humor to the evening.

Hedwig finished arranging his hair and nuzzled him before flapping away.

"Good idea," he nodded. "You have a good night, Hedwig. Sleep tight."

He stared at his familiar as she preened her feathers and then tucked her head under her wing, settling down on her perch for the night.

"Maybe I should try and find something to eat," Harry muttered before rolling his eyes at himself. "Listen to me, talking to myself." He heaved himself out of the chair and rubbed beneath his glasses. His eyes stung a bit from the glamour charms he wore almost constantly. He removed his wand and released the charms, feeling his face stretch slightly and become less full. His eyes twitched and he blinked them before rubbing them once more. Now they were their real almond

shape, and green, rather than the muddy hazel he wore when trying to keep secret who he was.

The fridge was rather bare, other than a slightly questionable meat pie that Sirius had hastily shoved into Harry's hands before leaving this afternoon.

"At least make the house Unplottable if you won't allow me to put it under a charm," his godfather had grumbled, making Harry smirk. He'd given in, eventually and the house was now slightly hidden, but not completely. There were no Muggle-Repelling charms, because that would defeat the purpose of ordering pizza, Harry insisted.

It was just over five years since the end of the war—if no one had found him yet, no one was going to now. Sirius was just a good worrier.

"Guess this will have to do," Harry shrugged, selecting a container of left-overs and took the whole thing out of the fridge, warming it with a charm and taking the entire thing into the living room with him, along with a fork. He perched in front of the telly and flipped through a few channels before watching something with laughter. He'd missed the punch line of whatever joke they'd told, but hearing the voices helped him feel just a bit better about being alone.

He awoke several hours later to eerie shadows dancing on the blue-lit walls. His neck made a loud popping sound when he lifted it and he rubbed at the knot of muscles and swore softly.

"Stupid," he grumbled, "falling asleep here."

He mashed his finger on the button that turned the telly off and the light faded from the room, plunging him into darkness. His eyes adjusted slowly and he stared into the black of night, wrapping the silence around himself like a blanket that offered no comfort.

The loneliness hadn't really been an issue for some time. Sirius was always around before and Harry had always had more than enough on his mind to take away the thoughts. When he was little he'd often wished for friends, like normal little boys, but Sirius had always promised the day would come when he'd be able to be normal.

He snorted a bit at the idea of himself being 'normal' and the sound was swallowed by the empty house.

He was twenty-two years old, for Merlin's sake, being alone shouldn't be like this. Alone was okay. He'd been alone before, and even though he longed for friends, for people to share his life with, it was okay if they weren't here.

"Maybe one day," he mumbled, stumbling through the dark to his new bedroom and crawling beneath the blanket.

Chapter 2

Better To Do Without

"I wondered when we were going to see you again."

Ginny tried not to roll her eyes when Tonks' words met her. Sometimes these little shopping trips got to be tedious.

"Good to see you too," she replied, glaring at her friend. "I'm well, thanks. The job is going good, flat mates are still nutters, but other than that..."

"Knock it off," Tonks laughed, "it's me you're talking to. You may be able to fool some people, but a few of us have you figured out."

Ginny felt her face heat as she slid into the booth at the Leaky Cauldron and glanced around nervously. Several pairs of eyes landed on her, stares full of curiosity and pity. Oh look, there's the Weasley girl, you remember her. Promising career until she went crazy.

She could read it on their faces.

"Settle down," Tonks chided mildly. "You don't care what they think."

"I don't," Ginny lied, grimacing and pushing a breath out of her cheeks. "Where's Hermione?"

"Late, surprisingly," Tonks shrugged. She picked up a lonely chip off her plate and toyed with it before taking a small bite. "I hear they've been running her ragged in the Law Division."

"She's good at it, though." Ginny found a crease in the table and ran the edge of her fingernail along it. "How is everyone else? Mum sends her weekly letters, but..."

"You haven't been home in a few weeks," Tonks nodded knowingly. "There was talk last week at the Weasley dinner about going out and dragging you back, you know."

Ginny sighed and laid her head back along the booth. "I just... I just need some time."

"Two years hasn't been enough?"

"Don't," Ginny warned. "I'm... I'm happy right now."

"Liar," Tonks chided with a smirk. "I know that look. I've worn it enough when Remus was trying to push me away. You can pretend all you want, but that doesn't mean happiness will appear from nowhere."

"How is Remus?" Ginny asked, sitting up straighter. Remus had always held a special place in Ginny's heart. He was there for her in her second year, when she'd just come out of that mess with the diary and had needed someone to talk to. They'd talked for long hours about darkness and how much it can affect you if you let it.

"Nice subject change," Tonks grinned. "He's good. Still as stubborn as ever."

Ginny's eyes flashed over Tonks' hand, noticing the still empty ring finger. Remus was still hesitant to further their relationship and make things official because of his... condition. It was one of the things Ginny did hate about the man; she didn't understand it at all, especially after he'd been so adamant about her trying to move on after the Chamber.

"One of these days I'll simply just get preggers and then he'll have to marry me," Tonks smirked.

"Dora!" Ginny hissed, looking around the pub. "Don't say things like that."

"What?" Tonks shrugged innocently. "It might work."

"And what if it pushes him over the edge and he leaves?"

"I'm an Auror, love," Tonks rolled her eyes, "I'd simply track him down and haul him back."

Ginny couldn't help the bubble of laughter that welled out of her at the no nonsense statement. A picture formed in her head and it was a very believable one of Tonks doing just that.

"Hi, everyone," Hermione sighed as she slipped into the booth next to Ginny. "Sorry I'm late. I got caught up at work." She threw her arms around Ginny's shoulders and squeezed her tightly. "I've missed you."

"Missed you too," Ginny replied, her earlier irritation melting away as they began to chat about work and the family.

Being away was harder than Ginny expected it would be. Then again, it was easier as well. After she'd been injured, Ginny had spent long months dealing with the loss of her dreams. All of her brothers, as well as her parents and friends, had tried to offer suggestions about what she should do with her life, but none of them felt like they fit right. Or maybe it was Ginny who was wrong.

She'd never considered anything but playing professional Quidditch when she left school. She was damn good at it and had dreamed of it since she was a little girl, stealing her brothers' brooms at night and playing games by the light of the moon.

When that dream died, the rest of her sort of shriveled up like an Abyssinian shrivel fig. Retreating from the press and the prying eyes of everyone who had watched her dramatic fall from the top helped, Ginny hid in the Burrow. But in the end it was not enough that Ginny felt like she was fully healing from any of it. Leaving seemed to help.

"Guess who I ran into the other day?" Tonks grinned. When she wore that look there was only one person she could be talking about.

"Please tell me you left him alone," Ginny groaned. She took a long swallow of her butterbeer, savoring the rich taste that melted on her tongue. She missed the taste when she was out there in the Muggle world.

"Why would I do that?" Tonks laughed, shaking her head as if Ginny had completely lost her mind.

“Maybe it would be best if—”

“It was only a mild itching hex, Hermione,” Tonks dismissed, “don’t get your knickers in a twist. And Phillips is a prick. He treated Ginny like rubbish, and you both know it. I happen to know he cheated on you with at least three girls.”

“I knew about them,” Ginny sighed. “I just didn’t care anymore.”

“Then why were you with him so long?” Hermione turned. “There are so many better men out there, Ginny. Men who would love and cherish you.”

“Where?” Ginny demanded. “Because I haven’t found one yet.”

Hermione sighed and her shoulders slumped. “I wish I could tell you exactly where to look, but I can’t.”

“We can’t all meet our soul mates at age eleven, Hermione,” Ginny smiled sadly. A hollow area in her heart gave a violent stab. She’d always been too spoiled when growing up, hearing all about her parents’ love story and how they’d met at Hogwarts. The silly little eleven year-old girl that she was had expected to step off the train and fall into the arms of a handsome, older boy whom she’d fall in love with.

Instead, she landed herself in the middle of a huge mess where students had been injured and Dumbledore had been forced to come and rescue her from her own stupidity.

Ginny’s ideals on love had taken a violent twist that year, jading her for a very long time.

“One day you’ll meet someone,” Hermione assured her with a pat on her hand.

“Enough of this,” Ginny shook her head. “I have a late shift tonight, let’s decide what we’re going to do and get on with it.”

The women laughed and paid their bill, spilling out into the alley. After an obligatory stop at George’s shop, where she was hugged and scolded and very nearly kidnapped by her over-eager brother, they made their monthly visit to Flourish and Blotts for Hermione.

Tonks buried herself in the Defense section, as usual, while Ginny prowled the aisles, not really looking at anything unless it caught her eye.

Hermione was near the History section—her latest obsession. She was determined to work her way around the store, thoroughly exhausting each section before moving on to the next one.

“It’s a wonder you have spare money for rent,” Ginny commented with a laugh when she walked by and found Hermione levitating a large stack of books next to her.

“I’m not going to buy them *all*,” Hermione dismissed. “I just don’t know which one I want most, so I’m making a priority stack.”

“Logical,” Ginny complimented with a smirk. She snatched one off the top of Hermione’s stack and blinked at the title.

"The Mysterious Harry Potter," she read, scrunching her nose in distaste. "Are you honestly considering this rubbish? You do know who wrote it—that Skeeter bitch."

Once upon a time, Ginny would have devoured any book with the name Harry Potter in the title. But she'd been young and naïve, and had dreams of falling in love with a mysterious and handsome man who would sweep her off her feet. The name Harry Potter had stuck in her mind from her bedtime stories and she'd harbored a silly little girl crush on the boy for years before finally deciding it was never meant to be.

Hermione nodded her head to the side. "I know, but... you can't tell me you aren't curious. I mean, the man is a virtual ghost. He disappears for years and years and then mysteriously turns up to defeat Voldemort, only to vanish once more. You know that some people say that he's not even a real person, but some spirit from another realm sent to—"

"Spare me the details of whatever the Prophet is printing," Ginny sighed, tossing the book back onto the spot. "He's not a ghost, or a spirit... he's just a bloke, trying to keep his sanity out there in a world where no one is allowed any privacy at all. I can't blame him for hiding away from everything. Imagine what his life would have been like if he'd been here; always having to deal with people in his business, wanting to know how he survived that killing curse, demanding that he deal with Voldemort—that's no life to live."

"He's an artist with his charm work, that's for sure," Hermione said, picking up the book and thumbing through it. The pages were suspiciously void of photographs, and the ones that were there were horribly smudged so that a face was barely recognizable. "This Obfuscation charm is just brilliant."

"Sort of makes me wish I'd had one when the press were all over me," Ginny mused.

"Oh, Ginny..."

"It's okay." She pushed away the melancholy moment. "So, tell me what Ron's been up to."

Hermione's face lit up brightly and she bounced on the balls of her feet. "He's been promoted! He's now a full Auror instead of a trainee."

Ginny smiled, both for her brother and his girlfriend. She'd known about the promotion, actually, because her mother's letters were always full of news on the family, as well as questions about when she was coming home and what she was doing, but it was good to see Hermione's excitement about it. "When is he going to make an honest woman of you?"

Hermione's raving about Ron's job broke off and she spluttered, her face turning bright red. "Ginny!"

"Oi! Look what I found!" Tonks' raised voice over the entire bookstore made them both turn. She must have gotten bored in the Defense section, however, because she was standing in the Wizarding Romance section, holding a book with moving diagrams out for everyone to see.

Ginny snorted and doubled over in laughter while Hermione's eyes bulged.

"We spend entirely too much time with that woman," she grumbled, pretending she couldn't hear Tonks calling out the name of whatever position she found so interesting.

* * *

"I think this may be some of your finest work yet, Cub." Sirius ran his hand up and down the fine wood of the broom shaft, appreciating each subtle dip and groove in the grain.

"Thanks," Harry said, trying not to let his cheeks heat too much. Sirius' approval had always meant the world to him.

"Did you use a shaping charm or—"

"Carved it by hand," Harry shook his head. "It seems like cheating any other way."

Sirius laughed and shook his head, balancing the weight of the broom perfectly on his hand. "Feels like it will ride perfect."

"It's not perfect," Harry dismissed. "The shaft is right, but I haven't got the accurate tail configuration yet. This one tilts slightly to the left."

"Well, I meant perfect for someone who is lopsided then." Sirius barked out a laugh and Harry rolled his eyes before snatching the broom back and setting it next to his Firebolt 3 in the tall grass.

The sky was a brilliant, bright blue today. It would be hot later, but this early in the morning was perfect for flying—the bite of an early autumn in the air. They'd just gotten down from playing a quick game of chase—a full-on game wasn't possible with only two of them.

"So, how goes the living alone?" Sirius nudged Harry's shoulder and then lay back in the grass, tucking his hands behind his head and crossing his long legs out in front of him.

"Same as you, I'd imagine," Harry shrugged. "It's pretty quiet in the place, but I'm managing. Haven't burned the kitchen down yet."

Sirius gave a sour look and Harry had to laugh. He hated it when Harry brought up that incident.

"I did *not* burn it down."

"You set it on fire."

"Which I put out immediately," Sirius pointed out huffily.

"Whatever. Flames and smoke equals fire."

"Anyway," Sirius grumbled, ignoring the way his mouth quirked up on the side in amusement. "I'm glad you're figuring it out. I never had to worry about living on my own because your father, or Remus, or even Peter were always around somewhere."

Harry nodded, having heard the stories a million times. He stared out over the bright grass of the field and wondered what his life would be like if he were normal—if he'd been allowed to attend

Hogwarts and been allowed to have friends. He might have even had a girlfriend.

He'd been out on a few dates, but there was always an extreme awkwardness about them that Harry never felt the need to continue seeing the girls. They weren't anyone special either, just... just girls he'd met after the war, while he was pretending to be someone else.

He was still pretending to be someone else now, but he hadn't tried dating again. Not for a while. But maybe he should start looking for someone—even just someone to pass the time with, someone to take to a film or have dinner with. Muggle girls seemed... less complicated than witches somehow. Then again, Harry had virtually no experience with witches anyway. But there was always the possibility that a witch might ask too many of the right questions and start putting things together. Harry valued his privacy.

"... and then this one time—"

"I've heard this one," Harry smirked.

Sirius spluttered. "You... you can't have, I haven't told you—"

"You've told me all of them," Harry protested. "I know every story that's archived in your head."

Sirius opened his mouth to protest, but then it snapped closed. "You probably do," he conceded.

"Give me a few months for the boredom to set in and then I'll invite you over to retell them." The comment was meant more as a joke, but Sirius seemed to sense the real feeling behind it and sat up.

"Are you sure that you're alright, Cub?"

Harry shrugged a shoulder and tugged at the grass, pulling a handful and letting it sift through his fingers. "Sure, why wouldn't I be?"

"Lots of reasons," Sirius shrugged. "Other than me, you don't really see anyone anymore. Even Remus commented the other day that he hasn't seen you in months."

Harry scowled. "He's the one who stopped coming around."

"I know," Sirius sighed. "Remus is... he's difficult at times, Harry. Him and his 'furry little problem'. He's closed himself off almost completely from everyone over the past few years. I know he's still in contact with the Order, and I suspect he might have been seeing someone, actually. But he refuses to talk about it at all.

"The things he was forced to do during the war..." Sirius trailed off and Harry swallowed through a dry throat.

He could only imagine the horrors that Remus saw while infiltrating the werewolf covens. He'd barely survived the Final Battle, narrowly escaping Fenrir Greyback and being forced to kill the monster with his bare hands.

"I wish I could do something for him," Harry shrugged. "But I have no idea..."

"None of us do," Sirius shook his head. "Even Albus tried before his death, Harry. I wish you could have met Remus when he was younger—when James was around to help take the edge off. Hell, I wish you could have met us all then."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I need to get back." His mumbled comment seemed to melt into the air between them as Sirius stared, his mind lost in the past. While he'd been a wonderful father figure to Harry, Sirius had his own demons that he'd allow to take over from time to time. Add to that the isolation that they'd lived in for so long, and the stress of constantly training to help fulfill Harry's destiny and it was little surprise to Harry that Sirius was like he was.

They were all damaged from what they'd been through. Horribly damaged.

"Do you have money for food and stuff?" Sirius asked, startling Harry as he gathered up the brooms and Quaffle.

"I'm good," Harry nodded. "I'll go get some things in the next few days, but... I have enough."

"Let me know if you don't want to go into London and... I'll think of something. Maybe I can send Remus. He'd probably like an errand. He loves it when I send him for things."

Harry snorted, remembering the countless arguments over the years about Remus being sent on errands all over the place. One time Sirius had even contacted him in the middle of the night, requesting a sundae from Fortescue's. Remus had explained just where he could shove his sundae and ended the conversation on the mirrors that they used for communication.

Just before Harry Disapparated, Sirius spoke up.

"Do me a favor, Cub?"

"Yeah?" Harry's eyebrows rose. Sirius rarely asked much of him.

"Try and... well, try and find a girlfriend, or at least go on a date, or find a friend. You... you need someone else in your life. Being alone all the time will just get you where I am—stuck in an old house alone, staring at the walls and feeling them close in on you. Or, if that's too much, just go out and get laid."

Harry snorted, dismissing the thought in his mind completely. Being that intimate with someone wasn't in the cards for him right now. Not that he didn't crave it, because he did—his body reminded him every single morning that he was twenty-two years-old and still a virgin. But the commitment and connection he'd have to share with a woman before he felt comfortable doing that was something that Harry didn't know if he could find right now. There was just no one...

"We'll see," he shrugged. "You know, Padfoot, that's good advice the other way also."

Sirius laughed again, the sound echoing over the field. "I just might think about it."

Chapter 3

Happiness Is Just Outside My Window

Harry stared into the ice box and tried to decide if there was conceivably enough inside to scrape together something that might resemble supper. Giving it up as a bad job, he closed the door and wandered back into the living room, staring at Hedwig's empty perch. He'd let her out to go hunting just a few hours before. She'd likely be gone most of the night.

"Fine, I'll go out," he mumbled to no one, snatching his jacket off the hook near the door and checking the mirror to make sure his glamour charms were in place. He brushed his hand through his hair, knowing it wouldn't matter anyway; the wind was blowing outside and his hair was always a mess anyway.

Down the block and to the south was a small pub that Harry had passed often, but had never gone inside. It seemed brightly lit and fairly clean, even if it looked fairly deserted when he stepped inside, escaping the stiff, cold wind.

"Hiya," the blonde woman behind the bar greeted him, smiling widely.

"Lo," Harry nodded, taking a seat at the far end, away from the only other person there—an elderly man who was reading a newspaper and picking absently at a dish of something.

"What can I get for you?"

The blonde was there, right in front of him, leaning her breasts on the bar. Harry's eyes went wide as she slid a menu so that he was forced to look right at them.

"Er... I don't know," he admitted. "Give me a minute to look."

She looked as if she'd possibly stay there all night, so Harry raised the menu, blocking her from his sight completely. It wasn't that he didn't find her attractive, but... when women were so blatant about their interest it turned him off, honestly.

"Alannah."

Another female voice called out and the blonde sighed loudly before disappearing through the door that presumably led to the kitchen. Harry was grateful for the reprieve, but he didn't look up, just in case the next woman was even worse.

"Sorry about that. She can be a little... well..."

Harry lowered the menu and smiled at the woman revealed. She was much better to look at than the blonde; a face free from caked-on makeup, her red hair pulled back, and her shirt covering everything necessary. She was lovely, actually, with a genuine smile.

"S'okay," he shrugged.

"Have you had a chance to decide?" she motioned to the menu. "Personally, I'd avoid the fish, if you want something decent."

Harry chuckled at her conspiratorial tone and moved his finger away from the listings with fish. "What's good then?"

"Here?" the redhead asked with a chuckle. "Not much. We do an alright meat pie, but I've had better."

Harry laughed aloud and folded the menu, sliding it back across the worn wood to her. "I'll give it a go," he nodded.

"Ooo, bravery in a man," she nodded, "I like that."

He felt his face heat as she walked away and his eyes strayed to her backside before he tore them away. She was flirting, but in a much more attractive way than women usually flirted with him. She was funny and nice, and it was refreshing.

"Now, what can I get you to drink? Lager? Ale?"

"How about a Coke?" he asked.

The woman seemed to ponder that for a minute, tilting her head to the side. "Interesting choice."

"What?" he asked with a laugh.

"Well, it's sort of this game I play, I guess," she explained. "When someone comes in, I try to guess what they're going to order to drink. I had you pegged as an ale."

Harry chuckled and shrugged. "Normally you'd be right. But tonight's a Coke night."

"Good enough," she nodded, handing him his drink. "That food will be up soon."

Without another word she turned and went down to the far end of the bar, striking up a conversation with Gregory—Harry overheard her say his name—who sounded like a regular from the way they were talking.

Harry sipped at his drink and watched her surreptitiously, trying not to look like he was watching. She was petite and not as curvy as some women—like the blonde who kept peeking at him from the kitchen door—but she was very attractive.

He caught her eye once and was surprised when her cheeks flushed pink and she stammered out her response to Gregory's question. His stomach flipped over uncomfortably and Harry wondered if he'd be able to eat at all with her standing right there. He'd never actually felt this way about a woman before; even the few women he'd dated hadn't made him feel as if he had developed an instant crush on them.

Because that's probably all it was, he told himself, just a little crush on a pretty woman.

"Here you go, love," she said, startling him from his contemplation as she slid a steaming meat pie

under his nose. She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "There's a trick to this eating alone business, you know."

Harry peered at her, nudging his glasses up higher onto his nose. "Yeah?"

A smile stretched her face. "Of course. Take Gregory over there," she nodded to the grey haired man at the end of the bar. "He's here every night at this same time, always alone. He's discovered the trick of it."

"And what would that be?"

"Making it seem as if it's your choice," she shrugged, bouncing a bit on the balls of her feet as her hand picked at a towel she had in her grip. "If you act like you want to be alone, then people leave you alone."

Harry couldn't help himself. He smiled. "What if you don't *want* to be alone?"

His question caught her off guard and she chuckled. "Well, that's a whole different sort of problem. You'll have to come back on Fridays, that's the night I give out free advice on life. I normally charge for information like that, but tonight's was free of charge." She winked and Harry laughed.

"My name is Ginny, by the way, if you need anything." Her hand extended over the bar and Harry took it in his, noticing the calluses there.

"Harry."

"Nice to meet you."

* * *

Ginny could feel Harry's eyes on her and it unnerved her, making everything she did feel thick and clumsy. Gregory blinked at her with suspicion when she had a hard time adding his bill—the exact same bill he'd been getting every night when he came in, because he always ordered the same thing.

And then his eyes had traced her secretive looks across the room and he'd smiled knowingly, giving her a little pat.

"I know the total, dear," he said, handing over exact change. "Want me to hang around? Be a chaperone?"

She laughed and rolled her eyes, forcing herself to take a deep breath. "I'm sure I can manage, Greg. Thanks."

"Good luck then," he whispered, sliding slowly off his stool, tucking his newspaper under his arm and shuffling out of the door with a salute to the almost-empty room.

Now that it was just she and Harry alone in the room, Ginny let out a shuddering breath. Alannah would look in and gaze longingly at the man picking at his pie, but she scurried out when Ginny would give her a dark look. Really, Ginny was saving her job, Alannah had been reprimanded twice

for trying to chat up customers.

The silence was almost deafening and Ginny's mind raced, trying to think up something to say. Harry was nearing the end of his dinner—well, he was done picking at it, anyway—and she almost didn't want him to leave.

Not since she was young had she felt the attraction to a man like this. Back then it had been a boy in the year ahead of her, Michael Corner, who had made her stomach flutter and her heart race. They'd dated for a few months before his attitude betrayed him to be nothing more than a normal, arrogant boy.

Dating Dean Thomas had been similar, but he was a friend of her brothers and thus, more familiar in a warm, friendly way.

Seth's attention had been flattering at first, but Ginny's interest in anything real with him died out the first time he stepped in front of her at a Quidditch Banquet so that she didn't block his photo opportunity.

Harry was... well, he was a mystery.

"This is the first time you've been in here," she mused, walking behind him and straightening a few of the chairs and tables. "I rarely forget a face."

"It is," Harry said, turning in his seat and watching her with intense eyes. Ginny felt her face heat, but she forced her eyes to stay on task, and not to drink him in. Honestly, she was starting to act just like Alannah—ogling any man who was under sixty and walked in the door. "I just moved to the area recently."

"That's nice," Ginny complimented. "Where did you come from?"

"Er... north," he answered a bit cryptically.

Ginny held up her hands and laughed. "Point taken. Mind your own business, you crazy pub-lady."

"Not at all," Harry dismissed with a laugh. "I just... I don't usually like to talk about myself."

Ginny nodded, understanding that completely. Taking a chance, she pulled out the seat next to him and eased onto it.

"I'm the same way, usually," she nodded, smiling sheepishly. He was definitely good looking: black hair that looked soft and was mussed from the wind outside, eyes that were a light hazel color, hidden behind thin glasses. His nose was straight and his lips thin. Overall, he was tall and wiry, and Ginny flushed, her mind jumping to what he might look like without a shirt on. Her eyes darted to his finger, noticing no mark there for a ring; so he most likely wasn't married.

"Have you worked here long?" Harry asked, drinking the last of his drink.

"About a year and a half," Ginny nodded. "Before that... well, I was an athlete, actually."

"Really?" he sat up taller, peering thoughtfully at her. Ginny felt her cheeks heat and prayed he

didn't ask what sport she'd played. She should have just kept her mouth shut.

"Yeah, but... I was injured two years ago and... Well, it just wasn't meant to be."

"I'm sorry," he said softly. His tone wasn't fully of pity at all, sounding more... sympathetic, really. "I, er, I know what it's like to have to give up on dreams. It's hard to find the desire to go on at times. And you just feel so... lost."

"Exactly," she nodded. Her heart raced in her chest and she fought the urge to reach out and touch his hand. "And no one really understands unless they've been through that—had their life ripped apart and stood there, wondering where the next breath was going to come from."

"Yeah," he agreed softly. There was an intense moment where their eyes met and Ginny felt like she could get lost in his gaze. She finally forced her eyes away, looking down to her hands that twisted in her lap.

"I should... get back," she said finally, gesturing to the empty bar. It felt almost like a betrayal to leave though, because she hadn't ever met anyone who seemed to understand how she felt about not being able to play anymore. This man was a stranger, and yet he seemed so familiar.

"Oh, yeah," he nodded awkwardly, his gaze heavy as she left the chair and moved back to the other side of the bar.

"Did you... enjoy the food at least?"

He tried to nod and look positive, he really did. But the slight hesitation told Ginny all she needed to know.

"I warned you it wasn't great." She laughed when he tilted his head to the side in agreement. "Now you'll probably never come back." She took a chance and winked at him, pleased when his face flushed.

"I'd come back anyway," he said softly, pulling money from his wallet.

Ginny totaled up his bill and took the money, giving him change, all the while trying to take her time, delaying his departure. In the end, she was sure she said something completely silly and girly to him when he left, because he walked out with a simple 'thank you and goodnight'.

"So much for that," she muttered, staring around the darkening pub. "Chasing them away like ferrets before a hippogriff. Way to go, Gin."

The door opened and she forced a smile on her face. The falseness of it melted away when Harry was standing there again, looking horribly disheveled, his cheeks bright pink.

"Do you... want to get a cup of coffee one day? Or... see a film or something?"

It looked as if it cost him quite a bit to ask her and Ginny nodded quickly, her mind trying to grasp any of the wild thoughts flying around in her head.

"Yeah, I really do."

Harry's smile was almost blinding and his chest heaved in relief. "Good. I, erm... I'll..."

"Tomorrow night?" she asked impulsively. She almost corrected herself, because she was supposed to work. Maybe if she begged, Alannah would cover her shift.

"Perfect," he nodded. "Oh, er... should I meet you here, or..."

With a shaking hand, Ginny wrote out her address on a beer mat and came around to hand it to him.

"Tomorrow then. How about... seven?"

"Seven o'clock," she agreed. Now that he'd actually asked, and she'd answered, there was a nervous energy to the air.

"Okay then," he nodded, his hand groping behind him for the door handle. It opened unexpectedly and Harry collided with another man, who helped him right himself.

Ginny giggled and watched him disappear, pink cheeks and all, around the corner of the building.

"I thought you weren't ready to date," Alannah accused, coming up beside Ginny and watching out the window.

"I... didn't think I was," Ginny shrugged. Now that the whole thing was over, she couldn't quite wrap her mind around it. Somehow it felt like hours had passed, or possibly it was only seconds. Whatever it was, Ginny had the feeling that her life had just changed.

"He's definitely cute," Alannah sighed. "And he seemed completely in to you."

"Do me a favor and take my shift tomorrow?"

"You'll owe me twice," Alannah sang out, scurrying away to take the order from the two men now seated at the bar.

"Deal," Ginny nodded, knowing she'd give just about anything to have tomorrow night off.

* * *

Harry's heart pounded so loudly in his chest that he thought it might just climb right up his throat and splat on the sidewalk in front of him, killing him in the process.

"I can't believe I actually asked her out," he mumbled to the dark grey sky. The incredulity of the moment made him laugh out loud and several people on the street corner stared at him before slowly moving away.

The house, even though it was dark and quiet when he got home, somehow felt a bit nicer. Harry lit a fire in the grate and sat staring into it, replaying every word said tonight, laughing aloud several times at Ginny's cheekiness.

When Hedwig tapped her beak on the window, Harry started and then rushed to let his friend in out of the cold. She glided up to his arm, nuzzling against his arm and chest before preening her

feathers. Harry took her back with him to the sofa and sat, brushing the back of his forefinger down her front while she made soft little noises of contentment.

"I met someone tonight, Hedwig," Harry said softly. He felt a bit silly talking about Ginny to his familiar, but... somehow he felt that he needed Hedwig's approval. She was his oldest friend.

"Her name is Ginny. And she's a Muggle, but... But there's something about her," he continued. Hedwig's large amber eyes watched him without blinking. "We're going out tomorrow night. I... I actually asked her out, Hedwig."

A sudden wave of nervousness washed over him and Harry took in a shuddering breath. In truth, he was horrible at this dating thing. Every date he'd ever been on was awkward and Harry had spent the majority of the time wishing the time would pass faster so that he could simply get home.

He didn't want that with Ginny. He wanted to go out and enjoy himself, and have Ginny enjoy herself. This wasn't simply about physical attraction; he'd definitely felt a connection in those few minutes they'd spoken. What it was, he couldn't quite say, but there was something about the woman that made him feel comfortable. She seemed like she might even understand a bit about what he'd been through, without even knowing who he was.

"This one is different, Hedwig," he nodded. "Don't suppose you could give me any pointers?"

The owl gave a low hoot and Harry sighed. "Yeah, didn't think so."

The idea to talk to Sirius flashed into his mind, but Harry dismissed it. Really, although Sirius claimed to have dated a lot in school, he was in the same boat that Harry was. They'd focused on one goal for so long, ignoring the fact that they were actually living, breathing males that it was awkward to think of their needs now.

Sirius wouldn't be able to help him on this.

Harry was just going to have to relax and be himself—it had worked tonight and Ginny seemed eager enough to talk to him in the pub.

"We'll give it a go, then," he mumbled, more to himself than Hedwig. She nuzzled his arm once more and cuffed his head with her wing as she alighted to her perch for the night.

"You do realize that if I ever bring her here, I'll have to relegate you to another room?" Harry asked.

Hedwig ruffled her feathers and gave him a rather annoyed look.

"We'll deal with that later, I guess," Harry sighed, turning back to the fire. There was a bubble of excitement and nervousness that sat in his belly that began to grow as the clock on the mantel ticked loudly. Each movement of the hand pulled his date closer and closer to reality.

And Harry couldn't wait.

Chapter 4

Hold Your Breath Until It's Over

It was three minutes after seven when Harry knocked on the door that had the bright purple paint and the rusting metal number eighteen beside it.

Honestly, he'd arrived at the flat almost fifteen minutes before seven, unable to help his excitement, but then had forced himself to walk around the block, both to calm down and to seem a little less anxious. Ginny would probably slam the door in his face if he didn't stop acting like a stalker.

But he just couldn't seem to help it. The idea of going out with Ginny, and actually having it turn out well, was rather consuming. He'd only managed a few hours of sleep last night before waking up early, his mind playing through a thousand different scenarios. He'd forced himself to work on the tail alignment of his latest broom and, thankfully, had managed to lose himself in the charming sequence for long enough that the day passed quickly.

He still had no idea where to take Ginny or what they might do. But even if they simply found a coffee house and spent an hour or two talking, it was fine with Harry. It didn't have to be something fancy—in fact it was probably better that it wasn't.

His hand hesitated, hovering over the door, before he forced his knuckles down.

Ginny swung the door wide, startling him, before she was out, almost knocking him over on the door mat.

"Sorry, but my other flat mate is home, and you don't want to deal with that. Let's just... run."

Harry couldn't help but laugh as Ginny slid her arm through his and tugged, dragging him along behind her, down the street and around the corner. She was giggling and pulling him, while Harry held back, purposely making her work. His stomach flipped, realizing her hand was in his, their fingers laced together perfectly. When did that happen?

"Is she a mass murderer, or something?" he joked.

"You never know," Ginny shook her head once they slowed down. She kept her hand in his and it felt comfortable there. "Chloe is... odd, is the only word I can think of. She doesn't quite know who she is yet, so it's like she keeps trying on all these different personalities to see which one will fit. This month it's goth—so we're stuck looking at black nail polish, eyeliner that looks like someone hit her and a very unhealthy attitude on life."

Harry laughed. "I guess that keeps things interesting, doesn't it?"

Ginny laughed and they continued walking aimlessly along the sidewalk. "I guess that's what you call it. I'm never completely sure what will be waiting for me when I walk out of my bedroom. I've learned to be fully dressed before I do come out, though. One time there was an entire cricket

team passed out on various surfaces of the flat. That was Alannah's crowning moment, I believe"

"Oh, er..." Harry grimaced, imagining the scene.

"Exactly," Ginny laughed. "Alannah doesn't have a lot of boundaries, as you saw last night."

They were quiet for a moment, walking in the chilly autumn evening. "Thanks for coming out with me," Harry said suddenly. "I... I was really nervous about asking you out."

Ginny smiled and his heart thumped loud enough he was sure she could hear it. "I wanted you to ask me," she admitted.

"I have to admit, I'm really nervous now too."

"Really?" Ginny asked, spinning and walking backwards slowly, watching him. "Why? Did you think I'd knock you back?"

Harry shrugged, feeling his cheeks heat. "No, I don't know. I just... don't have a lot of experience in this, I guess."

"In dating?" Ginny asked, looking surprised.

"You sound surprised," he pointed out.

"No—yes, I just... you're very attractive, Harry. I just assumed..." She trailed off and turned back around, standing next to him on the corner of the street, waiting for their turn to cross. "I didn't mean to offend—"

"Not at all," Harry shook his head. "I've gone out a few times with girls, but... I grew up sort of isolated and there wasn't much time for dating. What about you?"

"I've dated," Ginny nodded. "A few blokes, but nothing serious, really."

"Did you grow up around here?"

She shook her head and he took a minute to appreciate how nice she looked tonight, dressed in jeans and a jumper, with a simple jacket pulled over it. Her beautiful hair was pulled back into a ponytail, leaving her face pale and clear.

"In Devon," she shook her head. "I went to a boarding school until I was seventeen, then I moved to Wales. And then eventually here." Her face clouded for a minute and then she shook the shadow away. "What about you?"

"Grew up in Scotland," he admitted. It was the truth—and not something he'd told anyone before. The house had always been hidden by a Fidelius Charm when he was younger. "I had private tutors, but I sort of wish I'd been able to go away to school. I think I missed out on a lot."

"I wouldn't trade it for anything," she shook her head. "But it's not for everyone, I know."

Harry nodded. He'd been disappointed when he couldn't go to Hogwarts, especially after hearing all

of Sirius' stories growing up, but Dumbledore and Sirius thought it was too much of a risk to enroll him. So he'd simply learned from Sirius, Remus and Dumbledore.

"Where are we going?" Ginny asked, as if just now realizing that they'd walked all the way into the heart of the city.

"Oh, er..." Harry scratched his head and looked around. "I hadn't really planned on anything specifically."

"Do you mind if we just find some place to sit and talk?" Ginny asked, looking up at him through her lashes. "I just... I think I'd like that."

"Me too," he agreed immediately. "Have you eaten?"

"I did," she nodded.

"There's a little ice cream place just down the way," Harry suggested. "Or maybe it's too cold—"

"I'd love that," Ginny grinned. "I have a secret obsession for chocolate ice cream."

Harry chuckled. "Not so secret anymore."

They both ordered the cones of ice cream, Ginny's chocolate and Harry's strawberry, and walked hand in hand to a small play park where they perched on a bench, watching the ducks swim in the small pond.

* * *

Ginny watched, out of the corner of her eye as Harry ate his ice cream. "Watch that one there," she pointed out one particular brighter duck who was herding the others back and forth through the grass, snapping at the stragglers.

"He's quite bossy, isn't he?" Harry smirked.

"He reminds me of my Mum, actually," Ginny laughed. "Well... you know what I mean. There are seven of us and she was always squawking like that at us, pushing us around and getting us off to school, off to wherever we needed to go."

"Wow. Seven. I'm the only one in my family."

"An only child?" Ginny asked, licking a drip of chocolate off her finger.

"Yeah," Harry shifted a bit and Ginny wondered if she'd offended him. "My Mum and Dad died when I was little. I lived with my godfather."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Ginny said, her hand hovering next to his arm before she let it descend and rest. She thought she felt him shiver just a bit, but didn't remove it.

"It's okay. It was a long time ago," he shrugged. "Watch him now," he nodded at the duck who was rubbing his neck on the head of a dull brown one.

"He's courting her," Ginny smiled, glancing at Harry who looked sort of horrified, sort of intrigued. When the male climbed on top of the female, Ginny couldn't hold in a snort.

"Urgh," Harry grimaced. But a minute later he broke into laughter. "Wow, ice cream and a show."

Ginny laughed and took a bite out of the bottom of her cone, sucking the melted chocolate ice cream out of the hole. "Well, it's not a first date I'll ever forget, that's for sure."

Harry laughed. "This has been my best *date*—not just the best first one."

She couldn't say just why that pleased her so much, just that it did. "I'm glad. I'm having a great time, actually." And it was true—this was her best date as well, even with all the lavish things that Seth had insisted on doing together. Being with Harry was comfortable and relaxing.

"That's good," he nodded. "I was worried, actually. I just... I wanted this to go well."

"Well, it is," she nodded, eating the last of her ice cream and licking the stickiness off her fingers.

"Tell me more about your family?" he asked. "I mean, not if, you know, it bothers you or something."

"Not at all," she shook her head, staring up at the dark grey sky. A few stars were just starting to blink into sight and Ginny was sure she could identify them if she tried, but she really didn't want to right now. "Let's see. Well, I'm the youngest of the seven." Harry nodded and she could see he really was interested. Growing up as he had, with no siblings, no really close friends, must have been very lonely. Ginny couldn't even begin to imagine how it must have been.

"And the rest are boys," she added with a waggle of her eyebrows.

"Wow... and you survived!"

"Of course I did," Ginny laughed, moving slightly closer to him. It wasn't really cold out, but the warmth from his arm and side made her feel more comfortable. "I can out curse, out run, out punch any of them."

Harry laughed, a full, throaty sound that made Ginny proud she could bring it out of him. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

She gave a proud smile. "They tried to be overprotective and all, but I can take care of myself." She went on to explain a bit about each of her brothers—censoring what she needed. It made the stories much duller, Ginny thought, but Harry still seemed transfixed on what she was saying.

"Did they support you wanting to become an athlete?"

Ginny thought about that for a minute. "I think my Mum would have liked me to do something different, but yeah, for the most part they were supportive. What about your godfather?" she asked. "Does he support what you do? Wait... I don't even know what you do!"

Harry smiled and she swore his cheeks heated. His hands fidgeted in his lap. "I do wood working, actually. I'm thinking about opening my own shop one day."

"That's amazing," Ginny said, blinking. "Like furniture and stuff?"

"Nothing too big yet," he nodded, "mostly because I didn't have a lot of time or room for it growing up. But I just moved out on my own so..."

"And your godfather, he's supportive?"

"Yeah, he's always been there, you know. Like your Mum, I'm sure he would have liked to see me do something really amazing with my life, but... he knows this makes me happy."

"You'll have to show me something you've made one day," she insisted. "I've always been a bit jealous of anyone who can do something like that with their hands. I dated this one bloke who used to draw the most amazing pictures. He was really good."

"But not good enough to keep you," Harry pointed out with a small smirk.

Ginny laughed. "That's true. I loved Dean's art more than I loved him, I'm afraid to say."

"One day I'll show you something," he nodded. His fingers fumbled with hers and twined them together.

"I'd like that."

"I should probably get you home," Harry said reluctantly. "It's getting late."

"Maybe," she said, perfectly content to stay right here. "But I don't want to go yet."

"A few more minutes, then," he nodded, staring up into the sky. "Arcturus," he mumbled, pointing upward. "It's not usually this visible."

Ginny blinked at him. "You know your stars?"

"Yeah," he nodded and then looked away slightly, as if embarrassed. "My godfather had this thing about them. It was sort of a project with him. And... sometimes it helped me to get away, you know, lying up and staring into the sky and imagining myself flying up there, through the clouds and space, all the way up to the stars."

"It sounds wonderful," Ginny agreed. The urge to get back onto her broom again—one she hadn't indulged in almost a full year—was great. Perhaps she might steal a free afternoon this week and Apparate to the Burrow, just to go flying. A brief flash of regret that she couldn't take Harry up with her shuddered through her. But he'd think she was insane if she told him there was a way to fly, perhaps not up to the stars like he'd dreamed, but close. He was a Muggle after all, and completely blind to the magic that existed all around him.

"Flying like that would be... amazing," she agreed, staring back up at the stars. "My favorite has always been Sirius, but you can't always see it until winter."

He nodded. "A favorite of mine too."

"Did you ever think that the people we lose might be up there, watching us from the stars?" Ginny

asked impulsively, thoughts of Fred dancing through her head. It was him who had told her that when she was little.

Harry smiled and shook his head. "Not really. But I do believe they don't ever leave us. They stay with us when we remember them."

"I guess you're right," she nodded. "One of my older brothers died a few years back. I guess I'm always looking for something to signal to me that he's still here, watching over me."

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "I understand what that's like. Not just my parents—I've lost friends too, people I thought were too strong, too alive to ever die."

"Exactly," she agreed. "He was... he was larger than life, really. If there was anyone I never worried about, it was him." She blinked away the burning in the back of her eyes, not willing to cry in front of Harry. "And there are times, even now, years later, when I'll hear something funny, some joke, and think 'oh, I can't wait to tell him that' and then I remember that I can't."

His hand tightened on hers and he nodded. "I do that too. And every decision I make, I think about what my parents would say—would they approve of what I'm doing now, who I've become. But then there are times that I have to get past that, because I'll go insane if I think about it all the time."

"Moving on," she nodded. "It's always hard, but we have to do it."

"In the end, I think it makes us stronger people. We appreciate life just a bit more, I think. I know I do. I've learned not to take things for granted—well, I hope I have anyway."

Ginny laid her head on his shoulder, feeling completely warm and comfortable right now, with her hand tucked into his. "I'm glad you came into the pub last night."

He chuckled softly. "I'm glad I forgot to go to the grocers as well."

"Maybe one day I can make you a real dinner—my Mum is an amazing cook and, despite myself, I seemed to have picked a few things up from her."

He smiled, his lips twisting in an incredibly attractive, completely lopsided way that made her heart pound in her throat.

"I'd like that, I think," he nodded. "Ginny... I really like you. I... I'd like to see you again."

Rather than answering him, Ginny leaned in, pausing just before her lips touched his. If he moved forward, kissing her, then she'd know.

His tongue darted out, moistening his lips before he closed the distance between them, gently brushing his lips along hers.

She sighed in contentment when he used a bit more force, kissing her strongly enough that her head spun slightly. They broke apart after a long minute and smiled at each other.

"I'd like to see you again," she agreed.

"I'd like to kiss you again," he countered, his hand sliding along her jaw, the fingertips burying in the small hairs at the base of her neck. It tickled and sent a shiver down her back before she nodded, giving him the permission he sought.

The second kiss was fiery, making her whole body tingle in desire and excitement. Whoever he'd kissed before—if he had—had taught him well. Or perhaps it was simply natural talent.

Ginny couldn't remember any other kisses inciting this much fire inside her before. Her fingers wrapped into the lapels of his jacket and she could feel the rapid, jerky movements of his chest as he sucked in breath through his nose, unwilling to break their lips apart.

"I should get you home," he said finally, pulling away and shaking his head a bit.

Ginny blinked at him a moment, clearing her head from everything that she'd begun to feel, knowing he was right. They'd only just met, for Merlin's sake, and here she was thinking she wanted nothing more than to have him touch her intimately. She really wasn't that type of girl; the other men in her life hadn't made it very far before Ginny had insisted they stop. But she'd also not felt this type of connection with any of them.

"When can I see you again?" she asked, allowing him to pull her to her feet.

Harry wound their fingers together and tugged her closer. "Soon," he agreed. "I don't want to wait too long."

"I work tomorrow in the evening," she sighed, rubbing her face. She hadn't noticed how tired she actually was sitting on the bench with Harry, but it was well after midnight now. And yet it felt as if they'd only spent minutes there, not hours.

"What time do you get off?" he asked. "I have an appointment in the morning I have to keep." He sounded almost sad that they'd be apart and Ginny's heart fluttered once more.

"I get done at nine."

"I'll be there to walk you home then," Harry said, his answer sure.

"I'd like that," she nodded.

They walked in silence the rest of the way to Ginny's door, and then they stood there, looking at each other for a long time. Harry leaned in close and Ginny surrendered to his kisses once more, thrilled when her back pressed against the solid door. She'd certainly never been kissed like this before—like she was the air and Harry was drinking her in, sustaining his very life because she was here.

His hands cupped her face gently, his thumbs caressing her cheeks as if she might break in two if he held just a bit tighter. A shiver of pleasure ran down her back and Ginny pulled away, knowing they needed to break off right now, before one of them suggested anything more, and the other agreed.

"Good night, Harry," she mumbled, pressing her lips to the smooth skin of his cheek.

"Night," he agreed, looking torn as he pulled away. "I'll wait until you get in—not that I don't think you can defend yourself, I just..."

"It's okay," she smiled. The doorknob twisted under her hand and she forced herself to step inside. Her eyes met his as the door closed and she held his gaze until the wood blocked him out completely.

The flat was well lit, but silent as Ginny stared unseeingly at it, her mind racing with all that had happened tonight. Really, they'd only talked and eaten ice cream, but it felt like she'd known him for years. Talking with Harry was comfortable, not awkward at all. She felt guilty for not being able to tell him who and what she really was, but that was swept from her mind when she remembered the way he'd kissed her, held her hand, and spoken to her.

This, above all else, was real. And it made her feel more alive than she'd felt in a very, very long time.

Chapter 5

Quiet But I'm Sure There Is Something Here

The dream that night—or perhaps it was the next morning—was brutal. The vision his mind had created for him had been delicious—one of the best he could remember. Last night with Ginny has been beyond any expectations he'd ever had. It was surreal almost how comfortable he felt around her, like he didn't have to measure every single word before he said it, or worry how she was going to react.

He really needed to get up and moving for the day. He had a meeting with his account manager at Gringotts and then needed to go and see about renting a place just outside of town where he could work on his brooms without being worried about wood shavings everywhere. Now that he thought about it, though, he might have to make something else out of wood—something impressive—to be able to show Ginny. She was going to get suspicious if he showed her his hand carved brooms. It was the only thing really that was a pain when dating a Muggle woman, he decided. So much of his life would have to be kept secret—unless something actually came of it and they ended up together.

Harry knew he couldn't lie to her if they were serious. Statute of secrecy be damned; he just couldn't.

His morning passed in a blur and before he knew it, he was standing in a warehouse that was now rented in his name—well, not completely, he supposed. The name on the lease was Harry Jamison, but for all intents and purposes, that was him. It was the name he used while living out here among the Muggles. He certainly didn't want it known that Harry Potter was out and about, living his life. The Wizarding public thought that Harry Potter had disappeared back into his reclusive and secretive lifestyle, and that was just fine with Harry. He didn't need press following him everywhere, hounding him with questions about everything and nothing.

It was better this way.

Sirius arrived in the late morning, Apparating in to the warehouse along with the shrunken boxes that held almost all of Harry's broom-making supplies.

He wandered around for a bit, whistling low and nodding his head in approval. "This place is great," he finally said, helping Harry start to lay his things out on two long tables.

"I was actually thinking of getting some other wood working tools," Harry shrugged, testing the idea out on his tongue as he watched Sirius for his reaction. "I thought maybe I could try my hand at a few other things—not just brooms. Some Muggle some day might just come in here and wonder why I'm spending so much time on making simple brooms."

Sirius chuckled. "A cover—not a bad idea, Cub. I think you might even be able to make a tidy little profit on the side. Although once you get the brooms into the market, that'll be what you really work on."

"Yeah," he shrugged, "but right now they're one of a kind. I don't think I want to get into mass

production anytime soon. It'll be a tough sell, but I was thinking more along the lines of custom brooms for Quidditch players and such."

Sirius sat on the end of one of the tables, his legs swinging back and forth as he nodded. "A great idea. It may be harder to implement, since companies like Nimbus usually give the players their brooms free of charge. It's great publicity for them."

"It won't be easy at first," Harry nodded. "But imagine how a custom broom, made specifically for the rider, would increase their performance. Right now all brooms are standard, not adjusted to the height and weight of a player, let alone the position they play. Firebolt makes the best brooms for Seekers, but the charming sequencing seems off to me somehow."

They continued to talk about Harry's plans until it was past dinner time. Sirius offered to buy a pizza and they ate it straight from the box, still making plans for the broom shop. Before he knew it, it was past seven and Harry startled, looking down at his watch.

"I need to get going," he said, gathering up his things and discarding the empty pizza box.

"You have a date?" Sirius asked, his eyes wide.

"Er... no, no," Harry lied. He felt guilty but he really didn't want to say anything about Ginny quite yet. He knew Sirius wouldn't care that she was Muggle, not at all, actually. But it was more that he knew Sirius would want to know all about her, and probably meet her. Right now, Harry felt like this whole thing was still so brand new that he wanted to keep it to himself. For now. "Just meeting someone for a pint."

"Ah, bloke thing," Sirius nodded knowingly. "I miss doing that, you know. Maybe I'll have to try and get Remus to meet me. I'm glad you're making friends Harry. It makes me sad to think you're out here all alone."

For a brief moment, Harry rethought his desire to keep his secrets. He wasn't used to lying to Sirius, or not telling him everything. Maybe soon, he decided.

"I'll talk to you soon," Harry said, locking the door and Apparating to his house once Sirius had waved his goodbye.

* * *

The last week had been absolutely perfect, in Ginny's opinion. She and Harry had spent every evening together and even met several times in the middle of the day, when they weren't both working. They never did anything spectacular, although Harry had taken her to a nice restaurant just last night. But that was alright, because simply spending time together was amazing.

And the kissing was just... mind blowing. Last night Ginny had found herself pressed to the wall next to her door, one of Harry's hands buried in her hair, the other clutching at her waist. They'd both been aroused and it had taken everything both of them had to pull apart and leave each other, but they had, whispering their goodbyes before Harry walked away, leaving Ginny sad that he was going.

They were meeting again tonight; Harry was going to bring her to his house so that they could make dinner together. A small part of her wondered if it would go beyond just kissing tonight. A thrill ran through her at the thought, but it also made her stomach flip in nervousness.

"Just don't think about it," she scolded, slinging her broom over her shoulder and walking toward the house to let her mother know she was here. The desire to fly had been growing all week, but she hadn't stolen any time for herself before now. But it seemed the perfect thing to do right now, while the hours before she met Harry again stretched out.

"Hi Mum," she greeted, smiling at her mother, who was kneading a large mound of dark brown dough. "How are you?"

"Ginny!" Her mother smiled widely, her hands still moving in the stiff dough, working it with practiced movements. "What a surprise! Do you have the day off?"

Ginny came in, leaning her broom in the corner, and moved over to give her mother half a hug from behind, wrapping one arm around her mother's shoulders and pressing a small kiss to her cheek. "I do. I thought maybe I'd spend a little time flying again. It's been awhile and... well, I've just been thinking about it lately."

She tried not to blush when her mother blinked at her. "That's... well, Ginny, that sounds wonderful. I wasn't sure you'd ever want to fly again, truthfully."

"I do," she nodded. "I still love it, I just... I think I just needed some time to find myself again. To find a way to be happy."

"Are you?" her mother asked, voice harsh and low. "Are you happy my Ginny-girl?"

"I'm getting there," she shrugged, playing with the end of her hair where it lay over her shoulder. It seemed strange to admit, because she really hadn't thought about it, but she was happy. For the first time in a long time, she hadn't spent a day this week feeling melancholy or depressed about where her life *wasn't* going.

Her mother's hands stopped working and she stared at Ginny, eyes growing bright with tears. "I'm so glad, Ginny. We've all been so worried about you."

"I know," Ginny sighed. "And I'm sorry for worrying everyone. I just... I think I just lost *me* in all of the mess—making the team, the games, the publicity, and then Seth... It was all too much, and when the accident happened... I was ready to quit," she admitted in a small voice. It was the first time she'd said it aloud to anyone. "I hated it."

"I knew you were unhappy then," her mother said, using her wand to remove the remnants of flour and dough from her hands and dividing it into loaves, setting them in the warmth of the sun streaming in the kitchen window to rise. "I just didn't know what it was exactly, or how to help."

"You helped me," Ginny promised her, taking her hand as her mother sat next to her. "You really did. You took care of me after the accident—gave me a place to stay and kept the press away. Most importantly, you let me have the time and space to deal with it. The boys..."

"They don't understand sometimes," her mother nodded. "They don't remember struggling to find who they were. It's easier for men, I think. Not always, but most of the time. They're not so torn up by people's expectations of them, or their own expectations."

"Maybe they just hide it better than we do," Ginny shrugged, smiling slightly.

"I guess we'll never know," her mother shrugged and patted her hand gently. "Now, you go off and have a good fly. I'll make us a little lunch so that when you stop back in, we can have a real chat. And you can tell me about the boy you're seeing."

Ginny's jaw dropped and she stared at her mother. "How... what...?"

"A mother knows, Ginny dear." The knowing look on her mother's face was too much and Ginny just sighed, gathered up her broom and walked out to the field, pondering how on earth her mother could have known anything about Harry. Was she really that transparent?

* * *

Ron Weasley was happy with his life. He had a good job that challenged him and made him stronger than he'd ever imagined he could be, a wonderful girlfriend whom he loved more than life itself, and an amazing family. Things couldn't be much better. The Wizarding World was now much more stable than in years past; rebuilding after the war had been a challenge that had, frankly, seemed almost insurmountable. But they'd scraped by, the world limping on and slowly starting to recover.

Things were very, very good right now.

He did worry about Ginny from time to time, off in her own world, doing whatever it was that she did. Hermione said it was 'finding herself' even if Ron didn't know quite what that meant. Why did she need to find herself? She was right there. She was Ginny Weasley, youngest Weasley, amazing Quidditch player—at least before the accident—and the most fiery girl he'd ever known. To Ron it seemed fairly simple.

He'd been thinking more and more about her lately. Damn Dean. It was all his fault. He was forever asking about her when the friends got together to share a pint and remember their years at school. Neville said he thought Dean might still have a thing for Ginny, even though it had been years since they'd gone out. The idea made Ron a bit uncomfortable. He remembered all too well the few times he'd caught them snogging back at Hogwarts. Why couldn't Ginny just find someone decent? Not like that Phillips bloke. That had been a wrong match right from the beginning, even if Ginny didn't seem like she could see it.

Hermione and Tonks seemed to think it would happen one day, but Ron just wasn't sure. Even back in school Ginny had always seemed like she was searching for something that just wasn't there. It was a hard feeling to explain, but Ron could see the shadow of it in her eyes in quiet moments; the restlessness and frustration.

Quidditch had taken the look away for a while, until the accident. Ron didn't even recognize Ginny a few weeks after being hit in the side of the face with a Bludger. The swelling and bruising was gone, but there had been a shattered, fragile look about her that was completely out of place. The loss of her peripheral vision on one side meant she wasn't eligible for play at a professional level

any longer and no healing spells or potions seemed to help. In one brief, terrifying moment all her dreams had evaporated.

And then Ginny herself had disappeared after months of rattling around the Burrow and hiding from everyone. Over the last year, the haunted look had started to fade from her face, but he still caught remnants of it from time to time when she would actually come to a dinner at the Burrow.

He hadn't been to the Burrow in what felt like ages. Truthfully, it had only been two weeks. Last Sunday Hermione's parents had invited them over for dinner, so they'd missed the regular Weasley feast that took place.

Deciding that he'd just pop over during his lunch break, rather than grabbing something at the Ministry canteen, Ron smiled. Yes, it was a good idea. He'd get to catch up with what was going on in the family and make sure his mother wasn't angry about their missing the dinner, even though he knew she wasn't. Plus, there was the added bonus that Molly Weasley was the best cook on the planet.

The autumn colors were just starting to decorate the trees around the Burrow and Ron took a deep breath of the fresh, crisp air and let it fill his lungs. The bright orange pumpkins in his mother's vegetable garden drew his eyes and he was reminded of dozens of harvests, picking their favorite pumpkin to decorate for Halloween. He and Ginny had the knack of always choosing the same one when they were little. Ron would scream and Ginny would cry—gaining the support of her older brothers, who would then pressure Ron to give in and just let her have the pumpkin. By that time, all the good ones were gone and he always ended up with the lopsided, splotchy ones.

He smiled, spying the perfect one among the dark green leaves. This year he was going to win the race—possibly because Ginny didn't know he was still playing the game. He snuck into the back garden and made his way through the vines. Pulling his wand, he moved to carve his name shallowly on the orange flesh, only to find Ginny's scrawled there already.

Swearing, he glanced around. The writing was fresh, so she had to have been here within the past few hours. A blur of motion drew his attention across the field. She was at the pitch... flying.

Without realizing he was even moving, Ron gravitated toward her, staring with wide eyes at how fast she was going. There was a Quaffle tucked under one of her arms as she streaked toward the makeshift goal at one end, not realizing she had an audience at all. With a precision he hadn't witnessed in far too long, Ginny shifted the ball and tossed it through the hoop before swooping low and catching it again before it hit the floor.

She was amazing—far better than any of her brothers on their brooms. Even Charlie, who had almost played professionally, couldn't beat her elegance and grace in flight. Watching Ginny was like having the most joyful music fill your soul and spill over, filling all the other surfaces around.

The smile on her face when she turned and saw him was full and genuine. And it had been far too long since he'd seen it. Something was definitely different with his sister.

"Nice shot," he complimented, tucking his hands in his pockets and watching as she did a long loop, setting up another run. She looked just as practiced, just as determined as she had years ago, when she'd been playing for the Harpies.

"Thanks," she called out after making another graceful shot through the goal. "I thought I'd be rusty, but I guess it's something you don't ever forget." She hovered near him, almost reluctant to get off her broom, before slowly descending and giving the wood a loving caress. "It's been a long time."

"It has," he agreed. "What's up with you?" he demanded. "You're all... happy."

She laughed and nudged him in the shoulder as she passed. "Why does everyone ask that? Can't I just be happy?"

Ron stared at her, trying to put the pieces together in his mind. "Well, yeah, but... you're usually not." He fell into line with her and they walked quietly back toward the Burrow.

"I don't like that person I was, Ron," she admitted when they reached the old broom shed. It was even more filled with cobwebs now and Ginny gave a longing glance toward her broom before storing it away. He supposed she couldn't take it with her, to her Muggle flat, and her life in the Muggle world. "And I don't want to be that person anymore."

He slung an arm over her shoulder, pulling her close and placing a sloppy kiss on her forehead. "Well, whatever it is you're doing, just... keep doing it, alright?"

Her cheeks flushed for some reason and she wouldn't meet his eyes, but she nodded. "I plan to."

"By the way," he grumbled, "you cheated with the pumpkin. Your name is carved all over the best one."

"Did not," she laughed, poking his ribs. "There are no rules, therefore I couldn't have cheated. Besides, you would have only discovered that if *you* were going to cheat!"

"See? You admitted that you cheat!" He laughed and lifted her onto his shoulder, giving her behind a loud slap and carrying her toward the house. "We'll see what Mum says about this."

"She'll chose me," Ginny called out, wrapping her arms around his back and digging her fingers into his sides, where he was most ticklish. "She always chooses me."

"That's back when you were cute and innocent."

"I'm still cute and innocent," she challenged back and they burst through the door, laughing and wrestling, just like old times.

Chapter 6

Say The Word And I Will Be Yours

Harry felt a bit like a pinball in one of those arcade machines, bouncing all over the place, from one thing to another and not ever able to sit still. He couldn't even say he was nervous—terrified was more like it. Ginny was coming to his house, tonight! And if all went well...

Well, he wasn't *planning* on it, but he was *hoping* for it. Maybe it was too fast, too soon. Or maybe it was just right, Harry didn't know. But it felt right to want to take the next step with Ginny. And she seemed just as eager as he did. Should he plan on talking about it with her? Did people just... do that?

'Hi Ginny, come on in,' he played out the conversation in his head. 'Let me take your coat. Would you mind terribly if you just stayed the night? Because I really like you, and I'm not quite sure if I love you, but it might be that feeling. I do know I really want to sleep with you. I'm tired of being a virgin and I've chosen you to be my first, if you'll have me. And I'm pretty sure that I want you to be my last too, and every one in between, but it might be too early for that just yet.'

Yeah, he decided as he banged his head purposely on the kitchen door frame, he was completely insane.

He wandered into the living room, checking just one more time that he'd removed everything in here that might point to him being who he was. Framed photographs of his parents and Sirius were replaced with store bought, generic watery scenes in cheap wooden frames.

Hedwig and he had a discussion this afternoon about her spending the night at Sirius'. The owl was rather put out and refused to leave for some time, nearly sending Harry into a panic. But she'd eventually listened to his pleas and disappeared into the dimming September evening. Her perch was hidden in one of the back bedrooms now, and Harry would return it to its rightful spot sometime tomorrow, or later tonight if Ginny wasn't interested in staying.

His heart raced at the thought of having to talk to her about it, because he really should. He wished he were suave enough to just suggest, in the middle of one of their incredible kissing sessions, that he take her back and show her the bedroom. But even the thought of being that cool and collected at that precise moment made Harry snort in laughter.

She could say no, but Harry was pretty sure she wouldn't laugh in his face—that wasn't like Ginny at all. He may have only known her for seven days, but in a way it felt as if those days had been years. He'd talked with her about things that he hadn't even spoken to Sirius about—how lonely he'd gotten growing up, how hard it was not having a memory of his parents, his hopes and dreams for the future.

And Ginny had done the same. Each of them was broken, in a way; Harry from the war and all the things he'd gone through, Ginny from her sports injury and all that she had to endure after it. They were both, in a way, hiding from the world. Harry was hiding who he really was, and Ginny was trying to escape a past full of press and people never letting her have a minute to herself. It was

rather ironic that they'd come together, but wonderful as well. Both of them could understand the other so well.

Harry felt a guilty stab at all that he wasn't telling her, but he forcefully brushed it away from his mind. Soon. He'd tell her soon. And it wouldn't matter to Ginny; somehow he felt the truth of that statement deep within him. She would understand.

Her knock at his door startled him from his thoughts and he jumped to let her in, grinning at her wave through the small side window next to the door. His heart flipped over when she came in, carrying enough groceries for a month. Her arms went around him automatically and she kissed him, their lips seeking each other out as if it had been years since they'd seen each other, rather than hours.

"I missed you today," she whispered.

Harry's whole body shivered in joy and he couldn't fight the feeling that he'd been born the moment she first spoke to him—he hadn't really lived until she'd wandered into his life, changing it forever.

"Hi," he greeted, grinning and feeling beyond giddy at seeing her, at actually having her here in his home. "Come in. Let me take some of those." He wrestled the plastic shopping bags from one of her hands, laughing as she jokingly pretended to tip to the other side. "What do you have in here?" he scoffed, hoisting the heavy bags.

"That's my magic bag of tricks, Mr. Jamison," she laughed, winking at him. "It's a surprise."

Harry's jaw dropped and he stared at her as she inspected the living room, wandering right to the middle of it and turning around in a circle. *Magic bag of...* She couldn't... No, she was just teasing him.

"It's a nice house," she nodded finally. "Roomy, but not too big."

"Come on," Harry urged, placing his hand on the small of her back. "I'll show you the kitchen, and then give you the tour."

Fifteen minutes later, Harry was seated on top of his counter, watching Ginny's efficient hands as she cut chicken and bacon, washed and sorted the vegetables and began heating the oven.

"You seem... really happy today," he said, noticing the way her cheeks looked flushed and healthy.

"I got back out on the field today," she admitted with a shrug. "Played for just a bit."

"That's great, Ginny. How was it?"

"Chop these carrots for me?" she asked, handing him a bag of them. "It was... exciting. I mean, I know I'll never play competitively again, but it felt good just to get out there once more. To feel the wind in my hair and remember why I loved playing."

Harry's heart swelled in pride at her and he tried to focus on keeping his knife straight, making

clean even cuts to the vegetables. Her enthusiasm and high spirits helped to take away some of his worry for tonight, and he was reminded, once again, why he was with this young woman. Ginny seemed to be life itself—vibrant and energetic, love of life, determination and passion all rolled into a tiny wisp of a thing. And she was completely wrapping Harry around her heart.

She spoke about football like he felt about flying. Sirius had often told Harry he was the best flyer Sirius had ever seen—and that he might have had a chance at playing Quidditch professionally had his destiny not taken him in another direction.

“You’re beautiful, do you know that?” Harry asked and Ginny’s hand stopped its motion. She blinked up at him, her cheeks turning a brilliant pink. “I just wanted you to know that,” he shrugged, feeling foolish.

But then her lips were on his, their food preparation completely forgotten for the minute. When she pulled back, she opened her mouth to say something, but it seemed to melt away from her. She smiled instead. “You’re pretty amazing, did you know *that?*”

Harry laughed and kissed her once more. “We should probably get this started, or we’ll be eating at midnight.”

She pulled away rather reluctantly and began to finish what she was working on. Harry finished the carrots and immediately started chopping the leaks under Ginny’s watchful eye.

“What did you get up to all day?” she asked. They stood side by side and their arms rubbed while they worked. Harry couldn’t help but feel this was the way it was supposed to be—standing together, working to make a meal for each other, and talking about their day. This felt right.

“Not much,” he lied. “Spent most of my time at the shop, working on a few projects.” He’d actually begun making a few pieces of furniture so that he’d have something to show her. It was less tedious than making brooms, but the results were far more satisfying for just one day’s efforts. He’d even found a carved wooden hair clip in a catalog he’d bought at the DIY store that he was going to start working on tomorrow, just for Ginny.

“And I had a few things to get done around here.”

“Dirty laundry to stuff under the bed and all,” she grinned, nodding.

Harry nudged her arm and they laughed together. “It’s in the wardrobe, I’ll have you know,” Harry joked. “If I stuffed it all under the bed, I’d never have anything to wear. This way, when I go to find something to wear, all the dirties fall out at my feet and I’m forced to clean them.”

“I’m on to your game now, Harry,” she warned.

* * *

They ate dinner seated close together on the sofa, balancing their plates in their laps as they flipped through shows on the telly.

“It amazes me that people can spend all day in front of something like this,” Ginny mused. The

program was entertaining, but completely mindless as well. When she said that to Harry he smiled.

"I think mindless is rather the point." He gathered up their dishes and set them on the small table before sliding his arm around her.

"I'm so glad we didn't grow up with one of these," Ginny said, clicking the telly off. "My brothers would have wasted away in front of it."

"You didn't have one?" Harry seemed startled. "We didn't either."

"Nope," Ginny shook her head. Her heart was racing at how close he was right now, how warm and wonderful he smelled. "We were always too busy for things like this—why sit inside all day when there are woods to explore, trees to climb, ponds to swim in, and sports to play."

"I agree," he said, kissing her forehead softly.

Ginny laid her head on his shoulder and reveled in the feeling of simply being here with him. Tonight was wonderful—just like every other minute spent with Harry was. All afternoon she'd been pondering the changes to her life—both her mother and iRon/i had noticed just how happy she was. And it was all down to this man sitting right next to her, letting his fingers trail through her hair. Harry allowed her to simply be who she was. Even though she was hiding some pretty big secrets from him, Ginny felt as if Harry knew more about her than anyone else ever could.

She was going to have to tell him soon, she knew, because she had the distinct feeling that she was falling in love with him. Completely, arse-over-elbow in love with him.

His fingers brushing on the soft part of her neck, just below her ear, made her whole body feel like it was charged, skin tingling and alive.

"I love your hair," he mumbled, pressing his nose against the side of her head. "It smells so wonderful... like flowers."

"It's the shampoo," she mused. Her fingers traced up his arm, rubbing the short, dark hairs there and letting them tickle her palm.

In the next breath, they were kissing; passionate, out of control kisses that involved caresses and touches that made Ginny's whole body ache for more. The living room was mostly dark; only the low light from the dying fire casting tall shadows.

Harry's hands held her hips and lifted her into his lap. "This okay?" he asked between kisses.

Ginny nodded. "More than okay." And it was. Despite having only known each other for a week, Ginny knew Harry was different. She'd never felt this way about anyone before. It didn't feel rushed at all, not when every touch of his fingers, every smile that he showed, every word out of his mouth made her feel more and more alive than ever before.

The tension between them began to grow, sky-rocketing when Harry's hand brushed the skin of her back, just under the edge of her shirt. He'd touched her before, but this night seemed to bring the weight of the world with the warmth of his fingers on her skin.

"Stay tonight?" he asked, kissing where her collarbone peeked out from beneath the shirt she was wearing. He didn't look at her, just wrapped his arms around her tightly, letting her feel what she was doing to him, hinting at what he was asking for.

"I want to make love to you," he mumbled into the skin of her neck and then pulled back. His smudged glasses were crooked and his eyes were bright beneath them.

In the space of a second Ginny weighed what he was asking, what he was offering. Was it too much, too soon? Was she ready to be with him like that?

"I'll stay," she said in the next breath. The weight of the decision was sloughed off when she kissed him again, more urgently than before. Her shirt disappeared somewhere along the line, as did his.

"I've never... ever before," she mumbled, her fingers exploring the smoothness of his chest, tracing the lines there.

"Me either," he admitted. His chest shifted under her touch and he leaned forward, kissing her mouth, and then tracing down with his lips, along her neck, down to her chest.

"Can we take this to the bedroom?" she asked, barely finding her voice. Harry seemed to shake himself for a moment before he kissed her softly and nodded.

"Do you... need anything? I have... protection."

It took Ginny a moment to realize what he was asking, but she shook her head. "I have what I need. I just need a minute in the bathroom."

"Okay," he agreed. She was somewhat glad to feel that he was trembling just as much as she was. "There's one off the bedroom."

She nodded, remembering that from his tour. She quickly darted ahead, gathering her bag from the kitchen and closing herself into the bathroom.

Ginny eyed herself critically in the mirror. "You're ready for this," she told the reflection, immensely glad that this mirror would not talk back to her. She'd never been fond of that feature on magical mirrors. The one at the Burrow had been the bane of her existence for quite a few years growing up, but rarely commented anymore. A brief moment passed and she wondered what this mirror would say if it *could* speak.

Would it tell her she was rushing into this? Would it tell her that this was the right thing to do, because she loved Harry, and she was pretty sure he loved her in return?

Shaking her head at her foolishness, Ginny splashed water on her face and removed the rest of her clothing, trembling as she pulled the thin white cotton nightgown from her bag. Her wand followed and she quickly muttered a contraceptive charm, knowing it would be good for up to twenty-four hours. She'd researched it this morning, just in case. Her belly tingled in anticipation and she listened as Harry made small sounds in the other room.

"This isn't a mistake," she told herself firmly, feeling it down deep inside her. She quickly brushed

out her hair and tucked all of her things away in her bag, nudging it behind the door. Cracking the bathroom door open, Ginny stepped out into the low-lit bedroom. Long shadows were on the wall from the small fireplace that glowed and crackled.

"Hi," Harry stood nervously next to the bed, wearing only a pair of pajama pants. His hair was ruffled horribly, and his glasses were sitting on the table next to what she decided must be his side of the bed. The covers were pulled back, revealing clean, crisp sheets.

"Hi," she answered back, forcing her feet to cross the cold floor boards.

"You look... wow," he mumbled. He met her part way through the room and wrapped her in his arms. "We don't have to, you know," he murmured, holding his forehead to hers. "I won't pressure you."

"I know," she nodded. Her hands smoothed up his arms, resting on his shoulders. "You never would. I want this just as much as you do, Harry."

"Good." The word was barely out of his mouth before his lips pressed against hers, soft and smooth. They moved toward the bed almost unconsciously, and Ginny giggled when Harry tried to lift her onto the mattress without breaking the kiss.

"Not very suave, I'm sorry," he laughed softly when they bumped noses and foreheads.

"It's okay," she answered, pulling him to kneel on the bed with her. "I don't want someone smooth and debonair. I just want you, Harry."

* * *

It was a cold night, the first of the season and Sirius lit a large fire in the stone fireplace, welcoming the warmth and light that came from the flames. The house was entirely too quiet tonight. It had been weeks since Harry moved out, but tonight Sirius felt the years of being alone weigh heavy on him.

He picked up a framed photograph off the mantel and took it back to his favorite chair with him, staring at it as he sipped his glass of Ogden's.

"It's nights like this that I miss both of you more than ever," he mumbled to the portrait of Lily and James. It had been on his mantel forever, it seemed. Harry had always liked looking at it when he was young. He'd kept a copy of it next to his bed for years as well. Sirius had seen it on his mantel the day he'd helped Harry get the last of his things into the house.

The couple smiling at each other inside the frame were so young—just barely eighteen when the photograph had been taken. Sirius knew it was only a few months after this that they'd been married and starting their life.

"He's a good boy, James," Sirius explained to his best friend. "Although he's not much of a boy anymore. Grown up too damn fast, that's for sure. I wish I'd been able to give him more than I did. But he was safe—just like I promised you."

The image of the house at Godric's Hollow, falling in on itself, a hole gaping in the side of it, flashed through his mind and he swore. He could still see it, as if the whole thing had happened yesterday. And Albus' words, urging Sirius to take Harry and go into hiding—they were like a death toll and a bell ringing freedom at the same time. After pulling Harry from the rubble, Dumbledore had tried to convince Sirius to let him hide Harry away with Lily's sister, because of the blood magic, sealed on Harry by Lily's death. They'd argued late into the night, safely hidden away at Hogwarts while Harry wailed for his dead parents.

Finally, Albus had given in to Sirius pleas to keep Harry, rather than sending him to Surrey. Petunia's could always be a last resort if they needed a safe place to hide Harry away.

"It was the right thing to do," Sirius affirmed once more to James and Lily's pictures. Their smiles and loving looks seemed, to him, to be in agreement.

Harry had grown up loved, knowing the stories of his parents and who he was. He might have struggled with loneliness and understanding his destiny—some things not even Harry could hide from Sirius—but he'd always had someone he could trust, someone he knew loved him.

"Even if I bodged it from time to time." There were too many flashes of Harry being injured, being in pain, or suffering at the hand of that mass-murderer, and Sirius drowned the thoughts in his drink.

"I ought to check on him, you know," he muttered to the photograph. His eyes strayed over toward the white owl sleeping on the perch in the corner of the room. Hedwig had shown up late this afternoon, carrying no note. She'd just glided past him, cuffing him in the head far too firmly for it to be affectionate, and turned her back on him.

"No idea what he's up to, or why she's here."

The urge to Apparate to Harry's house was great, but he dismissed it. He'd already had several drinks tonight and didn't fancy having to send for someone from the Ministry to retrieve whatever bits of him were spread over the countryside.

"In the morning," he nodded. "I'll check on him in the morning."

Chapter 7

Come Close And Then Even Closer

Harry woke from a full night's sleep, his eyes fluttering at the light that was coming through the windows. The drawn curtains filtered it, making it a red-orange rather than bright yellow. His arms automatically tightened around his pillow and he arched his hips, pressing his morning hardness against...

Wait a minute.

His eyes flew open wide when his bare body encountered another bare body. It wasn't a pillow he was wrapped around, but Ginny. Her red hair cascaded around her head, tangled around his hand and hers, where their fingers twined together.

Not for the first time, she stole his breath away. And it wasn't just physical—although Harry did think she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. But the connection between them had been completely affirmed last night when they'd made love for the first time. Each movement of their bodies was etched into his mind.

And even though it hadn't been perfect—far from it, actually—Harry thought they'd both done well. Ginny had pointed out that neither of them could be experts the first time they tried something, and Harry agreed. His smile grew when he thought about practicing with her again.

"Practice makes perfect," he mumbled to himself. Ginny murmured something in her sleep and Harry kissed her shoulder. Her eyes fluttered open and blinked at him a moment before she smiled lazily and rolled to pillow her head on his chest.

"Morning," she said, yawning.

"Good morning." His arms closed around her and he felt complete again, sheltered in this moment. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did," she murmured. "Better than I expected. I've never shared a bed before, so I expected to keep waking up."

The thought took Harry by surprise, mostly because, now that she mentioned it, he should have expected the same. Thoughts of having Ginny in his bed hadn't ever propelled him beyond the 'having sex' part of it. His mind had always stopped right there when imagining it. But waking up with her here was almost as good—possibly better until they practiced more.

"What time do you need to work?" he asked, smoothing her long hair away from her face.

"At eleven," she mumbled, glaring over at the clock next to the bed that proclaimed it past nine.

"Damn," Harry muttered, kissing her forehead. "I was hoping we could spend all day right here."

Ginny laughed and lay her head down. "As wonderful as it sounds... the world moves on."

He was quiet, pondering that thought, his fingers dancing across the silky skin of her shoulder. "It doesn't seem right that it doesn't stop for us, you know."

"I know," she agreed. "It felt like it stopped last night."

"It wasn't that good," he protested. "At least not for you."

"Harry," she sat up, bringing the sheet with her and covering most of her bare body. "I told you last night—"

"I remember," he said, stilling her talking with a kiss.

"I'm off at seven," she gave a one-shouldered shrug and Harry's heart thumped in his chest. "I could... come back tonight."

"There's plenty of food left," he justified. "We could heat it up again."

"Sounds like a date," she said, leaning forward and kissing him.

"We have the oddest dates," he laughed. "But I won't protest."

"Don't," she laughed, kissing him several more times before getting up, taking the sheet with her. "I'm going to shower."

"I think I can manage something for breakfast," Harry nodded, watching her go and lusting after the pale swath of skin he could see along her leg and hip. "Unless you want me to join you."

"Maybe tomorrow morning," she said with a smile. "I work the late shift."

Harry stared at the door long after it was closed, reliving last night and then scrambling to get dressed when the pipes groaned. If he sat here imagining her in the shower, breakfast would never get made, and he'd be in there with her, making her late for work.

He used his wand to speed up the cooking and just managed to tuck it into a drawer as Ginny came out, brushing his comb through her long, wet hair. "Bacon butty," he offered, setting the top piece of bread onto the meat.

"Perfect," Ginny grinned, taking the plate from him and kissing his cheek before tearing into the sandwich. Harry watched, amused at her appetite.

"My mother would be horrified, you know," she said finally, licking grease off her fingers.

"Why, exactly, is that?" Harry asked. He poured her a cup of tea and watched as she stirred milk in. "Because you stayed last night?" Perhaps it was paranoia, but he wanted to know what she felt about what they'd done last night.

"Oh," she looked surprised and then grinned, "well, probably for that too, but... I meant because I didn't clean up last night after making dinner. We even left our dishes in the living room."

Harry chuckled and looked around the room at the mess. He could easily right it after she was gone

with a bit of magic. "I'll take care of it."

"I know you can," she dismissed. "But I feel bad."

"Don't," he shook his head. "It's my house."

"Yeah, but..." Her protest died when he glared jokingly at her. "Fine."

"Ginny, you're free to come and make a mess at my house anytime," he said softly, reaching out and brushing a bit of hair away from her cheek. "Anytime."

"Be careful, Harry," she warned, moving into his arms. "I might just take you up on that offer."

He kissed her then, savoring the way she tasted of bacon and tea, and the hint of mint from her toothpaste.

"Seven tonight?" he asked, feeling as if the hours apart might just make her disappear from the world. This whole last week had felt like a surreal dream that Harry might just wake from one day. And it would kill him if she wasn't really here.

"Seven," she agreed. She looked just as torn about having to leave as he felt and it helped, strangely.

* * *

Ginny's hopefully quiet entrance into the flat wasn't so quiet. Both Alannah and Chloe were there, cheering her in. Ginny grimaced, knowing she wasn't going to get out of sharing at least a few of the details because they were just here, like over-eager puppies. Telling them that nothing had happened would be a lie—one they'd smell a day away and call her on.

"You've officially completed your first walk of shame," Alannah hugged her tightly, squeezing her around the neck. "If I wasn't so jealous, I'd be thrilled for you."

"It was not a walk of shame," Ginny scolded. "I'm not ashamed at all."

"Tell us all about it," Chloe said, eagerly bouncing on the end of the worn, second-hand sofa. Her enthusiasm was completely betrayed by the all black outfit she was wearing, heavily lined black eyes, pale white skin and blood-red lips.

Ginny grimaced. "I don't think—"

"She's not a detail person, Chlo, remember?"

"But... you slept with him, didn't you?"

Ginny sighed, knowing she wasn't going to get out of this without sharing just a bit. These two were like terriers once they got a hold of something. "We had sex," she nodded, squeezing past Alannah.

"And?" Alannah demanded.

"And... I'm not saying anything more," Ginny shrugged, smiling smugly. "It's between the two of us, not the *four* of us."

"Must have been good," Chloe sighed, picking at her black fingernails.

Ginny went to her room and stared at the disheveled bed and clothing strewn about. The entire place seemed... different today. Maybe she was just seeing it through rose colored glasses after spending the night with Harry. Maybe it was just her addled brain that couldn't stop thinking about Harry.

She quickly tidied the room and changed into clean clothes to get ready for her shift at the pub. How she was going to manage to focus today was a mystery.

"Your sister called twice last night and showed up here first thing this morning," Alannah ducked her head into Ginny's room without knocking and Ginny very nearly cursed her, but managed to keep her wand hidden behind her leg.

"Sister?" Ginny blinked at the blonde, trying to follow what she'd just said.

"Yeah, your sister. Just a bit taller than you, red spiky hair. Chloe was admiring her piercings. She doesn't look a thing like you, other than the hair, if you ask me, but—"

Spiky hair and piercings. Tonks.

"Oh, yeah, my sister," Ginny nodded. "She, er... she was *here*?"

Alannah smiled, a rather predatory look coming into her gaze. "I told her you were out, didn't want to say where. But... then she started asking questions and..."

"And you spilled your guts," Ginny nodded knowingly. Honestly, it wouldn't have taken much, and Tonks could make a mute person talk aloud when she got questioning them, even without magic to help her.

"Sorry," Alannah smiled, not looking the least repentant. "I didn't give his name—probably because I only know him as 'that pub bloke', but she got the idea that you were having a sleep over."

"Great," Ginny grimaced. "That means she'll be dropping by again today."

"She seemed worried about you," Alannah shrugged. "But I told her you were fine—really good, actually. And I think she understood, because she laughed about it."

"Perfect," Ginny nodded. "I've got a shift at work. I'm sure she'll arrive in the middle of it all to embarrass me."

"Makes me tempted to come in on my day off," Alannah teased. "Honestly, you'll be fine. She'll see right through you, she'll tease you, and then, eventually—like when you're ninety—she'll let you forget about it. That's how sisters are."

Ginny grimaced, thinking that might be how Hermione was, but Tonks wasn't going to let it go that easily.

"Talk to you later," she sighed. Even the prospect of having to explain herself to Tonks couldn't steal away all of Ginny's good mood. Waking up with Harry this morning had only affirmed that she made the right choice by staying last night. It hadn't been awkward or strange to be there at all, even though she'd worried yesterday that it might be.

The whole way to work all Ginny could think about was being with Harry again tonight. It was going to be a long day.

* * *

Sirius' head was pounding when he woke slumped in the same chair he'd been sitting in last night. He swore loudly, startling Hedwig, who gave him a scolding hoot, ruffling her feathers in his direction.

"Don't yell at me," he grumbled, holding his head. He didn't remember finishing off the whole body of Ogden's last night, but his body told him he had. Honestly, he was getting old if he couldn't even hold his liquor anymore.

"Hello the house!"

Sirius swore again when Remus' booming voice bounced off the walls and shattered his head, sending the pounding sensation all the way down to his toes.

"Not so loud," he begged when Remus' shadow darkened the doorway.

"Had yourself a party last night, I see," Remus smirked. Sirius couldn't see him from where he was focused on the floorboards, but he *knew* that was the look Remus was wearing; he'd seen it enough over the years.

"You should have come," Sirius scolded softly.

"I would have, if I'd been invited."

Hedwig hooted again and Remus' shoes moved across the floor toward her. "Is Harry here?"

"Nope," Sirius shook his head and winced. "Just the bird."

"I swear she just glared at you, mate," Remus laughed. "You better watch yourself or she'll peck your head again."

"I meant to get up early this morning and check on the Cub," Sirius said, using Augmenti to fill his empty glass with water and taking a long drink. The water was refreshing and cleared away some of his dry mouth, but did nothing to ease the painful headache.

"Early?" Remus grunted. "Padfoot, it's nearly one in the afternoon."

Sirius swore and summoned a hangover potion from the kitchen. He grimaced at the taste as he swallowed it and nearly fell over when he tried to stand.

"How much did you drink last night, Sirius?" Remus demanded, hoisting his friend off the chair.

"Not that much, but I slept in the ruddy chair. My body is too old for this, Moony."

"You forget that you're not eighteen anymore."

"Eighteen was a good year," Sirius smiled. His legs felt surer as the potion flowed through him. His body was still protesting his choice of bed last night, and probably would for some time to come, but at least he could stand on his own.

"It was," Remus nodded. "If you want, I could go and check on Harry for you."

Sirius waived him off. "I'll be fine. He's probably at the shop by now anyway."

"How is that going for him?" Remus asked. Sirius took a moment to study him critically and decided that both of them were far too old. What had happened to the pack of young lads roaming around Scotland, playing pranks and having fun?

"He's doing well, he tells me," Sirius shrugged. "He's gone back to being secretive again, though."

"You don't think he's dealing with all of *that* still, do you?" Remus asked, rubbing his face harshly.

"No more than any of us are, really," Sirius dismissed. "I could ask the same thing of you, my friend, you know. You don't tell me anything anymore."

Remus grimaced. "There's not much to tell, really."

"Stop patronizing me, Moony. I'm old enough to put the pieces together. You're up to something—have been for a long time. I've kept silent about it because I was trying to act like an adult, letting you take whatever time you thought you needed to tell me about it. But I'm too old and tired to wait around forever. Spill!"

Remus was quiet for a long minute and Sirius stood, prepared to walk out. He'd put up with this for far too long.

"I'm seeing someone," Remus finally said. "Have been for awhile."

"And?" Sirius demanded.

"You don't sound surprised," Remus said, blinking up at him.

"You're not as good at keeping things as secret as you think you are. I was just waiting for the official announcement."

"Not sure there will be one," Remus shrugged. "She wants a commitment and I'm just not sure."

"Do us all a favor and get over yourself already, Remus," Sirius demanded.

"You're one to talk," Remus shot back, "holed up here in this house, never doing anything. You know, I might have told you if you didn't pretend you still needed to be here, hidden away from the world and not really living."

There was a long silence until both of them started laughing. "I guess we're both more than a bit ridiculous," Sirius conceded.

"You know her, actually," Remus shrugged. "Nymphadora Tonks."

"Tonks?" Sirius blinked wildly. "Moony she's—"

"Far too young to be saddled with an old man like me, I know," Remus sighed, laying his head along the back of the sofa.

"That's not what I was going to say," Sirius shook his head. "I meant she's an Auror. She'll kick your arse if you don't commit. Age is just a number, mate. If you're serious about her—and since you've been with her for this long, I think you'd better be—then you'd better get it straight in your head."

Remus spluttered for several seconds but stopped when Sirius gave him 'the look'. "I'm not sure marriage and kids are the kind of thing I can do, Sirius. There are my... special circumstances, and then you add in the age difference—"

"Which sounds like you're the only one bothered by it," Sirius put in.

"You're meant to be on *my* side, you know," Remus grumbled. He trailed off and Sirius let the subject drop for now. Moony wasn't one to convince by arguing more. He needed to have the truth shoved in his face and then left to think about it. He'd come back for more when he was ready, and Sirius would be more than willing to dish it out.

"What's wrong with Harry?"

"Nothing," Sirius shrugged. "He's inexplicably happy."

"Er, Padfoot, I'm pretty sure that's a good thing."

"Did you miss the 'inexplicably' part?" Sirius scoffed. "I don't have the slightest idea what he's up to lately. The past week he's been completely silent—no notes, no calls, nothing. And he's always in a hurry, off to somewhere when I show up."

"He's twenty-two years old, Sirius," Remus protested. "That's how young people are at that age."

"I don't remember that year," Sirius grumbled. "I was already a surrogate parent at twenty-two, raising a child while trying to hide from shadows."

Remus sighed and rubbed his face. "Give him some time, Padfoot. He's just gained his first taste of freedom and he sounds like he's enjoying it. Plus, he's got the business he's trying to start. Or... maybe he's found himself a girl."

The last addition to that list made Sirius almost choke on his breath. Logically, he knew it would happen one day, but Harry didn't really date. He'd gone out a few times when Sirius pushed him into it, but nothing serious. And even though Sirius had told Harry to find someone just the other week, he hadn't assumed Harry would actually *do* it.

"You don't think..."

"I have no idea," Remus shrugged. "He and I were never as close as the two of you were. But, in that same vein, I think that you need to trust him a bit more, Sirius. He'll tell you what's going on when he's ready to."

"Like you did?" Sirius smirked.

"No," Remus sighed. "Harry's better about that than I am. Always has been."

"We'll see," Sirius shrugged. "Maybe I'll just keep popping over at odd times."

Remus laughed. "You're liable to get yourself hexed that way, you know. Or see something you don't want to see."

"Maybe," Sirius shrugged. "But at least I'd know what he's up to."

"Just give him time," Remus cautioned. "He's a good kid, Sirius. You did a good job of raising him—far better than I would have done. You were the right choice."

"I'm still not sure about that."

"You just wait," Remus cautioned. "James and Lily will tell you themselves one day."

"If I keep up nights like last night it'll be sooner rather than later," Sirius grumbled. "This old dog is too tired for things like that."

Chapter 8

Maybe You Want Her, Maybe You Need Her

Harry rolled over, his hand reaching for Ginny in the warm bed. He'd gotten so used to having her there that on the few nights that she didn't stay over, Harry had a hard time sleeping. It had only been a month since they started sleeping together, five weeks since they'd started seeing each other. At times it felt like there wasn't a time when Ginny hadn't been there, and then others when it had been only seconds. Harry didn't even think that one lifetime would be enough to spend with her.

As they lay together, cocooned in the warmth of Harry's bed, he contemplated, once again, asking her to marry him—or to move in here at the very least. It may have been a whirlwind romance, but he had no doubt he was in love with her. He hadn't told her that yet—maybe it was time now.

His hand traced her shoulder, following the line that her thin tank-top made along her skin. Ginny rolled toward him in her sleep and he marveled at how beautiful she was, at how lucky he'd been to walk into that pub five weeks ago.

He needed to tell her his secret soon—secrets, really, but he was sure that the first would be bigger than the second. She had no idea who Harry Potter was, so his supposed destiny shouldn't matter more than 'by the way, I'm a wizard'.

"Gin," he whispered, letting his fingers slide along her jaw line. "Wake up, Gin. I need to tell you something."

She stirred, but they'd been up late last night, watching a show on the telly and then barely making it to the bed before their clothing had come flying off—although not in the magical sense.

"'m sleepin', Harry," she mumbled, patting his cheek lovingly before burying her face into the pillow.

Harry chuckled and slid his hands down to her waist, finding the warm skin there that he knew was especially ticklish. She squirmed away from him, slapping at his hands, but she was laughing now too.

"Come on, wake up," he urged, pressing his lips to her neck and blowing on the skin there. Ginny squealed and tried to get away, but eventually she stilled in his arms, leaning up to kiss him.

"You ruined a perfectly good dream, you know," she grumbled.

"I need to tell you something," Harry said, smoothing her mussed hair away from her face.

"Should have a cup of tea first?" Ginny asked. "Is it that type of thing?"

He chuckled and considered. "I think you can handle it now."

"Okay," she nodded and pretended to prepare herself, wiggling underneath his body and making it

nearly impossible for him to concentrate.

When she was finally settled, looking expectantly up to him, he smiled.

"I'm in love with you," he said softly. "Completely in love."

She smiled widely and wrapped her arms around him. "I've been waiting for you to say that, you prat. I've loved you since the moment I first saw you, I think."

Harry laughed at her earnestness and dipped his head to kiss her. "Love at first sight?"

"Well, maybe not that long," she shrugged, kissing him back just as enthusiastically. "But almost."

"You make my life... incredible."

"You're not so bad yourself, Harry," she nuzzled her nose against hers.

He almost asked her to marry him right there, but decided that she might appreciate something a bit more romantic than him with his ruffled bed head and morning breath.

"Let's get dressed," he urged. "There is something else I want to talk to you about. We can do it while we make breakfast."

She gave him a wary look and kissed him. "Can't we just stay in here a bit longer?"

Harry laughed and let himself be carried away in her enthusiasm. She did usually have great ideas.

The latest one appeared to involve considerably less clothing and Harry was in the middle of removing her pajama bottoms and tossing them in the same direction her tank top had gone when Ginny gasped.

"Harry... there's someone here!" she hissed, struggling to pull the sheet over them. She squealed loudly when the bedroom door swung open.

"Get your lazy arse out of bed, Har- Oh! I'm sorry!"

Harry swore and dropped to the mattress next to Ginny as the door closed loudly. Sirius. Perfect timing as usual.

"My godfather," Harry sighed, rubbing his face harshly.

"Do you think he saw..." He heard the terror in Ginny's voice and took a deep breath to clear his head before pulling the sheet back up over her and kissing her forehead.

"I don't think I can do the family thing right now, Harry." She turned panicked eyes on him and he nodded jerkily. As much as he wanted Sirius to meet the woman he was in love with, this wasn't the ideal situation.

"I'll take care of it. You go get in the shower."

She gave one large sigh and a glance toward the door before running on her tiptoes, the sheet dragging behind her.

Harry took another minute to try and calm his body before he pulled his glasses on. Not bothering to put on a shirt—what difference did it make now?—Harry walked out of the bedroom. He could hear Sirius rummaging around in the kitchen, probably making tea, and walked in that direction.

“Er... hi,” he said, stepping onto the cold floorboards. Sirius at least had the decency to flush before his face split into a huge grin.

“I wondered what you’d been up to.”

“Don’t,” Harry shook his head. “Don’t tease about it, okay? She’s... horrified.”

“I didn’t see much,” Sirius shrugged. “Thankfully. That’s not exactly the side of you I wanted to see when I came here today.” The kettle whistled loudly and Sirius levitated it toward the table.

Harry jumped forward and grabbed the handle. “Sirius!” he hissed, glancing back over his shoulder. “She’s Muggle!” he said under his breath. “I... I haven’t told her yet.”

“How long has this been going on?” Sirius said, nodding his understanding.

“Five weeks,” Harry shrugged. He felt like a five year-old, getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar, but shook it away. He was a grown man, in his own home, with the woman he loved. Sirius be damned!

Sirius whistled low. “It’s serious?”

Harry stared at him, waiting for the punch line to the decades’ old joke, but it didn’t come. “Yeah,” he nodded. “I’m in love with her.”

Sirius groped for the chair behind him and sank into it. “Er... love?”

“Yeah,” Harry ruffled his hair and chuckled softly. “You look stunned. Sometimes I feel that way too.”

“Like I got run over by a herd of hippogriffs,” Sirius nodded. “Why haven’t you said anything, Cub?” He looked hurt and Harry felt a wave of guilt.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Maybe I figured you’d take the mickey, or... or tell me that I’m too young, or we haven’t been together long enough to know that it’s love.”

Sirius nodded thoughtfully. “You’re probably right.”

“I didn’t keep it from you to punish you for anything, or to be secretive,” Harry denied. “I just... it was all new for so long, and then things just started to build...”

“It’s okay,” Sirius shrugged. “Just a shock, I guess. Can I... meet her?”

Harry smiled. “Probably not the best idea right now,” he shook his head. “She’s mortified, actually.”

Thinks you saw... well, everything."

"Just the red hair," Sirius shook his head with a smirk. "Damn you Potters and your redheads."

Harry laughed and listened for the sound of the water in the pipes. The shower was still running and he had no doubt Ginny was huddled in there, waiting for him to come in and proclaim the coast clear.

"We'll set something up soon," he promised.

Sirius nodded and stood, rubbing his hands on his jeans. "I'll just... go then, I guess. Harry... you are happy, aren't you?" he asked as they walked to the front door.

"More than I've ever been," Harry smiled.

Sirius stared at him for a long minute before he threw his arms around Harry's shoulders and hugged him until Harry wasn't sure he'd be able to take a full breath in.

"By the way," he mumbled when he finally released Harry, "you might want to get some bruise paste there, Cub. You've got a few... marks." He smirked and disappeared from the front step.

Harry swore and reached up to touch the sensitive spots on his neck. But he couldn't be irritated with Ginny for the love bites, not after remembering what he'd done to earn them.

Maybe she'd still be in the shower and he could repay the favor.

* * *

The weeks seemed to pass in a blur—happiness swirling with the high of spending time together—and before Ginny knew it, Halloween was upon them.

The Weasleys had never been much for celebrating the holiday with anything elaborate, really, but as the grandchildren started to arrive, her mother's plans for a family celebration were announced. A feast like they'd always had at Hogwarts.

"And be sure to bring your lad," her mother winked. "You'll have plenty of time to prepare him for the shock of a full Weasley house and warn him away from George."

Ginny couldn't deny that having Harry with her would complete a metaphorical circle in her mind—the two things she loved more than anything finally joined—but she hadn't told him that she was a witch yet. It just never seemed to be the right time to blurt it out.

But when she'd asked Harry to come with her, he'd gotten this... *look* on his face. "I can't Gin," he protested. "My godfather and I... we have this tradition on Halloween."

"That's fine," she assured him, both relieved and saddened.

"I do want to meet your family," he nodded. "I just... I can't miss this. I've been blowing him off a lot lately and..."

“Harry, I *do* understand. And we have been a bit... occupied lately. Go and have a good time. I’ll see you the day after.”

But now that she was here, or at least out in the field behind the Burrow, she felt his absence keenly. The cold night wind blew against her and she gathered her cloak against the biting chill that it brought. It made her whole body ache uncomfortably, when she was already nursing a bit of a cold. No doubt her mother would fill her full of Pepperup Potion if she so much as mentioned the word ‘cold’. Maybe that would be a good thing, though.

The windows of the Burrow were lit up brightly and she could see the party well under way when she stepped onto the porch. Walking in was like hitting a wave of heat and sound, and Ginny winced against it.

“Hello, Ginny-girl!” her father greeted her with a kiss on the cheek and looked behind her, possibly expecting Harry. “Where’s your young man?”

“He had a family obligation tonight,” she explained, “some sort of traditional thing that they do every year.”

“Ahh, that’s too bad,” her father said, smiling and patting her cheek softly. “I was looking forward to meeting the man who put this smile on my not-so-little girl’s face.”

Ginny felt her cheeks heat and nodded. “I’ll bring him over soon—maybe when not everyone is here.”

“Good idea,” he chuckled. He helped her remove her cloak and hung it by the back door. “Go and say hello to your mother.”

Ginny did as he suggested, weaving her way through the crowd, which seemed to include almost as many people without red hair as Weasleys. All of Ron’s friends were there—Seamus, Dean and Neville, along with many of the other Gryffidors they’d all grown up with over the years. Luna danced by on the arm of Rolf Scamander—someone she’d written to Ginny about meeting.

“Hello everyone!” Ginny greeted the room in general, receiving more hugs than she could remember getting in a long time. By the time she made it to her mother, her whole body was aching.

“You look a bit peaked, dear,” her mother said, holding her hand to Ginny’s forehead. “Have you been wearing your scarf and hat?”

Ginny couldn’t help but laugh at that. “I’m serious, young lady. You lose forty percent—”

“I know,” Ginny interrupted. “Maybe a bit of Pepperup—”

“Have a whisky instead,” Ron interrupted, handing her a glass filled with the amber liquid. “Does the same thing as Pepperup.”

“It does not, Ronald Weasley,” her mother grumbled. She was gearing up to argue when Victoire wrapped her arms around her grandmother’s legs, distracting her.

"Come on," Ron said, guiding Ginny toward a rather loud corner of the room. "Let's get you away before you have to hear about everyone's aches and illnesses." Seamus and Dean were arguing over the rules of some sort of drinking game while George thumbed through a book, quoting rules over the top of everyone.

"Where's the bloke?" Ron asked.

Ginny downed her drink when everyone looked her way. "Couldn't make it," she shrugged. "He had a family thing already."

"Tell me why you insist on dating a Muggle, when I'm right here, love?" Seamus teased, opening his arms wide.

"Because I've seen what you have to offer, Finnegan," she quipped back, letting her eyes roam up and down his body. "I prefer the Muggle."

Everyone in the group groaned loudly and Seamus poured her another drink, laughing.

Ginny held it in her hand, not really wanting to get pissed tonight. She'd already had more than she planned on having. Perhaps if she simply held it in her hand, people would stop trying to get her to drink more.

"You think the stuff from my shop would work on a Muggle?" George asked thoughtfully. "We probably owe this bloke a talking to, at least."

"Yeah," Ron grumbled. "He needs to hear the speech."

"Leave her alone," Hermione threaded her arm through Ginny's and tugged her away from the blokes, over to a corner where Tonks and Angelina were talking quietly, Tonks' hand on Angie's round belly.

"Thank you," Ginny breathed. "I don't want to have to defend Harry's honor to them."

Hermione laughed. "Instead you'll be forced to defend him to Tonks."

Ginny pretended to try and tug her back toward Ron and his friends instead, but Hermione just laughed louder and pulled her over.

"There you are," Tonks said, giving Ginny a one-armed hug. "Appears you're just as single as I am tonight."

"Where *is* Remus?" Ginny asked, going onto her toes and looking around the room.

"Somewhere," Tonks said darkly, swigging what remained of her drink. "And he thinks *I* get moody at that time of the month."

Ginny smirked and remembered that Halloween did fall on the full moon tonight. "I'm sorry," she said, sliding her hand into her friend's, giving it a quick squeeze.

But Tonks waved her hand in front of her face dismissively and Ginny and Hermione exchanged a

glance. "How much have you had tonight?"

"Enough not to care," Tonks smirked.

"Molly's already said she's staying here tonight," Angelina greeted Ginny with a quick hug before she wandered over to help Freddie use a training wand to carve his pumpkin.

"Who needs men anyway?" Tonks cheered, earning a few chuckles from the groups around them.

"Well," Hermione sighed, glancing over at Ron. "They are rather..."

"Ginny needs men," Tonks giggled. "Or just one, anyway."

Ginny felt her face heat and didn't know whether if shushing Tonks would draw more attention than her inebriated ranting.

"Yep, she needs her man," Tonks laughed. "Did you know that I almost did a tracking charm on you that night?" She leaned close to Ginny. "Imagine my surprise if I had found you off shagging some random Muggle!"

"Alright, that's it," Ginny grumbled, grabbing her friend by the arm and dragging her from the room. Hermione followed, rushing up the stairs after Ginny and Tonks, who was tripping up, being dragged by her arm. "You need to sober up."

"Why? Because I spilled your secret to the family?" Tonks giggled. "Hey, at least he's not running around, not telling people you're together. He's not, is he?" she peered closely at Ginny—so close that Ginny had to back up. "I wonder if shagging a Muggle is better than a Wizard." A round of laughter from the bottom of the stairs assured Ginny that they'd been followed.

"I'll bet the only difference is their wand!" Tonks snorted loudly and leaned heavily on Ginny. "Geddit? Their *wand!*"

"Hermione... sobering charm, please?" Ginny begged, feeling horribly tired all of a sudden. Maybe not bringing Harry with her was a good thing. She couldn't imagine how embarrassed she'd be to have him see her friend like this.

Hermione's wand flashed in the low light of the hallway and Tonks shook her head, disoriented for a minute. Ginny pulled her toward the bathroom, forcibly ejecting Bill when he opened to her demanding knock.

"Hello to you, as well!" he called just as the door shut in his face.

Ginny turned on the water in the sink and wet a cloth and began to stroke it along her friend's face. Hermione did the same, helping to wash the other side.

"I'm so sorry, Ginny," Tonks said finally, her brown eyes leaking tears into the flannels on both sides. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm jealous, I guess."

"Remus loves you," Hermione assured her. "He does."

"Sometimes I know that," Tonks said, pulling back and taking the cloth from Ginny to wipe her eyes with. "And then other times I just don't know."

"You just need to be patient—"

"Says the woman who waited seven years for my thick brother to notice that she had breasts," Ginny scoffed. "Patience isn't what you need right now. Kick him out on his arse! That man needs a wake up call."

Hermione's jaw dropped and she spluttered, but Ginny held her hand up, stopping any words that were threatening to escape.

"You're an Auror for Merlin's sake, Dora. You're a strong, independent woman, and if he wants to be with you then he'll need to commit. If not, then you're better off without him. You fought the same war he did and mourned friends the same as he did. It's been five years—that's time enough to get over himself and pick up the pieces.

"Stop letting him walk all over you and be the woman I know you are."

The words melted into the silence of the room and Ginny sighed, rubbing her forehead in exhaustion.

"There are too many men out there who will treat you with the respect you deserve, Dora. Don't waste your time on someone who treats you like rubbish that he's stepped in. I know that from experience. If you love him, tell him. If he decides he can't commit then you can decide whether it's worth wasting more time on, or if you need to move on."

Tonks blinked at her, looking as if she were the younger woman in the friendship, rather than being years older than Ginny.

"You're right," she shrugged, rubbing her eyes dry. "Sometimes I get so caught up in what I feel that I forget that I don't need to be treated this way."

"Well said, Ginny," Hermione said softly. Her acceptance made Ginny blink; Hermione was usually much more tactful in her advice. But sometimes the direct approach was the best.

"I've really missed you, Ginny," Tonks hugged her tightly.

"I've been a bit preoccupied lately," Ginny sighed, feeling her face heat. "I don't mean to ignore—"

"I meant over the past few years," Tonks dismissed. "I owe your man a huge kiss when he finally turns up, you know. He's brought you back to us."

"It's true," Hermione said, joining the hug.

Ginny laughed. She couldn't deny that she felt more like herself than she had in a very long time—perhaps ever. She'd found herself in Harry's arms. Tears welled up in her eyes and she closed them tightly, feeling like a silly bint for crying over this.

"I can't wait to meet him," Hermione said, laughing when they broke apart.

"Soon, hopefully," Ginny nodded. Now she just needed to tell him about all of this. She couldn't deny that it was long past time to talk to him, but something kept holding her back. It had taken her hours today to analyze it and decide that she was frightened that he just might not understand enough to want to stay with her, and she couldn't quite bring herself to risk what she'd found. But she was slipping around him more and more, and soon she'd do something horribly blatant and scare the pants off him.

Once they'd cleaned themselves up, the three women entered the kitchen again, faces red from the attention they were drawing.

Ginny migrated over toward the kids at the table, commenting on their pumpkin carving and eating handfuls of sweets that they offered her.

By the end of the evening, Ginny's stomach felt horrible from all the things she'd been offered, and had devoured: biscuits, sweets, sweet rolls and her mother's dinner. The Firewhisky she had running through her veins was making her slightly dizzy.

The cold air outside helped to clear her head when it was time to Apparate home. Ginny took large gulping breaths of it, wrapping her cloak tighter to her as the wind whipped around her.

As she was passing the remains of the pumpkin patch, a violent wave of nausea rose up inside her and she lurched forward, grasping the small fence that surrounded the garden. Everything she'd eaten all night came back up, making her splutter and cough. She stood bent over in the bright light of the moon, staring down at the mess she'd made. Her stomach rolled several more times, threatening to heave again, but she managed to swallow it back down.

Finally, after a long minute, she was able to vanish the sick and wipe her mouth on her cloak.

"Damn Firewhisky," she muttered, glaring into the night. "Too many sweets."

Her head pounded and she didn't even try to move out to the Apparition point, but left from right there in the garden.

Once back in her flat, Ginny changed her clothes, brushed her teeth and washed her face. She still felt achy and slightly hung over. She crawled into her cold bed and closed her eyes, wishing she'd stayed at Harry's tonight instead.

Chapter 9

Sometimes The Hardest Thing And The Right Thing Are The Same

It was too cold to be out tonight. The wind cut right through his wool cloak, making Harry shiver against it. He'd much rather be home with Ginny, sitting in front of the fire, or, better yet, cuddled in bed.

Even as the thought entered his head, he pushed it away. No, this is where he needed to be right now. Since the war had ended, they'd moved their memorial out here to Godric's Hollow, rather than having it hidden away in the house in Scotland.

In some ways, Harry liked it better back at the house—it seemed so much more real here at their graves, especially on this night, when the wind made the trees sway and creak ominously, and the leaves blow everywhere.

"It's going to snow soon," Remus said, sniffing the air. He shivered as if the chill went all the way to his bones. "Need to speed this up, Sirius," he mumbled, glancing nervously at the horizon which was just now becoming painted in bright orange hues. Perfect for Halloween.

"It's time," Sirius nodded, shifting his heavy cloak aside and producing a bottle of Ogden's Finest and three small shot glasses. He set them on top of the marker with James inscribed on the front and filled them.

Harry leaned forward and took his glass, Remus did the same, and Sirius held his up. "To James," he said strongly, "the best mate I ever had—hope you're still holding my place for me up there. Line up some dates for me too, while you're at it, will you?"

Harry smirked, staring at the amber liquid in his glass as Remus cleared his throat. It was hoarse and Harry glanced at him to see him roll his shoulders. Whether it was the impending transformation later tonight or the heaviness of memories, Harry couldn't tell. Whatever it was made him look awful.

"To James—you were the one who figured it all out first and never backed down. I miss you, Prongs."

Harry was quiet for a minute, measuring what he wanted to say. There was a lot he would like to say to his father, but this wasn't his father—this was a plot of land.

"I learned a lot this year," he started out, his voice low. "But most importantly, I learned what it feels like to love someone with everything you have. To want to give everything to that person." Remus stirred and Harry could feel the weight of his stare. Apparently, Sirius hadn't said anything to Remus about Ginny yet.

"Thanks for teaching me that, Dad," Harry said.

As he finished they all lifted their glasses in salute and then drank them. They refilled them one more time, looking at Lily's marker now.

"You were one hell of a woman, Lily Potter," Sirius said, emotion choking his voice. "The only girl who ever turned me down when I asked you out. And then you betrayed me by falling in love with my best mate." He shook his head even as a barking laugh escaped his chest, rolling out of him. "To you, Lils."

"You were one of my best friends," Remus said, his voice soft. "Smarter than any of us, and much prettier too." Sirius snorted but didn't say anything. "You gave me more than friendship, Lily; you gave me a shoulder to lean on and understanding that surpassed anything I could have asked."

"Mum," Harry said, blinking back the moisture in his eyes. He always cried when they drank to his mother. "I've always wondered what drove you to step in front of that curse. And I've never fully understood it... until now. I still don't think I'll ever feel it the way you did, because you're my mum, but... I want to just tell you... thanks, and I miss you."

They drank the toast and Sirius gathered the glasses, vanishing them and tucking the bottle of liquor back inside his cloak. "Come on, we have a few more minutes. Let's go home and get warm." He clapped Harry on the back and they began to walk away from the graveyard.

"Would someone mind telling me what Harry was talking about?" Remus asked just before they Disapparated.

"So, am I going to get an explanation?" Remus demanded the second they were all standing in Sirius' living room.

Harry's throat closed up and he rubbed his eyes under his glasses, tugging at the scarf and cloak he wore. Honestly, he didn't want to talk about this right now. He'd rather just go and see if Ginny was curled up in his bed. Then again, it really wasn't that late, and she was probably still with her family.

"Harry here has been keeping a few secrets," Sirius grinned and slapped Harry on the shoulder, almost knocking him off balance with his enthusiasm.

"I met someone, Remus," Harry said finally. "And she's... great."

"He's in love," Sirius added helpfully, bouncing a bit on the balls of his feet. "Imagine that, our ickle Harry in love, but does he run and tell his godfather who raised him for twenty-one years?"

"Shove off," Harry grumbled, even as his frown turned into a smile. He'd known this was coming—had known since the moment Sirius found out about Ginny. That didn't mean he was looking forward to it.

"Noooo," Sirius drawled, ignoring Harry's groan and catering to Remus' laughter. "I have to find out by walking in on the two of them in bed together."

Harry knew his face was turning red, so he shoved his hands in his cloak pockets, fiddling with the carved hair clip that he'd finished earlier today for Ginny. He was planning on giving it to her soon—

maybe when he sat her down and talked to her about him being a wizard. There just hadn't been a good time for that yet, or a good time to sit and talk about where their relationship was going. He was going to have to make time. Soon.

"Padfoot, his head is going to explode—give him a moment to explain."

Harry sighed and turned to look at the man who had been almost a surrogate godfather. Remus was always around when Harry was growing up, although he'd become more and more distant as Harry got older and the war got worse.

"Perhaps you can explain why you've been keeping secrets as well," he challenged. Remus immediately turned on Sirius, a move that Harry hadn't expected.

"He's smart, Remus," Sirius shrugged, slouching into a chair. "I didn't say anything to him."

"He didn't have to say anything," Harry dismissed. "You're not as good at it as you think you are."

"Neither are you, Harry," Sirius quipped.

"I was perfectly fine with my secret until someone came walking into my house without any notice. You're lucky I was preoccupied or I—"

"Is that what they're calling it nowadays?" Remus smirked. Harry let his shoulders slump, knowing it was a lost cause. He'd never win this round; it was two against one.

"I'm in love with her," Harry finally said. "And you'll get to meet her as soon as I can figure out how to tell her about... about all of this," he sighed, looking around. "It's not easy to explain, you know."

"The Harry Potter bit?" Remus asked.

"The wizard bit," Sirius corrected with much glee. "She's a Muggle."

Harry lifted the hair clip out of his pocket and looked at it, his fingers tracing the intricate lily carved in detail. "She'll understand, I just don't know how to start the conversation, honestly. And there's always something else to distract me."

"She's a redhead," Sirius added, earning a low whistle from Remus.

"You need to find a woman, Padfoot," Harry sighed, tucking the clip away once more.

"I am the only one without one," he nodded thoughtfully. Harry couldn't help but smirk at Remus.

"And *you* were taking the mickey."

Remus opened his mouth to protest, but then simply shrugged. "I've been seeing someone as well."

"My cousin!" Sirius barked with a laugh.

Harry's blood ran cold for a moment. "Er... which one?" Most of Sirius' relatives were horrible

people, raised in their pureblood ways and willing to die for it. Come to think of it, most of them did die for it.

"Andromeda's daughter," Sirius quickly explained. "She was in the Order, but you never met her."

Harry nodded absently. He hadn't met many of the people fighting against Voldemort, actually. Dumbledore had thought it was imperative that Voldemort not know Harry was alive and ready to stand in the path of his ultimate drive to take over the Wizarding world, so they'd kept Harry hidden away for years, working behind the scenes to bring the bastard down.

"How is that going, actually?" Sirius turned back to Remus, who grimaced.

"That well?" Harry laughed.

"I, er... I'd better get downstairs," Remus dismissed, changing the subject.

Harry jerked his hand up and stared at his watch. Now that he was drawn back to think about it, Remus was starting to sweat and look more and more pale. Harry had thought it was just the questioning.

"We're not done talking about this," Sirius challenged, following his oldest friend down to the holding cell that had been built in the basement long ago for nights like this. Remus had taken his Wolfsbane Potion already, but he always came here during full moons, just in case.

Harry took a moment to compose himself and think about Ginny before he followed.

Would she truly understand a world like this, with magic, and werewolves, and prophecies? Could *he* even understand it all at times?

"... one of these days she's just going to walk away from your scruffy arse if you don't start showing her how you feel about her."

Harry entered the room and immediately froze. "Er... I can just go..."

"Stay," Sirius barked. "You need to hear this too, in case you ever decide to get your head stuck in your arse about something."

Harry blinked at both men for a moment, Sirius leaning on the bars that separated them and Remus lying on the small camp bed that was the only thing in the cell. He was staring up at the ceiling, but still listening.

"He's right, you know," Harry challenged, shrugging one shoulder when Remus glowered at him. "If you're jerking her around, she's better off alone. Women like it when you treat them with respect, Moony."

"Listen to him," Sirius snorted. "One relationship and he knows everything about women."

"Not everything," Harry challenged back. "But I know that they don't like being treated like rubbish."

Remus stared at him with dark eyes for a long time before he looked away. "I'll talk to her when I get back."

"And you'll set things straight between you," Sirius nodded.

"I'll tell her how I feel, and I'll listen to what she has to say, and then we'll decide—together—where this is going."

"Not the answer I wanted, brother," Sirius sighed, "but I guess that's all I'm going to get from you right now."

"When did this become all about me," Remus grumbled, grimacing as he began to shudder. "Supposed... to be... Harry."

Harry and Sirius both snorted. "Yeah, well, he's doing things right, as far as I can tell. You're the one mucking it up."

Watching a transformation happen was almost physically painful for the observers. The slip and slide of bone and muscles rearranging, the tearing of clothing, the panting of the man who was slowly losing his mind over to the monster he hated—it was all gut wrenching to watch.

"I hate this," Sirius muttered, staring at his friend who was down on all fours. In the next second, he'd transformed into Padfoot and howled at the ceiling, commiserating with the wolf that lay flat on the floor.

Harry remembered sitting in this same spot as a very young boy, watching the same thing happen and crying because his Uncle Moony was in pain. It felt like lifetimes ago.

He stayed until both the wolf and dog were asleep on the floor, their heavy, even breathing making him tired.

Before he left the house, Harry stared at the picture of his parents that had always been on the mantel.

"I'm in love, Mum and Dad," he said softly. "And Ginny is wonderful. She's... I think you'd really like her. At least, I hope you would. She makes me happier than I thought was possible and I don't ever want to imagine my life without her now that she's here."

An unexpected wave of loneliness broke over him and Harry shivered in its wake. Right now he wanted nothing more than to be with Ginny, to hold her in his arms and smell the flowery scent of her hair.

He Apparated straight into his house, using one of the back bedrooms to arrive in, and hoping Ginny would be there. But his bed was cold, still flat and smooth where she'd made it early this morning.

Harry rubbed his face and discarded his cloak in favor of pulling on a coat and knit hat. He didn't fancy the walk over there—it was almost midnight—but he knew that Apparating straight into Ginny's flat probably wouldn't be the best way to break the news that he could perform magic.

There was still a light on when he knocked on the door. The blonde woman from the pub where Ginny worked opened the door and Harry thought she looked just as startled as he felt. Even though Ginny had warned him about her flat mates, he hadn't really connected that it was the same woman.

"Hi. Er, is Ginny here?"

The woman hesitated for a minute, as if she might lie to him, but finally nodded, holding the door wide. "Second door on the left, but I think she was asleep. She looked rather pale when she came in."

Harry scowled, his mind racing to try and figure out why she would have looked that way. Had something happened? He knew she was going to visit family and then taking the train home. Perhaps she was ill. They'd both been sniffing a bit lately and with the dramatic weather changes over the past few weeks, perhaps she'd caught a chill.

He knocked softly on the door, waiting for her to answer.

* * *

Ginny heard his voice in the living room, having just barely closed her eyes. But the clock now said half-twelve, rather than eleven. She must have dozed fitfully for awhile.

"Come in," she called when he knocked. Harry's head, complete with winter hat, peeked in the door.

"Hi," he said, sliding inside and standing with his back to the closed door. "I... I wanted to make sure you got in alright. She said you weren't feeling well."

Ginny knew the minute she saw him that something was wrong. Even in the minimal light of the room, she could see the shadows etched on his face.

"Just had a bit too much to drink," she dismissed. "I'm okay now."

He nodded but still stood there. "I should have come with you."

Ginny shifted in the narrow bed, making room for him. He hesitated, staring at the space for a moment before he began to shed layers, ending up in his boxers and t-shirt.

"You had a family obligation, Harry," she murmured once he was settled in next to her. He felt a bit warm to her and she wondered if he was coming down with the flu, or had a cold. "I understand that."

He nodded but was quiet for a long time and her mind raced, trying to decide if she should ask him what had happened, why he seemed so sad.

His arms wrapped around her, pulling her close and he buried his face in her hair. "My parents... they died around this time of year. We always get together on Halloween to remember them."

Understanding and sympathy filled her and she pulled him closer. "I'm so sorry, Harry. If I had

known I would have come with you."

"I should have invited you," he said, nodding. "I just... it's always been just us for so long."

"I know." She smoothed her hand through his hair and holding him close to her. Her heart beat faster as she gathered the courage to say what she wanted to. "But you're not alone anymore, Harry. I'm here."

"I know," he nodded, his lips finally finding hers.

Chapter 10

Everything I Need That I Never Knew I Wanted

Harry got up early, hoping to avoid running into Alannah and Chloe. Ginny kissed him goodbye at the front door and then dragged herself back to bed. The sheets smelled like Harry and she wrapped herself in them, taking comfort from the memory of him here with her.

It was bright out when she finally woke, groggy and with a headache. The room was overly warm and it made her feel all sticky. She gathered her things and trudged to the shower, ignoring Chloe's smirk when they passed in the hall.

"No Romeo this morning?"

Ginny closed the door and rested her head against it. She didn't have to work today, thankfully, and wondered if she should Apparate to the Burrow to get some Pepperup Potion. She'd forgotten last night in the mess of everything with Tonks. In fact, she should probably check on Tonks anyway.

Harry had some things to do at his shop and she planned to meet him for dinner. He'd asked her this morning, before he slipped out the door in the chilly air, if she would move in with him.

She must have looked rather stunned, because he'd kissed her forehead and told her that they'd talk about it more later. The idea was thrilling, really. She loved Harry more than anything, but she was nervous about what her family would say. Thanks to Tonks last night, they all knew, or suspected anyway, that she and Harry were intimate. But it was far different to hear something and to *know* something.

Her brothers would probably hunt Harry down and skin him alive.

The hot water in the shower did wonders for her achy body and relieved most of the headache. She quickly washed and then stood under the spray until it was just barely warm before wrapping a towel around herself and looking at the reflection critically in the mirror over the sink.

Her skin was pale, making her freckles stand out in stark contrast. Her hair was rather dull and the ends needed a good trimming. Perhaps her mother could help out with that today as well.

Ginny quickly got dressed and brushed out her hair. When she was brushing her teeth, however, she gagged on the brush and had to dive for the toilet. She barely made it in time to lose the meager contents of her stomach. Her whole body arched and she coughed, spluttering on the acrid bile that rose, burning her throat and nose.

"Are you alright, Ginny?"

Alannah's voice from the other side of the door startled Ginny and she stared at the floor, willing her stomach to cooperate enough that she could stand up.

"Yeah, just... just hung over a bit."

The door opened and closed quickly and Alannah was there, handing her a glass of water and a flannel.

"Hung over?" she asked with a critical eye.

"Had too much to drink last night at my parents'," Ginny shrugged. "Alcohol and I don't mix well."

Alannah bit her lip and leaned against her hip against the counter. "I don't mean to be intrusive or rude, but... do you think you might be pregnant?"

Ginny scoffed at the question, even as it hammered inside her brain. "No. No, I can't... we've been... careful." Her mind went automatically to the small bottle of potion tucked away in her bedside table. She took it every day because it was more convenient than running to the bathroom to do a contraceptive charm every time things grew heated between her and Harry. But even as the thought entered her mind, her mother's voice when she was fifteen, warning her that nothing was fool-proof, echoed.

"I..."

Alannah sighed. "It's something you may want to consider. You've been feeling sick lately—achy and throwing up. You and I always have our cycles at the same time, and you haven't touched your supplies this month."

Ginny felt as if she'd run head first into something heavy and solid. She groped for the wall behind her and leaned against it, staring at nothing as she mentally counted back. She hadn't had her period this month. Damn. Damn. Damn.

Pulling a small box from her pocket, Alannah set it on the table and turned to go, a sad smile on her face. "I'll get Chloe out of here for awhile so you can have some privacy."

"Don't... don't say anything please," Ginny pleaded. The emptiness in her head was spreading, causing her whole body to become numb, except her low belly, which felt incredibly warm all of a sudden. Ginny knew it was probably just her imagination, but...

"I won't," Alannah shook her head. "I've been in your shoes, Ginny. I won't say anything. Just... just know that you have options, okay?"

Ginny nodded and watched her go, before her eyes turned to the box on the counter. She knew what it was, but... would it work for her? She was a witch and this was a Muggle test.

Her hand shook as she reached out and picked it up. But the words on the box were too blurry to read. Ginny took a deep breath, set the box down, and finished her preparations for the day before she felt steady enough to look at it again.

The instructions were fairly simple, even though her hand shook while she followed them.

The two lines that appeared were faint and took a whole four nerve-wracking minutes to appear. But they confirmed what Ginny already knew deep down inside.

She was pregnant.

* * *

Tonks was barely conscious when an ethereal form melted through her kitchen wall. It was faint, but she could swear it was a doe. Her eyes widened as Ginny's voice spoke.

"Are you home, Dora? I need your help."

She immediately jumped up, her wand in her hand. But... Ginny's Patronus was a mare, wasn't it? Not a deer. A Patronus message was impossible to mimic, however, so she had no doubt that it was Ginny asking for help. Before she could do anything more, Ginny was there, arriving with a startling loud pop.

"I didn't have time to respond," Tonks growled. "What if the wards had been up?"

"I took a chance," Ginny said, reaching for a chair. "I didn't even know if I'd be able to make it."

"What happened? You look like death, Ginny. And when did your Patronus change?" Tonks could see Ginny's whole body shake and she was paler and more fragile than Tonks had seen in a very long time. Any grogginess from last night's festivities was quickly gone as Tonks nudged Ginny's chin up and peered into her eyes.

"Have you been attacked?"

Ginny shook her head and her eyes filled with tears. "I think the Patronus changed because of Harry—because I love him. Believe me, it startled me too." She was quiet for a long minute before she looked up again. "Tonks... I'm pregnant."

The words shuddered out of her even as a single tear escaped and dripped down her cheek. "Oh shit." Tonks backed up, as if it might be catching and sat heavily on her chair once more. "You... you're sure?"

"Unless a Muggle test won't work on a witch," Ginny nodded. She took a deep breath and swiped angrily at her tears. "I think I'm in shock."

"What, er... I don't even know what to ask," Tonks shrugged. "The test should work, I guess. I've never really known a witch who took one. We could do a potion test, but I don't have the supplies."

Ginny was quiet for a minute, picking at the skin around her cuticle. "Could we? Please?"

Tonks blew out a breath, puffing her cheeks while she thought about how to go about this. "I haven't done one by myself, actually," she admitted. "Hermione would know, though."

"She's at work," Ginny protested. "I can't say anything to anyone until I know. I haven't even told Harry. I just... just realized an hour ago."

"Hermione will come," Tonks assured her friend, reaching over the table to cover Ginny's cold hands in hers. "She will."

Her own Patronus message, conjured a minute later, disappeared out into the November day, headed for the Ministry.

Ginny's head was down on the table, but she wasn't crying.

"Are you... furious, terrified... what?" Tonks prodded.

"Just... numb," Ginny answered, lifting her head. "I don't really know what to think, what to feel."

Tonks nodded and rubbed her face harshly. Without another word, she got up and went about fixing a cup of tea. "Have you eaten anything today?"

Ginny grimaced and made a gagging sound. "Even the thought of food..."

"Yeah, but... you need to eat. For both of you." Saying that felt like speaking a foreign language for the first time—it sounded off and the implications of what she'd said just didn't quite sink in all the way.

Ginny stared at the table for a minute before slowly nodding. "Okay, I'll try. But no eggs; I've already thrown up enough today."

Tonks pulled open the ice box and stared inside trying to decide what might work best. There was some fruit, and she knew the bread was alright.

"Here," she said as she arranged a selection of things on a plate and slid it closer to Ginny. "Eat something at least."

Ginny took a small bite of apple. She must have decided it was good, because she took another bite, and then another.

"What are you going to do?" Tonks asked. Her mind was reeling with possibilities. The Wizarding world wasn't exactly keen on unwed mothers—one girl Tonks had gone to school with had been completely shunned by her parents for getting pregnant before she was married. It was horrible, but it was a fact of life at times. But the Weasleys weren't going to turn Ginny out; that much Tonks knew.

"I don't know," Ginny shrugged. "I just... it's not even real yet in my mind."

"Yeah, but... gut reaction? What was the first thing you thought of when you knew?"

"What am I going to tell Harry—that's the first thing I thought. And then..." she trailed off, her hand reaching down and brushing her flat stomach beneath the shirt she wore. "I'm keeping the baby."

The heaviness of the statement hung in the air between them and Tonks swallowed thickly. She was a mix of emotions right now—torn for one of her best friends. There was the excitement and thrill of a new life, and yet... Ginny was going to have a hard road ahead of her.

"Any idea what Harry will say?"

Ginny's answer was cut off by Hermione's arrival, wildly careening out of the floo, her wand held

aloft and her chest heaving.

"What's the emergency?" she demanded, peering around with wide eyes.

Tonks swallowed, glancing at Ginny. "Er... sorry about that. We just—"

"I'm pregnant, Hermione," Ginny said softly.

Hermione's eyes went wide and she immediately took the seat next to Ginny, looking completely unsure what to do. Should she hug her friend and comfort her, lecture, schedule out babysitting times... what?

"Oh, er..."

"That's what I said," Tonks tried to smile.

"And you're sure?"

"I took a Muggle test," Ginny nodded. Her words were stronger now, as if by making the decision about the baby she'd somehow made it all more real to herself. And Tonks realized maybe she had.

"We can do a potion test," Hermione nodded. "I have the things at home—don't ask," she glared at Tonks when Tonks opened her mouth to question why she happened to have the supplies on hand. "Give me five minutes."

"We don't really need to," Ginny sighed, rubbing her face. "I know already."

"Yes, but... but we'd better be sure before you tell Harry. You *are* telling him, aren't you?"

"Of course," Ginny scowled. "You didn't think I wouldn't tell him about his child?"

"No, I just..." Hermione sighed and shook her head. "I have no idea why I said that, I'm just..."

"In shock," Ginny nodded. "It wears off eventually." She finished her apple, taking larger bites now and drinking her tea as well.

"Harry asked me to move in with him this morning," Ginny said. "We were supposed to talk about that tonight... make a decision."

"That sounds positive," Hermione added, her eyebrows rising. "He wants some sort of commitment."

Tonks tried not to scowl at the word. It was a dirty word, as far as she was concerned.

"She's keeping the baby," Tonks informed Hermione. "And she's going to tell Harry."

"Soon," Ginny added. "Like... maybe right now. We both need time to... to decide what we're going to do."

"Have you told him about you, yet?" Hermione prodded. "Because chances are the baby—"

"I know," Ginny said, the sad look returning to her face. It looked so completely strange to see it there again. Ever since she'd started seeing Harry, the old Ginny—vibrant and happy—was back, and it was good to see. The contrast between the two people was vivid. "That's another part of the same discussion."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "I'll go get the potion ingredients and we'll do the test."

* * *

Harry's house was completely silent and Ginny felt like she'd paced a path in the floorboards, waiting for him to come home. She could have gone to his shop, she'd been there before, but this seemed like the sort of thing she should talk to him about here, in his home, not at his work.

She finally sat down and lay her head on the soft back of the sofa, thinking about all the emotions she'd run through as the day progressed. First there had been the absolute shock of finding out about the baby, and then panic while she tried to decide what to do. But that emotion had been rather short lived, because she'd known instantly what she wanted to do. Just because she hadn't planned for this didn't mean it wasn't something amazing and wonderful.

The resolve and even a little bit of excitement started to come in when she was at Tonks', watching the potion in the cauldron turn bright purple. She was definitely expecting a baby. Harry's baby.

And that changed everything for her. Did she want to move in here with Harry? Would he even want a child right now in his life? He was well off, she knew, so he could help take care of her financially, but she really didn't know much about his past. But she did feel like she knew *him*. He wasn't going to close her out completely when she told him, she was sure. After all, he'd willingly participated in the act to make this child just as much as she had. They were both responsible.

The thoughts swirled inside her mind until Ginny closed her eyes against them.

Harry's hand on her cheek, a soft smile, and his voice woke her.

"Hi. Didn't expect to find the most beautiful woman in the world asleep on my sofa when I got home from work," he mused, kissing her.

Ginny let herself melt into the kiss. His body was cold against hers; he'd just arrived.

"Harry, I... we need to talk."

His smile dissolved into something resembling remorse. "It's about me asking you to move in here, isn't it? Did I rush it? Because you know we don't have to—"

"Not at all," she shook her head, trying to smile. Ginny wiped the grogginess from her nap away from her face and sat up fully. "Not at all," she soothed. "I want to, Harry, I really do."

"But..."

"But I think there's something else—a few somethings, actually—that we need to talk about first."

His forehead knotted up in lines and he removed his jacket, scarf and hat, tossing them onto the

table in front of them before sitting back.

Ginny shifted, feeling energy careen inside her body until she had to find some way to let it out. "I... I want you to know that I never planned this. And I'm not trying to trap you or... I'm saying this all wrong." She stood, the anticipation of what she needed to tell him growing until she couldn't stand still any longer.

"Just say it," Harry urged, coming to stand before her. His hands were on her shoulders, gently rubbing. "Just let it out."

Ginny took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. "I'm pregnant, Harry."

There was no change for a moment, and then pure shock took over, as if he'd been hit in the head with something completely unexpected. His hands fell away and Ginny had to turn around to keep from crying.

"Could you... just say something?" she begged. "Yell or... get angry or... something."

She heard him move behind her and turned, only to see him down in front of her on one knee, looking up. His hands lifted hers, his thumbs caressing the backs of them, and he blinked once before opening his mouth.

"Will you marry me?"

Chapter 11

When It Falls Into Place With You And I, We Go From If To When

The words seemed to come out of nowhere, and yet Harry knew that's exactly what he wanted to ask. Ginny stared at him, her eyes blinking furiously, and the silence stretched between them.

"Could you just say something?" he smiled. "Yell, or get angry, or—"

"Don't," she said, pulling her hands away from his and turning. Her shoulders shook and Harry was sure she was crying. "Don't do that, because if you don't mean it—"

"I do!" He shot up from his knee and gathered her into his arms, relieved when she melted in, wrapping her arms tightly around him. "I do mean it. I've been thinking it for weeks, Gin." He whispered the words into her hair, unable to stop the kisses against the crown of her head that came along with them. "I just didn't know when the right time to ask was. And now..."

"Now that there's a baby involved," Ginny said, nodding.

"It speeds things up," Harry admitted, his heart pounding away so hard he thought it might explode. A baby... a life that he and Ginny had created. He pulled his mind from that, unable to deal with it fully just yet. "I still would have asked."

Ginny's tear stained face looked up at him, her eyes bright with more emotion. "Are you... are you sure? I won't pressure you into this. I'm keeping the baby, even if you aren't—"

He kissed her then, the emotion and out-of-control feeling taking over, forcing him to act on the most basic feelings that he could wrap his mind around. He loved this woman, more than anything. And, yes the pregnancy had been unplanned, but... he already loved the baby. It was a part of Ginny, how could he not?

"Marry me?" he asked once more when they pulled apart.

She looked torn for a minute before she took his hand and led him back to the sofa. She still hadn't answered him and Harry's stomach tied up in knots. 'This is where she tells you that she doesn't want that from you, you prat,' he scolded himself.

"Before we talk about that," Ginny said, taking a slow, deep breath, "there's something else I need to tell you."

"Not sure how much more I can handle," he mused, startled that he'd actually said it aloud. Ginny chuckled, but it was a forced dry sound.

"I need to tell you, because it changes things. Lots of things. I..." Her words seemed to fail her and Harry looked at her, thinking that she looked so young right now; young and innocent, and completely terrified.

"Whatever it is, Ginny, it won't change the fact that I love you," he affirmed, twining their hands together. "It won't change the fact that I want to marry you and... and raise our child together."

A single tear dripped down her face and she nodded, still looking unsure. "It might."

"It won't," he promised. His mind was already racing, however, dreaming up impossible situations that were more and more fantastical, and horrifying, each time.

"I... I'm a witch, Harry."

The words echoed in the space between them, hammering into his brain, and for a moment, Harry had to ponder them to decide what they meant, even though his heart was screaming that he already understood them.

"I mean, I can do magic. Real magic, not like parlor tricks and such," Ginny rambled on.

"I'm a wizard," Harry said, the words simply leaking out of his head. He wasn't quite sure if he'd said them aloud, because Ginny was still talking, listing the things she could do with the wand she had just pulled from her pocket, so he repeated it, louder this time.

"I'm... I'm a wizard, Ginny. I can do magic too." He fumbled for his wand and they both sat there, staring at each other.

"How... oh," Ginny said, swallowing audibly. "I... I don't know what to say."

"Me either," he admitted. "I'm... relieved, I think. When you said it would change things... I kept thinking that you'd found someone else or..."

"Never," she shook her head. The hand holding her wand dropped and she studied him. "How did I not know?"

"How did I?" he challenged back, setting his own wand aside and rubbing his face. The weight of everything they'd said in the last few minutes pressed down on him and Harry felt the insane urge to laugh. So he did.

It must have been contagious because Ginny giggled, pressing a hand over her mouth to try and trap it in. By that time, Harry was gone, laughing all the way from his toes. It set Ginny off further until they were leaning on each other, tears of relief and release rolling down their faces.

Harry kissed her then, tenderly, feeling as if he'd fallen in love with her all over again. "There's something I have to tell you," he admitted once they'd pulled away.

"It can't be heavier than what I've told you already," she shook her head, wiping away the moisture on her face.

Harry grimaced. "There's a reason I keep who I am a secret," he started, feeling as if he was mucking this up completely. "My name isn't Harry Jamison it's—"

"Potter," Ginny breathed, her eyes going wide. "I just... is that it? It just... came to me."

Harry fought to keep his jaw from dropping completely at her guess. "Yeah." He lifted his wand and removed the glamour charms used to hide his scar and alter his appearance. Ginny gasped at the sight of the famed mark on his forehead, her cheeks going red when she realized what she'd done.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't stare, I just... I have to admit I almost didn't think you were real. I mean... I knew, but... I didn't *know*."

Harry nodded, shifting uncomfortably under the way she was looking at him, like some sort of mythical creature she'd just discovered actually existed.

"Can you not... look at me like that?" he asked, turning to look away.

"Like what?" she demanded, forcing his chin back around to look at her.

"Like you can't decide to be horrified by who I am, or kiss my shoes, or something."

She smiled then, a slow, warm look that made his whole body ache inside. "I'm not horrified. And I'm not going to kiss... your shoes." She leaned forward, placing a small kiss against the side of his mouth, and then the tip of his nose.

"Your eyes are green," she murmured, just before removing his glasses and pressing soft kisses to his closed eyelids.

Harry's heart hammered in his chest and he gathered her into his lap, letting the feelings dredged up by what she was doing overwhelm him. When her lips brushed across his scar, Harry's fingers dug into her hips. His scar had never been anything more than a burden, a reminder of a destiny that was not his choosing, and bound him to a mass murderer.

"I know you, Harry," she whispered. "You're good and kind."

"And I'm in love with you, Ginny."

"Weasley," she said.

Harry's eyes blinked open and widened. Weasley. How had he not connected it before? "Er... wow."

"Don't look at me like that," she challenged, smirking.

"Yeah, but... all the people in the world I could have chosen, and I fall in love with a Weasley," he chuckled, holding her against him.

"You've heard of us, then?" she laughed.

"Yeah," he nodded, a hundred stories told by Remus and Sirius about the strength and ferocious courage of the Weasley family came to his mind. "Wait... you're the one... with the diary. And... and the Quidditch player." He felt a bit stupid now that he hadn't connected who she was.

Ginny's face heated and she tried to pull away, nearly snarling at the comment. But Harry's hands held her still.

"No... hang on," he protested. "I... Ginny I was always so amazed by your story when Remus told me what happened with the diary. I remember thinking that you must have been so strong—far stronger than I could ever be."

"Remus?" Ginny sat up. "Remus Lupin?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "He was one of my father's best friends."

"He's dating one of my best friends," Ginny interjected. "Or well... was, or something. And he taught at Hogwarts the year after... He really helped me to get past all the mess in my head that the diary left."

Harry's mind flashed to last night, listening to Sirius tease Remus about Andromeda's daughter. "Nymphadora?"

Ginny giggled at the name. "Tonks," she corrected. "She hates her real name. You've met her?"

"Wow," Harry mused. "No, I haven't met her. I never met anyone from the Order, really. Albus thought it was better this way and Sirius agreed. Small world."

"And getting smaller," she nodded. Her head rested on his shoulder and they simply held each other.

"What are we going to do, Harry?" she asked finally. "So much has changed."

"Not really," he shook his head. "You're still the woman I fell in love with. And... and we're going to have a b-baby." He stumbled over the word even as a picture flashed in his mind; Ginny with a bundle of blankets in her arms, leaning in to show him the tiny face enclosed in the soft fluffy yarn. A face that was so tiny, so innocent that it made his heart throb painfully.

"And I still want to marry you," he added, running his hand along her head, smoothing her hair there. "That hasn't changed."

"You know you don't have to—"

"Ginny," he scolded softly, "will you just answer the damn question! Seriously, I'm dying here. I've proposed twice already. Don't make me do it again."

She pulled back and looked up at him, incredibly vulnerable chocolate eyes searching his face. "You're not just asking because of the baby?"

"It's a factor," he admitted. "But only in moving the timetable up. I'm in love with you, Ginny Weasley. I love the way you're feisty. I love the way you hold me and love me. I love everything about you. And... and you're about to give me a family. A baby, Gin. You don't know how long..." He stopped, too choked up to continue. "I've always wanted a family."

"Yes," she said finally. "I'll marry you."

Harry kissed her then, a soft kiss, lips moving against lips and hands urgently holding.

* * *

The room was bathed in long shadows and Harry's eyes traced the curve of Ginny's shoulder, following it down her arm until he was looking at her belly, still flat beneath her shirt—her belly, where his child now grew deep inside his sleeping fiancé.

He had to shake his head to pound both of those terms into his head. Only yesterday he'd simply been Harry Potter, wearing someone else's face, using someone else's name, and in love with someone different.

Amazing what twenty-four hours could do. Now he was Harry Potter, who was in love with, and engaged to, Ginny Weasley. And they were about to start a family.

Something deep inside him welled, building and building until it burst, filling him with so much love and knowledge that his head spun. It was almost like there was a door deep inside him that had been locked forever ago and was now shattered open.

And he understood. He understood why his parents had gone into hiding to protect him. He understood why his father had stood firm against Voldemort, even knowing he was going to die in the next breath. He understood why his mother had stepped in front of him and refused to yield, even when she knew she could save her own life.

It was all about love. Overwhelming, consuming, wonderful love.

And it rolled off of Ginny in waves that were almost visible to him as she slept next to him. It pulsed from her, filling him completely. And he knew that she loved him just as strongly as he felt for her.

They were going to do this; they were going to get married and have a child.

And everything was going to be okay in a way it had never been alright before.

* * *

Sirius dozed off and on in his chair. The day after a full moon was always like this; lazy and long. Remus was up earlier, but he was sleeping now, exhausted from his body contorting and changing twice in the past few hours.

There had been hundreds of days like this over the years. Back at school, the three Marauders would drag themselves to classes, sneaking away to see Remus in the hospital wing when they could, and pretend that they'd had any sleep at all the night before. Somehow it was easier when they were that young.

When Harry had been little, Sirius had been forced to care for him, along with Remus. But as Harry grew, he tended to be the one making breakfast and tea, helping his godfather and surrogate uncle into bed and amusing himself until one of them was awake enough to take care of him again.

It hadn't gotten easier over the years, just... different. Sirius learned to let go of the guilt and allow Harry to help where he could. And Remus learned that Sirius and Harry weren't going to abandon

him eventually. And Harry, well Harry had always been saddled with the chore of taking care of himself along with two old, broken-down men. It wasn't fair for him, but most of his life hadn't been fair.

One day he would have explanations to make to both James and Lily about the way he had raised their son, but for now all Sirius felt he could do was be there for Harry when he needed someone to talk to. He seemed perfectly capable of finding what he needed in life to make himself happy, if his recent mood had been any indication.

Sirius hated to admit it, because it sounded so... juvenile, but he was jealous of whoever this woman was that Harry was seeing right now. She seemed to be able to give him something that Sirius had been searching high and low for twenty-one years for—a way to make Harry truly happy. Not only that, but Harry was spending all of his time with her now.

It wasn't as if Sirius thought Harry would forget about him, because he knew Harry wouldn't be so careless and abrupt with his feelings. And part of it was that if Harry really loved her, Sirius knew he *should* be spending his time with this woman.

It was a challenging position to be in, and one that simply made him even more tired to think about, so he was trying not to.

The sound of someone moving about upstairs roused Sirius and he set about gathering tea for Remus, who would be starving. There were several loud bangs against the floorboards and Sirius smirked to himself.

"Old man is having trouble getting started today," he mused, lifting the tray.

But when the sound of something scattering over the floor echoed, he set the tray aside and pulled his wand, moving up the stairs quietly, but quickly. The sound wasn't coming from Remus' room, but from Harry's old one.

Sirius leveled his wand as he kicked open the door, startling Harry, who was pawing through a pile of junk that was spread on his old, narrow bed. There was an empty drawer resting next to his feet, discarded as Harry's eyes searched.

"Have you seen my Gringotts key?" Harry demanded. "I thought I'd taken it with me, but it's not at the house."

Sirius blinked, trying to force his mind to catch up with what was happening. Only Harry, Remus and Sirius could Apparate through the wards here, so... it must be Harry.

"Have you?" Harry asked, barely sparing Sirius a glance before he used his wand to banish the mess back into the drawer and pulled out another one, dumping it on the faded quilt. Plastic army men and miniature metal cars mingled with broken quills, spare bits of parchment, missing buttons, chocolate frog cards, and other bits and pieces while Harry spread them around the bed.

"Hello to you as well," Sirius said, lowering his wand.

"The key?" Harry looked rather frantic and huffed mightily when he didn't find his treasure among

the mess.

"Oh, er... I think its downstairs—"

The words were barely out of his mouth before Harry nudged past him and took the stairs at a full run, skipping many of them and landing with an echoing thud on the bottom landing.

"What..." Sirius had no choice but to follow, his mind racing as to what Harry was doing here, let alone why he was so determined to find his key. Did he need money for something?

Harry's cry of triumph from the kitchen made Sirius speed up his pursuit. He held his wand high when he entered the kitchen.

"Don't you dare Disapparate, young man, until you tell me what the hell this was all about!" He felt stupid when Harry's eyebrows rose in challenge. "I'll... body bind you if I have to."

"If you could manage to hit me, lazy old dog," Harry snapped back, grinning.

Sirius blinked and lowered his wand a fraction of an inch. "Harry, what... Why do you need your Gringotts key?"

"So I can get into my vault before they close," he shrugged, as if it were the simplest answer in the world. And Sirius supposed it was, but it wasn't the answer he wanted.

"But..."

"I need to get some money to buy an engagement ring."

That wasn't the answer Sirius expected either and his eyebrows contracted as he tried to figure out just how badly Harry's brain had been addled by whatever force had so obviously taken over him.

"I'm getting married, Sirius." The smile that accompanied Harry's statement was almost blinding in its genuineness and Sirius blinked, trying to connect the dots.

Married.

The floor was the next thing he saw, rising up quickly to meet him.

Chapter 12

All We Know For Sure Is What We're Fighting For

Harry watched his godfather tip and barely managed to catch him before his head crashed onto the stone tiles of the floor.

"Sirius?" he mumbled, staring wide eyed at the man. "Er..."

"Don't worry, Harry," Remus said gruffly from where he stood in the doorway. "He always did have this thing about fainting at the most inopportune moments."

Harry jumped back, letting Sirius' body flop to the floor when Remus lifted his wand. Water flew from the tip, splashing Sirius in the face.

Obscenities and threats filled the kitchen as Remus kept the water spraying on Sirius, who was now awake.

"Now, since I missed all but the last line of that conversation, would you mind repeating it?" Remus asked, finally ending the stream of water and pulling a chair from the table to sit on.

Harry blinked at the exchange, turning his Gringotts key over and over in his hand. "I proposed this afternoon."

Remus nodded and Sirius swore softly, using his shirt to wipe his face dry.

"I don't quite know what to say, Harry," Remus shrugged.

"Then just tell me you're happy for me," Harry said. No matter what they said, they couldn't steal away how he felt about this. Ginny was going to be his; they were starting their lives together.

"Are *you* happy?" Sirius peered at him, the mess over the water forgotten. Harry knew Sirius would exact his revenge on Remus later, but for now there were more pressing matters.

"I am," he smiled. "More happy than I've ever been."

Sirius and Remus exchanged a look and both sighed. "Does she know who you are, Harry?" Remus asked, staring down at his hands, which he stretched and flexed against the table.

Harry wanted to bristle under their scrutiny, but he sighed instead, supposing they had every right to be wary. They hadn't even met Ginny yet.

"Yes, she does," he nodded. "And I know who she is."

The statement caused dead silence until Sirius opened his mouth.

"Her name is Ginny Weasley," Harry put in before the question could arrive.

Eyebrows slid toward hairlines and Remus whistled, smirking. "You sure know how to pick them, Cub."

"How is it possible that you did not know who she was?" Sirius scowled at the table. "She was a professional Quidditch player."

"I never saw her play," he shrugged. "I never met anyone from the Order—even though I know their names. Plus, she was never in the Order. Up until today I thought she was a Muggle."

"So it never crossed your mind—"

"Why would it?" Harry anticipated Sirius' question. "I met her in a Muggle pub, she acts Muggle, she never showed any signs of being anything more than who I thought she was. She was doing the exact same thing I was—hiding out."

"It's true," Remus sighed. "After the accident that cost her the spot on the Harpies, Ginny went into a sort of depression. She stopped doing things with her friends, stopped... everything, really. Dora is one of her best friends, and Ginny didn't even tell her where she lived until this last year. The press was brutal about the accident, about the ending of her relationship with that Phillips prat, rumors of drug abuse and such. I don't blame her for wanting to escape it."

Sirius rubbed his face harshly and peered at Harry. "So, you both confessed who you were and you just decide to propose?"

Harry felt his face heat and he glanced down at his hands resting on the table. "Not exactly. I've been thinking about it for weeks, actually."

"Yeah, but... you just met," Sirius protested. "Why not date for awhile more before you jump into a commitment like that?"

Harry looked up weighing the odds of telling two of the most important men in his life the truth. He hadn't talked to Ginny about this—in fact, he'd left her sleeping in his bed, with a conjured rose and a note on the pillow next to her, telling her he was running an errand and would be back soon. This was taking too long and Gringotts was going to close soon.

"Ginny's pregnant, Sirius. I'm going to be a father."

For the second time that day, Sirius slumped downward.

Remus jumped across the table and snatched the front of Sirius' shirt, to keep him from falling completely over. "Those were the exact words James used to tell Sirius you were coming into the world, Harry. Well, with Lily, rather than Ginny."

"Let him sleep," Harry sighed, ruffling his hair. "I need to make it to Gringotts before Ginny wakes up. I want to get her a ring today."

"Marriage and a family are big commitments, Harry," Remus sighed, resting Sirius against the table.

"Albus told me something one time, before..." Harry swallowed past the unexpected lump in his

throat. Thinking of the old man, who had been one of his closest mentors for much of his life, and the way he'd been killed right in front of Harry, brought up all those old feelings suddenly. "He said that Voldemort wasn't the end of my destiny, but just the beginning." Harry shook his head, smiling slightly. "You don't know how many times I've replayed those words in my head, trying to figure out what they meant. And then today, when Ginny told me about the baby, I finally understood, Remus. I chose to get rid of Voldemort, but my life—my destiny—didn't end there. It's there in front of me, ready for me to grab onto. Ginny and this baby, Remus... they're what I want. They're my future.

Remus stood still for a long minute. "I just don't want you to regret making a commitment like this. Marriage and a family—"

"I'm ready for the commitment," Harry confirmed, looking at the man. He felt like he was seeing a whole different side to Remus than he'd ever imagined there was. Remus' issues with abandonment and rejection ran deep, so deep that he refused to accept there might be people out there who actually did want him to stay around. "Believe it or not, Remus, you were one of the ones who taught me what love was. You should probably get your own life straight before you start lecturing me on mine," he added, standing and moving away from the table, preparing to Disapparate.

"Tell Sirius when he wakes up that I'll come by soon to talk to him about this. And I'll bring Ginny with me."

* * *

Ginny woke to a mostly dark room and blinked away the sleep from her eyes.

"Harry?"

Her arm reached out across the bed, but it was empty. There was a dark shape on the pillow next to her, however, and she turned on the lamp next to the bed, smiling when she saw the rose along with a folded paper.

"Be back soon, Gin," she read aloud, "just had to run an errand. Love, Harry."

She lay back down on the pillow, staring at the rose and contemplating the changes in her life over the past day—or even the past eight weeks.

Eight weeks ago she had been alone, hiding in the Muggle world and not willing to face going back to a world where she didn't feel she had a place any longer. Eight weeks ago she had gone to work one evening, not expecting anything unusual, only to meet a handsome stranger.

Now she was engaged to be married, expecting a baby, and the man she loved was Harry Potter—Savior of the Wizarding World. Surreal was the only word she could find that would even come near to describing how she felt right now, and even it seemed inadequate.

There were so many questions she had, both about Harry and about their future. Did he want to stay in the Muggle world forever and raise their child here? Or did he want to be a part of what he'd left years ago?

As much as Ginny detested the circus that had erupted after her injury and felt the need to escape

it, she'd always known her place was there in that other world. She'd been drawn out here by the anonymity and carefree character that she could play by being Ginny Westin. It appeared that Harry had been drawn by the same things. But neither of them could deny that under the false names and made up lives, they were who they were.

Her hand drifted unconsciously toward her belly, resting against the life they'd unknowingly created there.

There were still so many questions to be answered. Getting married was wonderful—something that made Ginny giddy with excitement—but there was so much more to deal with—not the least of which was breaking the news to her family; both bits of news, actually.

She heard him arrive before she saw him. The crack of Apparition was unmistakable and Ginny smiled. Getting to and from his house was going to be so much easier now. She wouldn't have to walk the six blocks in the cold. Then again, she was moving in here, so it was a moot point anyway.

"Hi," Harry said as he came into the bedroom. He shucked off his cloak quickly and hurried to the bed, bending over to kiss her.

Ginny giggled as he clambered onto the mattress next to her, reminding her of an overly excited child who had something important to tell her.

"What have you been up to?" she asked, brushing her fingers along his pink cheeks.

"Just needed to get you something," he shrugged, grinning as he held out his hand. A square box rested there and Ginny stared at it, guessing what was inside, but not sure if she should open it or not.

"If you don't like it..."

"I will," she nodded, knowing that no matter what Harry bought her, she would love it.

The ring was perfect—not too big, not too small. "I told you," she smirked when she saw he was grinning. She slid the ring on her finger, startling when it sized to fit her perfectly.

"I got us some take-away too," Harry said after he kissed her.

"I'm feeling lazy," Ginny said, snuggling into Harry. "Let's eat it right here."

"Is this going to become a habit?" Harry chuckled, summoning the food.

"It just might," Ginny shrugged. The food smelled wonderful and Ginny dug in with gusto, making Harry chuckle as he struggled to get a bite here and there.

"I like this," he finally said. "Sitting here with you, eating and just... being together."

"Me too," she said, kissing his cheek. "I want it to be like this always."

"It will," he assured her. "Although, soon we'll have to share the bed."

Ginny smiled, but she couldn't help but be nervous. "I have no idea what I'm doing, Harry. I'm not sure I can be someone's mum." Tears sprang to her eyes unexpectedly and she swore softly, wiping at them with one hand.

Harry took the container of food from her and set it aside. "Shhh," he soothed. "We'll learn together, yeah? I'm terrified too, really. I don't know anything about being a dad. Plus, I have to talk to your family now. You should have seen Sirius' face today when I told him who you were."

Ginny blinked at him. "Your godfather is Sirius Black." The clues laid out in front of her like a book and Ginny felt particularly stupid that she'd not put it all together before. But she just hadn't.

He smiled slowly. "Yes, he is."

"And that's where you were all those years. With him."

Harry nodded. "We lived in Scotland, under a Fidelius Charm for most of my life. Remus and Dumbledore brought us supplies and I trained for what I needed to do."

Ginny stared at him with wide eyes for a moment before shaking it off. "I used to listen to the stories about you and wonder where you'd disappeared to." She trailed off and felt her face heat. "I thought maybe I'd meet you at Hogwarts—I sort of had this completely irrational crush on you. But I soon learned it was just on that heroic character in the stories."

"I don't live up to the hype, I promise you," Harry chuckled. "I'm not sure how anyone could."

"You may not live up to the fairy tales, Harry, but you're everything I could ever hope for. And... you love *me*. Little Ginny Weasley."

Harry kissed her softly. "Little Ginny Weasley, Rookie of the Year, leading Harpies scorer for two years running. I'm not sure I'm worthy of you."

"That's nothing in comparison—"

"Then don't compare," Harry shook his head. "You're the woman I love, the woman I'm going to marry... the woman who is giving me everything I've ever wanted. You're perfect, Ginny."

"Far from it, I promise you," she said, curling into him. "How are we going to do this, Harry? What is the next step?"

He sighed and was quiet for a long time before clearing his throat. "I think it's talking to your family, Gin. I know how much they mean to you. They're a part of your life, and I'm tied to that now."

"They'll love you," she protested. "They'll be shocked, but they'll love you."

"I'm not so sure," Harry shook his head, his expression turning dark. "I haven't even met them and I've already slept with their daughter, gotten her pregnant, and proposed. Not the best record, is it?"

She laughed. "Now that you put it that way..."

"I'm just hoping their shock can buy me a few extra minutes of living to explain myself."

"And just what are you going to explain, Mr. Potter?" The name felt foreign on her tongue and Ginny repeated it over and over in her head, still shocked. It didn't seem real that her Harry was *that* Harry.

"That I'm in love with you. That I wouldn't take back any moment of the time we've spent together. Things may not have turned out exactly like we planned—or maybe it was our lack of planning that set us on this path—but it's everything I could ever want or hope for, Ginny. Growing up like I did... all I dreamed about was something normal—a family to love me. When I was young, that dream was having my parents, siblings and friends. As I got older, it changed to be a wife and children of my own."

Ginny's tears burst out again as she held him. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "I think today has just been..."

"It's been emotional," he agreed. "Draining."

"You told your godfather?"

"And Remus," Harry nodded.

Ginny bit her lip. "I'm not very happy with that man right now, you know."

"I know," Harry sighed and rubbed his face, removing his glasses and laying down on the pillow. "I told him to get his head out of his arse."

"I told Tonks to broom him," Ginny snorted. "I think that might have been the hormones talking, actually, now that I think about it. I've been pretty on edge lately."

He was quiet for a minute before looking at her. "I love him, I really do, but maybe that would be best. Maybe they both need time apart to decide what it is they want. In the meantime, Sirius and I will keep working on him."

Ginny nodded and lay down with him. "Where are we going to raise this baby, Harry?" Her hand rested on her belly and Harry's joined it, rubbing in light circles. "Here or... there?"

"There," he said firmly. "As long as you're alright with that." His eyes searched deep into hers and he smiled when she nodded. "This baby deserves every chance he, or she, can get. And chances are they'll be magical. They need to be raised there."

Ginny bit her lip. "That means dealing with the press."

"Yes, it does." He twisted their fingers together and they rested on her belly. "But I think we can manage it together. I... I want to get married soon—not because I'm ashamed of the baby or anything... I could never feel that way about what we've done, Ginny, but I won't have people saying things about you or about our child."

She nodded, shuddering as visions of the stories that might surface in the press came to her mind.

She had no doubt that some of them would surface no matter what they tried to protect.

"I don't want to elope, Harry," she shook her head. "I think we've both been away from family too much. I want my family there. And yours."

"Okay," he agreed gingerly. "Okay. Assuming I survive telling your family, that is."

Chapter 13

I Will Be Your Guardian When All Is Crumbling

Sirius paced in his living room. He hated waiting. He was rubbish at it, really. But usually Harry or Remus were here to calm him down, or at least give him something to distract him. But Remus was late and Harry hadn't arrived yet.

He was bringing Ginny today so she could meet Sirius.

"I could use a little help here, James," he eyed the portrait that had become a silent companion very much through the years. "What do I say to them? I've never done well with the advice giving part of this, you know. Mostly I just slap him on the back and tell him to get on with it. I don't think I can do that here."

As always, the portrait was silent, leaving Sirius alone with just his thoughts.

He was just contemplating a fast glass of Ogden's to calm his nerves when he heard a pop in the kitchen. They were here.

Remus always Apparated to his room, Harry never really had a regular place, just wherever he felt the desire to appear.

Sirius stayed in the living room, unsure whether he should go and meet them or just wait, but his decision was made when he heard Harry giving a tour of the house. A soft, feminine voice—something that had never been inside these walls since Sirius bought the house—asked a question and Harry answered.

His heart racing, Sirius turned toward the doorway just as they entered, hand in hand.

Ginny was very pretty. She was petite, only coming up to Harry's chin, and slight, but he knew that her small size was definitely a deception to how strong she was. He remembered the stories he'd heard of this pint-sized dynamo.

"Sirius, this is Ginny. Gin, this is my godfather, Sirius Black."

"Pleased to finally meet you," Sirius said, stepping forward and holding his hand out for her to shake.

But Ginny ignored the handshake and went up onto her toes to press a kiss to his cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered, "for taking care of him."

Dammit.

Sirius swallowed thickly and nodded, brushing his hand along her arm and then staring as she moved back to Harry's side. They looked good together and Sirius couldn't deny the way that Harry's face lit up when she touched him—it was like looking at a different man.

"Come on," Sirius said after clearing his throat. "I've managed to cobble together something to eat for us—nothing impressive, mind you, but it'll be something."

They talked throughout the meal of the tentative wedding plans and Sirius insisted that he was paying for everything, over both Harry and Ginny's protests, but his forceful opinion finally won out when he told them that Harry was like a son, and the only child Sirius would likely ever have.

Ginny got a soft look on her face at that and squeezed his hand in a way that Lily Evans had done so many times years ago. Sirius had to shake himself as the similarities washed over him.

Ginny was different than Lily, and yet... there was a fire about them both that had attracted James and his son to the women.

And Sirius couldn't deny that it was love he could see between Harry and Ginny now, because the same soft touches, whispered words, considerate moments were present between the couple now and the couple then. It was like stepping back in time and Sirius grew choked up several times.

"We'll let you know what day we decide on," Harry said when they finally stood to leave, "assuming I survive telling her father and brothers."

Sirius laughed and then paled as he remembered just how many brothers Ginny had. "Er... would you like reinforcements when you talk to them?"

Harry thought about it for a minute but then shook his head, winding his hand with Ginny's. "We'll be fine," he assured his godfather; or maybe he'd been talking to himself, Sirius wasn't sure.

Ginny threw her arms around his neck just before they left, mirroring how they'd arrived, and whispered to him once more. "Just in case you were wondering, you did a wonderful job raising him. He's who he is today because of you."

Sirius swallowed past the lump and shook his head. "Good genes," he winked, "and the love of a good woman."

Her cheeks turned pink and her smile was dazzling as she turned back to Harry, twisting their fingers together.

Things really were going to be alright. Sirius could see that in the bright green eyes of his godson as he looked down at the woman he loved. Harry had never looked more like his father than in this moment, with the future ahead of him.

And then they were gone; Disapparated, leaving Sirius in the house alone again. He poured himself a small bit of Ogden's and went to sit in his favorite chair, facing the fireplace and his favorite photograph.

"They're young and idealistic," he explained to James and Lily, "but they really are in love."

Remus arrived some time later, looking pale and haggard.

"You missed Harry and Ginny," Sirius scolded, taking in the scattered pieces of his friend.

Remus grimaced. "Tonks... she broke it off, completely."

Sirius' teeth ground together for a minute as he stared at how shattered Remus looked. "Good for her," he finally said, startling Remus. "Now maybe you can get your head out of your arse and do the right thing."

For a moment it looked as though Remus was going to attack him and Sirius relished the thought—at least it might prove there was some fire left in the old wolf—but Remus backed away instead.

"I'm not going to kick you out, Moony," Sirius explained, "you'll always have a home here."

"But?"

"But just know that I'm not going to let up until you straighten this out. You're in love with the woman. She's in love with you. But you're both too damn stubborn, and you've let your pride get in the way."

"Talk about stubborn," Remus scoffed. "You've been holed up here in this house for years, Sirius. The war is over! Harry's fine—he lived, thanks to you—"

"Thanks to us both," Sirius pointed out quietly, but Remus didn't hear him.

"He's out there about to start a family of his own, and you're still here, hiding in this wretched house, talking to ghosts." He turned on his heel, walking out and Sirius blinked at the empty space.

Slowly, he smiled. "That's exactly what I've been doing," he nodded, feeling older than he had in a long time. He moved into the entry way, where there was a mirror hung on the wall, and stared at his reflection in it. His hair was too long, and he could stand to put on just a bit of weight, but overall he was still attractive, he thought.

Harry had left their little cave here in Scotland and had gone out on his own—testing his wings, as it were—and had managed to find a woman he was arse-over-elbow in love with. Maybe, just maybe, there was life outside these walls for Sirius Black as well.

* * *

Harry couldn't remember being this nervous ever, really. Even facing Voldemort for the final time he'd found an overwhelming calm somewhere inside him and had known the right things to say, the right things to do.

Now he was floundering, and it was possible that he was having a heart attack as well, even though Ginny scolded that he was simply being dramatic.

They'd spent all morning moving her things from her flat into Harry's house—which was now *their* house, he thought with pride. And while Hedwig still refused to acknowledge him for kicking her out of her house, she'd really taken to Ginny and was usually found somewhere close to the witch. Harry blamed it on the women of the house ganging up on him, and Ginny called him dramatic again.

But the banter was worth any teasing he had to put up with, especially since Ginny usually soothed away his pout with a kiss.

That comfortable feeling was long gone as Harry stared at the crooked house at the end of the path and tried to gather his nerve. Tonight was a Weasley family dinner and Ginny assured him that doing this with everyone here was for the best—whose ‘best’ was still up in the air. Harry felt more like he was on a suicide mission than anything. The word ‘dramatic’ had been used once more and Ginny accused him of being the pregnant one.

Harry smiled just thinking about it, though. He was going to be a father. The idea was so far beyond anything he could contemplate that it both terrified him and thrilled him.

“Stop dragging your feet, Harry,” Ginny scolded, her mitten-clad hand pulling him along. She seemed almost excited, but perhaps it was nervous energy driving her. “It’s like tearing off a bandage... we’ll just get it over quickly.”

The fact that there was pain involved in the analogy wasn’t lost on Harry. He sighed and rubbed his face. “Alright, let’s do it.”

But Ginny stopped him on the small porch, wrapping her arms around him. “No matter what happens in there, Harry, just remember that I love you. I’m going home with you and we’re going to be a family. I want my family’s approval, I want them to love you just as much as I do, but it won’t change the way I feel about you if they don’t.” She kissed him and brought his hand around to rest on her stomach. “It won’t change how either of us loves you.”

The words were like a shot of pure adrenaline into his body and Harry took a deep breath, preparing himself to walk in and face a family that he’d never met.

“Although, I will tell you to keep your wand handy,” she added in a whisper against his cheek.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he nodded, opening the door wide for her.

They were greeted with smiles and calls of welcome, until it dawned on everyone just who they were greeting. Harry was fairly sure it was the scar on his head that drew most of their gazes—he’d decided to completely forgo the glamour charms tonight and felt a bit unprotected.

“You... you said he was Muggle,” the tallest brother said to Ginny, although his eyes hadn’t left Harry.

“Surprise!” Ginny called out rather weakly.

When the moment of shock was over, Harry found himself in the middle of a rather strong set of arms, wrapped around his ribs. Ginny’s mother was chatting away at him, tears running down her face unchecked, but he could only make out a few words.

“... Harry Potter... our little girl... so very happy...”

He took it as a positive greeting and patted the shorter witch gently on the shoulder. “Thank you, Mrs. Weasley,” he said finally. “Ginny is... she’s amazing. And I see where she gets her capacity to

love. And to squeeze the stuffing out of me.”

Arthur Weasley gently pried his wife away from Harry and held out his hand. “A pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“None of that, please,” Harry dismissed. “It’s just Harry.”

The man looked taken aback by that but nodded anyway. “Well, just Harry, come in and have a seat. I believe we all have a few questions for you, but I promise we’ll try to accost you in an orderly fashion. No guarantees on George’s behavior though,” he winked, making Harry chuckle.

The room was magically expanded, Harry could tell—there was no way this many people could be seated at this large a table in *this* house without it. But as Harry looked around, the chaos seemed to fit. Everyone was laughing and happy, and even though some of them were staring at him from time to time, Harry felt a bit like he might be able to belong here.

“See,” Ginny said quietly, leaning into him as they ate the delicious food that Mrs. Weasley had obviously spent hours and hours preparing, “I told you they wouldn’t chop you up and serve you for the main course.”

Harry took a sip of his mead and nodded, trying to keep his face passive. He was fairly sure the main course could change at any moment. “We also haven’t told them anything yet.”

“Point,” Ginny conceded, her teasing spirit diminished some.

“So, Harry, what is it that you do, when you’re not out saving the world?” George asked, receiving an angry hiss from his mother and a smack to the back of the head from his wife.

Harry chuckled. “I’m working on styling a new line of Quidditch brooms, actually.”

“I thought you made furniture,” Ginny gaped.

Harry laughed harder. “Er, I hastily threw a few things together back when I thought you were a Muggle. I doubted you were going to understand why there were bits and pieces of fancy brooms lying about the shop.”

A lively discussion of the current brooms on the market and their attributes took place, mainly headed by Ron, Ginny’s brother who was the same age as Harry. He seemed intrigued and asked if there was a time he could come and see what Harry had put together. He’d, apparently, played Keeper at Hogwarts.

All in all it was a much more relaxed atmosphere than Harry had expected, however, just as he’d told Ginny, the fun had yet to begin. Right now he was Harry Potter, Ginny’s boyfriend and somewhat of an enigma. But before the night was over he was about to become Harry, Ginny’s fiancé. He wasn’t quite sure what to say about the baby just yet, or if they should just let that information come out when it came out. That had been Ginny’s idea, but Harry wasn’t so sure. If you were ripping off a bandage, shouldn’t you do it all at once?

“Let’s go into the living room,” Mr. Weasley urged once forks had stopped moving and second and

third helpings were finished.

“Victoire can take the little ones up to the play room,” Bill suggested, urging his silver-haired daughter onward. The children seemed excited and Harry watched with rather glassy eyes as they tramped up the stairs, pudgy little legs climbing high, and infectious giggles rattling through the house.

Ginny caught his eye and he knew she was thinking along the same lines he was; it wouldn't be too long before their own child was doing the same thing. He kissed her temple as they stood and followed her family into the living room. Mrs. Weasley joined them a few minutes later, having charmed the food to put itself away.

“So, Harry,” Mr. Weasley cleared his throat and Harry swallowed past the dryness of his mouth, “what, exactly, are your plans?”

“It's a bit early for that, Dad,” Bill chided softly, smiling. His humor drained away however when he turned to look at Harry and Ginny.

“Actually,” Harry said softly, “I've asked Ginny to marry me.”

The reaction was mixed—Bill was adamantly claiming that it was too soon for that, others were congratulating the couple, and her mother and several sister-in-laws squealing loudly. Harry watched the varied responses, focusing mostly on Ginny's brothers and her father.

Mr. Weasley looked torn, as if he wanted to be happy for them, but just wasn't sure yet. Bill was angry, his face red and muttering about irresponsible decisions. George was laughing and Percy was... well, Harry didn't know the man well enough to know what he thought of anything really. They'd only exchanged a few dry words the whole night.

Ron looked to be taking after his father, although he seemed to be leaning more toward acceptance than disapproval.

“The only reason this makes sense at all is if Ginny is pregnant,” Bill's voice rang out over the group, earning him disapproving looks and gasps.

Harry's whole body tightened and he felt Ginny's grip on his hand clench down. He glanced at her, unsure what she was going to want to do.

“And if I was?” Ginny challenged, her expression blazing. “Would it make a difference, Bill?”

“Of course it would,” he protested. “You're not old enough to—”

“You can forget that argument right there, Bill Weasley,” Ginny yelled, her face turning redder by the minute. “I'm damned well old enough to make my own decisions.”

“Ginny—” Harry cautioned. He didn't want this to turn into a messy family argument—it was the last thing he wanted to see.

“There have been plenty of people who have had children when they were younger than me and—”

"Ha!" Bill yelled, moving even closer to Ginny and towering over her. Harry stood immediately, his hand twitching toward his wand as he stood between Ginny and her brother. "You *are* pregnant!"

Harry's whole body tensed for an explosion, but it didn't come. Instead, the tension in the room rose as everyone waited for an answer.

"I am," Ginny nodded. Her fingers dug into Harry's back, twisting in his shirt and he wasn't sure if she was holding him back, or simply trying to stay afloat in this mess. "But that doesn't change—"

"The hell it doesn't!" Bill screamed, advancing on Harry.

His wand came up and Harry saw motion all around the room as wands were pulled. His eyes locked on Ron, seeing the first spell shoot towards him.

Chapter 14

This Most Assuredly Counts

Harry Potter was a puzzle that Ron Weasley couldn't quite seem to work out. Perhaps it was his mysterious past that made it seem that he was so much harder to understand than he really was. That had to be it, because the bloke that he was meeting tonight was modest and down to earth—someone that Ron would most likely be friends with if given the chance.

And the fact that he was almost as interested in Quidditch as Ron was helped. They'd already talked about brooms and Ron was itching to talk to him about the teams he favored—perhaps they both shared an appreciation of the Cannons.

He was glad that Ginny had finally brought her boyfriend to a dinner and that everyone seemed to be excited about meeting him. Bill was being a bit of a git, but, then again, he sometimes didn't remember that his younger siblings were old enough to make their own decisions in life. Maybe it was a hazard of being in charge of them so often when he was younger; he felt more like a parent toward them than a sibling.

The engagement announcement startled Ron, but as he watched the interaction between Ginny and Harry it made sense.

And then he remembered seeing Ginny just a few weeks ago, out in the field behind the Burrow, flying again. She was happy and seemed carefree, laughing and smiling, even joking with him. She was *happy*.

And if it was Harry that put that smile there, then Ron would definitely defend him.

His confidence wavered when Bill accused Ginny of being pregnant. One look at both Harry and Ginny's guilty faces confirmed it for Ron. He hesitated only for a moment before deciding that it didn't matter. They were happy, and they'd made a commitment to each other. It might not have been ideal, but Ron certainly couldn't cast a stone at them. He and Hermione had lived together for the past few years. It was only by pure luck and planning on Hermione's part that they hadn't ended up in the same situation.

When Bill pulled his wand, Ron knew he needed to do something.

A blinding light erupted from the tip of his wand without him thinking about it and a wavering shield appeared between Bill and Harry. Surprisingly, another spell impacted Bill from the side and he tipped over, rigid. George quickly levitated him toward the sofa, rather than letting him fall on the floor.

"There will be *no* attacks in this house!" Molly Weasley's voice was firm—just as strong as Ron remembered it from the Final Battle when she had dueled Bellatrix LeStrange and beaten the woman. Her stance was the same as well—her wand drawn, her feet spread and her shoulders back. She had been the one to cast the body bind at Bill.

There would be no arguing with his mother tonight.

The tension seemed to bleed off slowly and Ron's eyes bulged as he saw Harry's fist around his wand, his knuckles white. Merlin help Bill if he'd actually managed to get in the path of Harry Potter.

"Maybe we should all sit down again," Hermione suggested, her voice shaking. She and Ron edged over closer to Harry and Ginny, who were both white and shaking.

"No one will lay a finger on the two of you now," Ron's mother assured them with a pat on Ginny's shoulder. "Now, let's sit down like civilized adults and discuss this."

"Mum," George nodded toward Bill who was staring up at the ceiling, his eyes bulging.

The Weasley Matriarch studied her oldest son for a minute before shrugging. "It will wear off eventually."

Fleur seemed to agree as she turned her back on her husband with a disapproving look and settled into her seat once more.

"So, I'm about to be a grandmother again?"

The abrupt smile on his mother's face was rather predatory in a way that reminded Ron to practice safe sex for a very long time to come, but it seemed to relax Ginny some.

"We didn't plan it, but we're happy about it," Ginny smiled tentatively.

Harry's whole body was still rigid and his jaw was locked, but he didn't look like he was about to attack anyone. Not yet, anyway. Ron held no illusions that that demeanor would change in half a second if any of them posed a threat to Ginny.

"Mr. and Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, his voice soft but strong. "I'm in love with your daughter. I love her more than anything in this world. We may not have planned to have a child right now, but that doesn't change anything for us. I still would have asked Ginny to marry me. She still would have answered the way she did." He glanced at Ginny to confirm the statement and she nodded firmly. "The baby is just icing on the cake, as far as I'm concerned." He let out a shaky breath that seemed to come from deep inside him—possibly even all the way from his toes.

"Would you all excuse me for a minute?" he asked, standing and making his way out of the living room toward the kitchen.

Ginny stood and, surprisingly, Hermione was the one to stop her. "Why don't you let me, Ginny? Harry and I are alike in a lot of ways. I... I think I might be able to help."

Hermione and Ginny stared at each other for a long minute before Ginny nodded and sat back down. Ron watched as his girlfriend took a deep breath and walked through the door into the kitchen.

* * *

Harry was literally shaking when he entered the empty kitchen. He rolled his shoulders willing the

adrenaline to leave him so that he didn't explode in anger and frustration. He'd been so close to cursing Ginny's brother—just milliseconds away from uttering the words that would have changed everything. He wouldn't have hurt the man, just made him well aware that Harry wasn't going to stand for anyone hurting Ginny—either in word or action.

He closed his eyes and pushed the feeling away. No one was going to hurt her, or him. In fact, other than the one brother, and a few tight smiles around the room, everyone seemed to be rather accepting of the situation. Surely they didn't think he and Ginny had *planned* this.

Even as the thought passed through his brain, Harry dismissed it. They most likely just thought he and Ginny were young and reckless, rather than deceiving.

He heard the door swing open and stiffened, preparing himself for an argument. He wouldn't attack anyone, no matter what they did to him.

"They don't realize how intimidating it can be for someone like us to walk into this family."

Hermione moved to stand next to him, looking out the window at the white landscape.

"They're loud and opinionated, and can be quite physical at times," she scowled. "But they do mean well, and even if they act in haste their motives are pure."

Harry chewed on that for a minute before shrugging. "I have no idea what I'm doing here."

She smiled. "Get in the queue with the rest of us. Figuring out a Weasley mind is probably the hardest thing you'll ever have to do."

They lapsed into silence until Hermione turned and began filling the sink with water. She spelled the counter full of dishes to begin washing themselves and conjured a towel, handing it to Harry. He smirked at it before accepting and hand drying the dishes.

"I always clean when I need to think," Hermione said, conjuring another and taking a dripping dish from the air.

"Seems like your place must be quite clean then," Harry chuckled. "I started carving wood when I needed to think, although I'd rather fly if I can."

"Well, Ron's always around to mess it up again," she shrugged. "I never did like to fly, really. I grew up in the Muggle world, so it seemed so... odd to be riding around on broomsticks."

"Does it get better?" Harry asked, adding another plate to the stack of clean, dry ones he'd been making. She must have understood what he was asking, because she nodded.

"It does. Not everyone judges you, Harry. Bill seems to be the exception."

"I don't blame him, really," Harry defended. "I just..."

"You just wanted to hex him for yelling at Ginny," Hermione finished with a nod.

"Yeah," he admitted with a crooked smile.

"He'll understand that when he has time to think about it," Hermione nodded. "He's not unreasonable; he just suffers from the Weasley need to speak before they think."

Harry laughed softly and nodded. "I've noticed that. Ginny threw her lot in with me before she knew much about me."

"She knew enough," Hermione defended. "Ginny has been so different over the past few years. I take that back," she shook her head. "I don't remember Ginny being ever truly happy. But she is now. And they can see that," she nodded her head toward the living room. "They're not stupid; they know who is responsible for making Ginny smile and for bringing her back to them."

Harry focused on the pot he was drying rather than look at her. His cheeks were flaming, but he understood that it was a compliment.

"The engagement and the baby are a shock, but it won't take them too long before they all accept that it's reality."

"I'm not changing my mind," Harry defended softly. "Ginny and I are getting married. And we're having a baby."

"Good," Hermione nodded. "That's another thing they'll respect—your resolve."

"It seems strange," Harry mused after they worked in silence. "I grew up so alone. I mean, I had my godfather, and Remus. But... all I ever wanted was a family."

"Families come in all shapes and sizes," Hermione pointed out. "And they're rather a package deal at times. You may not agree with them all the time, but they still love you."

Harry looked at her for a long minute before he nodded, smiling. "I guess they do."

"You're good for Ginny, Harry. And she's good for you. Don't let that go." Hermione rested her hand on Harry's arm for a minute before they went back to cleaning the kitchen.

"How did you and Ron meet?" Harry asked.

Hermione laughed. "Well, it was Halloween of our first year, and Ron was being his usual thick self. He'd called me... well, a horrid name, and I was hiding in the girls' bathroom, trying to pretend I wasn't crying. And then this mountain troll came in..."

* * *

Ginny peeked into the kitchen, trying hard not to let the door squeak and give away her spying.

"Not killing each other, are they?" Ron asked, resting his chin on Ginny's head.

They both watched as Harry and Hermione cleaned the kitchen, talking and laughing softly.

"Nope," Ginny said, letting the door close slowly. She sighed in relief. Tonight had been stressful, and she was glad it was over in a lot of different ways. Other than Bill, and her father's quietness, everyone else seemed very accepting of Harry, the engagement, and even the baby.

Her mother's attitude surprised her more than anything. It was shocking that she'd completely accepted reality without scolding or lecturing at all. Molly Weasley was not known for being tolerant of new ideas right away. Ginny had been prepared for a lecture on being a responsible adult in the least, not a whole list of instructions on how to take care of herself and the baby, as well as Harry.

Ron had his hands on her shoulders, rubbing lightly as they looked into the living room. Their mother and father were talking quietly in the corner and it looked as if her mother was winning points in whatever the topic was—as if Ginny couldn't guess.

"She likes to keep us on our toes, doesn't she?" Ron asked.

Ginny sighed her agreement and leaned back into her brother. "You're not angry?"

"About what?" Ron asked, sounding surprised.

"Any of it, really?" Ginny said.

"No," Ron said after a long minute. "You're happy. Harry seems happy. It's a bit of a shock, but... as long as you're alright with it."

Ginny was quiet for a minute, her fingers brushing over her belly. "I was terrified at first," she admitted. "Not of Harry's reaction or anything—I knew he'd support me no matter what—but more of what the hell I'm going to do, you know."

"It's a big responsibility."

"Exactly." Ginny turned and looked up to the brother she'd always been closest to. He'd been the one to notice something was wrong with her in her first year and taken her to Dumbledore who had destroyed the diary. They'd been close all through school, but had started to drift apart as they got older. Ginny missed that closeness.

"But Harry pointed out that no first time parent can know everything."

"Hermione might," Ron snorted and then sobered, realizing what he'd just said. "I mean... you know, when we decide to, er..."

"Relax, Ron," Ginny shook her head with a smile. "Breathe."

He nodded jerkily. "I know what you mean, though."

"And we'll be together," Ginny continued. "We can do anything when we're together."

Ron smiled widely. "Brilliant how that happens, isn't it?"

"It is," Ginny agreed.

"Does Harry know about your crush on him when you were little?" Ron smirked.

Ginny rolled her eyes, but couldn't help the laugh that swelled out of her.

Molly Weasley lay in bed, unable to sleep. She should be asleep, because she'd been up before the sun this morning. But her worries about her children often kept her up far later than she hoped.

Today's family dinner had been very... eventful and informative. Between the three surprises revealed by Ginny, Molly was really only shocked at one of them.

Harry Potter. In their home, and the one their daughter had fallen in love with.

Oh the engagement and pregnancy were surprises, but not completely unexpected, really. Anyone looking at Ginny over the past few weeks could have seen that euphoric love-drunk look on the woman's face and known that a commitment wasn't far on the horizon.

And when she'd walked into the back door of the Burrow on Halloween night, Molly had already suspected her daughter might be carrying a secret—one that even she didn't know quite yet. There was something about the glow of a pregnant woman. Molly had dealt with it enough over the years that she could often put the clues together before the mother's themselves knew.

She'd been the one to tell Fleur she was expecting Victoire, and even Louis. She'd been the one to take a pot of cream of chicken soup over to Angelina and talk to her about little Freddie. And she'd seen the confirmation of little Molly's appearance in the family on Audrey's face not three weeks after the little one had been conceived.

And now her daughter—her little Ginny—was going to have a baby of her very own.

Two years ago, if anyone had asked Molly if Ginny was ever going to be a mother, she would have had to think long and hard about it. Ginny herself had scoffed at the idea, claiming she wasn't ever going to get married. And children were out of the question for a professional Quidditch player.

But then Harry had come into her life. Handsome, humble, wonderful Harry. His love for Ginny radiated off him along with his quiet strength. To Molly, he looked like a ball of rubber bands, all knotted up inside with tension and power, just waiting to burst forth. It was intimidating, especially considering who he was, but, then again, she figured that he could do just about anything with that energy, if he put his mind to it.

And loving Ginny, and their baby, was what he'd chosen to do.

He was going to make a wonderful father, despite his obvious nervousness at the situation.

"Molly, stop thinking and go to sleep."

She smiled into the darkness of the bedroom and reached over to pat her husband's hand as it reached out, settling on her hip.

"I can't seem to stop the thoughts tonight."

Arthur had been hesitant about accepting Harry, even though he seemed to like the boy right away, mostly because Arthur had always been wrapped around his little girl's finger. And now Ginny's

attention was elsewhere.

"She's growing up, Molly."

His voice was so forlorn and when he pressed a kiss to her shoulder and cuddled up close behind her in the bed, Molly couldn't help but feel her heart twinge for this man.

"She's not our little girl anymore. She's... she's his now."

"Yes, she belongs to him," Molly agreed. "Just like I belonged to you once you slipped that ring on my finger."

"She's having his baby."

"Yes, she is," Molly sighed. "Think what wonderful parents they're going to make."

"Is it too soon?" he asked, shifting in place.

Molly was quiet for a long minute, thinking about it. "It's not for us to say, Arthur. Harry and Ginny have made their choices, and no life is ever a mistake. It might not be what they planned, but they're going to love this child. Besides, what's done is done."

"It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't *him*," Arthur grumbled and Molly had to laugh at his insecurities.

"You're losing your little girl to her childhood love. A hero who you weren't even sure really existed beyond the stories."

"Her knight in shining armor," Arthur sighed. "I used to be her hero, you know."

"You still are," Molly chided, resting her hand on his cheek. "She'll always love you, Arthur, but Harry can give her a life we never dreamed of. He can give her a home and children, and a love that's not on the same level as what a parent can offer."

"I know," Arthur sighed. "And I like the boy, I really do."

"Did you see her smile tonight?"

"Of course," he protested. "She was smiling most of the night." Even before his words died in the air around them, Molly could tell that he'd realized what she meant.

"She hasn't smiled like that since she was very little," Molly said softly. "I could never take that from her."

"That's why you weren't angry," he nodded.

"I can't be angry at anyone who loves one of my children that much. I may not approve of all their choices, but there's no anger there. Harry is no cad, Arthur. He's not toying with her affections, or using her strictly for his own gratification. He honestly, truly, and completely loves her. He didn't hesitate to do the right thing the moment they were faced with a challenge and he's not going to back down now, or ever."

"You saw how he put himself between Ginny and Bill," she pointed out. "He would have protected her with everything he had, and we would have been picking up pieces of a Curse Breaker scattered all over my living room if Bill had been a second faster."

"That spell by Ron was a nice piece of work," Arthur mused. "He was faster than I could imagine."

Molly sat up on her elbow, staring down at Arthur's profile in the dark. "And what about *my* spell, Arthur Weasley?"

She could hear him smile, feel the way it stretched his face, the humor leaking off of him. "Well, your spell work is always brilliant, Mollywobbles. I expect that from you."

"You charmer, Arthur Weasley," she scolded softly, swatting his chest.

"Only for you, Molly, only for you."

"They're going to be alright," Molly affirmed as she nuzzled into his embrace. "Because they're in love."

"Love is a good thing," Arthur said quietly, kissing her head and closing his eyes.

Chapter 15

This Is How The Story Ends, Or Have We Just Begun

The chaos of the Burrow wasn't something Harry thought he'd ever get used to anytime soon. But he had to admit, it was fun at times.

Tonight was very fun, actually, and he had Sirius to thank for that. He seemed to be a one-man side show tonight, entertaining everyone and being more charming than Harry had ever seen.

Sirius had jumped right into the planning for the wedding, rivaling Molly in his attitude that everything had to be absolutely perfect for his godson and the bride. He and Molly frequently butted heads about the plans, but they worked it out.

Right now, as it stood, there would only be a handful of guests—mostly Ginny's family, a few members of the Order, and Harry's very meager family of two. One of whom was sulking in the corner, pretending his ex-girlfriend wasn't sitting with Ginny, Hermione and Molly, planning the details of Ginny's wedding robes.

The wedding itself would take place in a marquee in the back garden of the Burrow, heated with liberal charms. Bill Weasley had taken it upon himself to arrange for the tent and the charms, after he had apologized to Ginny, nearly begging her forgiveness. Ginny had given it straight away, as if she'd already forgotten the incident had ever happened.

Harry supposed that's just how it was in a large family. He was still wary of Bill, but the older man had so far done nothing but be supportive since his first outburst.

"Please tell me Ron and I get to plan the Stag Night." George slid into a seat next to Harry and grimaced over at the women.

Harry grinned as Ron joined them, sitting on the table and swinging his long legs. If his mother caught him, she'd scold him and perhaps even set a pinching hex on his backside, but she was rather preoccupied right now, measuring Ginny who was rolling her eyes and pulling all sorts of faces.

"I have no idea," Harry shrugged nonchalantly. "Although you'll probably have to fight Sirius over it."

George's eyebrows rose as if he relished the challenge.

"I hadn't even thought about one, to be honest," Harry shrugged. "Everything is happening so quickly."

It had only been two weeks since they'd announced their engagement, and their other little secret, to the Weasleys.

"Freight Train Molly," Ron nodded knowingly. "She'll have you hitched by the end of the week."

"Sounds good," Harry nodded. "Ginny and I'd do it tonight if she'd allow us. We talked about eloping, actually."

Both men smirked and Harry knew it was lucky Ginny had derailed that idea before Harry had gone too far with it. "Mum would have killed you for that."

"Which is why we didn't," Harry pointed out. "We figured we were on shaky ground already."

"I'm surprised the press hasn't gotten wind of it yet, actually," Ron mused, nodding toward Ginny. Harry knew he was talking about the baby, not the wedding.

Harry grimaced. "They will soon enough. The news of the wedding broke fast enough."

"That's what happens when you wander through Diagon Alley connected at the lips to our sister, mate," George slapped Harry on the shoulder.

He couldn't say he regretted it, really. What a comeback to the Wizarding world! Headlines all over the place were announcing Harry's return as well as the wedding. Speculation about the relationship was ripe and there were a hundred stories circulating about how and where they'd met.

Little had been said about Ginny's return, other than her connection to Harry, which was fine with Harry. He'd rather the focus be on him than Ginny; she didn't need any more stress right now.

"Once the hype over the wedding has died down, someone will notice that two months are missing from the time line," Harry sighed. "Not that it matters much, anyway. Whether it's true or not, they're going to print it."

"Then don't worry about it," George shrugged. "No one who matters cares."

"True," Ron shrugged. "So, back to the Stag Night."

"Talk to Sirius," Harry nodded. "I'd be up for a pub night—no strippers, though."

"You're taking all the fun out of this, you know," George protested.

"Yeah, his wife might let him get away with it if it was for you," Ron pointed out.

"Not likely," Harry smirked. It seemed, to him, that Angelina had George fairly under control, if that was at all possible. "And Hermione wouldn't believe it either."

Both men looked rather sullen about the whole thing and Harry just laughed at them.

"You blokes sound like you're having much more fun than I am," Ginny said sulkily, wrapping her arms around Harry's neck from behind and kissing the top of his head.

"We're trying to talk Harry out of making us hire strippers for his Stag Night," George said plainly, making Harry nearly choke.

"Right," Ginny drawled. "And I'm a Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

"A what?" Harry asked, his eyebrow rising as both Ron and George laughed loudly.

"Oh, Harry, you have *got* to meet Luna," Ginny laughed, hugging him even tighter.

He tugged her around until she was sitting on his lap sideways. "How long until we can go home?" he asked softly, nuzzling his nose into her neck.

"None of that," George grumbled, abandoning his chair and moving to the far side of the room, where he started talking to Remus.

"Er, mate, don't take this the wrong way, because I really like you, but I can't handle it when you two do that. It puts me off my dinner." Ron slid off the table, but Harry barely noticed as Ginny's fingernails were lightly scratching along his neck and into his hairline.

"Soon," she promised him. "Mum wants to do one more fitting to make sure the robes fit with the alterations she's done. She's worried that they'll be too tight and show everything."

"Can I see them?" Harry asked, twisting his fingers into the ends of her hair.

"No," Ginny giggled. "Mum would kill me if I showed you."

"So, let me get this straight," Harry mused. "She knows I see you naked on a regular basis, yet she's worried that I may see the wedding robes?"

"Er, yeah," she smirked. "I didn't say it made sense just that it has to be that way. Supposedly it's bad luck if you see me in them before."

"I don't believe in luck," Harry protested.

"One more week," Ginny said, her lips hovering just beyond reach of his. "And then I'll let you see them, right before I let you take them off me."

"Brilliant," Harry said, tugging her close enough to kiss her thoroughly.

* * *

Remus watched sullenly from the corner of the room. He really didn't want to be here, but Sirius hadn't given him much of a choice. He'd pulled the 'Harry needs us' card and Remus had known his number was up.

What Harry needed them for was still a mystery, as he seemed to be perfectly content where he was, snogging the life out of Ginny Weasley in the middle of the Burrow.

He'd known Tonks was likely to be here—she was one of Ginny's best friends and was probably standing up at the wedding for her as well. Seeing her for the first time since she'd asked him to stop coming around was more painful than he'd expected. He didn't count on missing her so much; the way she smelled, the way she made him laugh, the way she understood him far more than he wanted her to.

"Just get it over with," Sirius growled quietly when he walked by, nudging Remus on the shoulder.

Remus didn't answer more than to glare at his best mate's back. He had no doubt that the pranking would escalate far beyond what it was if he dragged his feet any longer. Already he was afraid to touch anything for fear it would disappear completely. First, it had been small things around his room at Sirius' house: his glasses, his hat, his winter cloak. He blamed it on preoccupation and old age until it was larger things that disappeared: his bed once, while he was laying on it, a chair in his room, a book he'd been reading.

And just two days ago his clothing had suspiciously begun vanishing. He was currently wearing his last pair of pants and a pair of trousers that he had to magically expand to make fit him.

George had been the first he'd suspected, simply because of opportunity—Harry had brought him and Ron to Sirius' house just last week—and several snarky comments that George had made about Tonks' attitude.

But when his underpants had started disappearing, Remus' suspicions had shifted to Sirius. Vanishing underwear was definitely more his style.

Sadly, Remus had a feeling that Harry knew exactly what was going on as well. There were knowing looks traded between him and Sirius when Remus showed up at the Burrow.

"How's it, Remus?" George asked, sidling up. His smile was just a bit too wide.

Damn. He knew as well.

"Fine," Remus barked out, but his anger slowly faded into just tiredness.

"You know, I remember this one time when Angie was really hacked off at me," George said, glancing over at Tonks, who was staring at them now. Remus shifted uncomfortably and looked down at his hands, twisting in his lap. "And I had to literally grovel on my knees to get her to talk to me again."

Remus sighed. "I'm not even sure if I can get back in that way."

"So you at least admit you want her back," George nodded. "That's a start, I guess."

"I just... I don't think I can give her what she wants."

"What is that?" George asked, leaning on the kitchen wall and studying Tonks, who looked away.

"What Ginny has," Remus sighed, nodding his head to where Ginny and Harry were talking quietly, their foreheads pressed together.

"What Ginny has makes some of us sick at times," George scoffed. "Did Tonks ask you to marry her? Did she ask for the package deal?"

Remus opened his mouth to respond, but the words died in his throat. She *hadn't* asked him for it, even though he suspected it's what she wanted.

"I'll take that as a no, then," George said, nodding thoughtfully. "You assume because she and Ginny are friends that they want the same thing."

"It's what she wants," Remus said firmly.

"Maybe so, but I once wanted an elephant as a pet," George shrugged. "I was two, and crushed when Mum told Fred and me that we were getting Ron instead. We tried for years to spell a trunk on him, you know. Just because we want something doesn't mean it would always be best for us, or it's what we're going to get. Eventually I got over the slight and learned to accept Ron, no matter how grey-less and non-baggy he was."

"So you're saying that settling is what she should do?" Remus huffed. "Settling for something other than what she deserves."

George smiled widely. "Ah, now we're down to it. You don't think you're what she deserves."

Remus shifted, wanting to be doing anything than discussing this with *George* of all people. "Are any of us worthy of them?"

"Some more than others," George shrugged, his head bobbing to the side. "But, probably not. It seems to me that you're missing a key point, however."

The Weasley twins had always been too smart for their own good. Remus sighed, knowing there was no way to get out of this.

"You wouldn't feel this way unless you really loved her."

Remus' jaw clenched and his teeth ground together. He looked up, not even trying to disguise his staring at Tonks.

"And if you really do love her, you'll respect her more than you do right now."

"I respect her immensely—"

"Really?" George asked, his eyebrows disappearing into his hair line. "Because you've chosen to tell her, with your actions, that what you want is more important than what she wants, and that no matter what her choice is that you don't think it's the right one. She's chosen you, Remus."

His heart twisted as he realized that it was all true. He loved Tonks, he really did. She was everything to him, but she deserved so much more than he was.

What if, by trying to give her what he thought she deserved, he was really robbing her of what she desired?

Tonks met his gaze and held it for a long time, until he had to look away. It was still there—deep in her eyes was the love that he couldn't deny any longer. He felt her move across the room, felt each step she took toward him like an electrical charge in the air.

"I was surprised that you came tonight." Her voice sounded foreign; like a language that he didn't know how to speak, but thought it was beautiful at the same time.

"Sirius..." He trailed off, tired of lying to both of them. "I wanted to come," he revised his statement.

"For Harry," Tonks nodded.

"Yes," he nodded, "but also... to see you again."

"You can't have it both ways, Moony."

He nodded at her forceful statement and pretended that there weren't too many ears in this room listening in.

"I know." He looked up at her again, surprised when she sat down next to him. "What do you want?"

"Right now?" she smirked. "I rather fancy another one of Molly's raspberry tarts, but I'm afraid I'll pop my trouser button if I do."

He tried hard not to smile, but it half appeared anyway. "I meant—"

"I know what you meant," she sighed. "Is it okay if I don't really know?"

The answer surprised him but he nodded jerkily. "I... I think so."

"Because what I want changes on a daily basis," Tonks explained. "And I'm fairly easy to please, most of the time. I think... I think I just want to know where I stand. I don't like the dark, you know."

"I remember," he nodded. For an Auror, Remus had found it ironic that Tonks had to sleep with a light on—she honestly couldn't sleep if it was too dark.

She studied him for a minute before shrugging. "I could use a date to the wedding. And I don't really fancy asking Charlie Weasley. He doesn't dance as well as some people."

A hundred memories played through his mind of their time together, making him feel like an arse for all that he'd pushed away.

"That's all I really need right now. I'll let you know if I can think of something else."

"Besides the tart."

"I changed my mind about wanting the tart."

"Figures." He smiled down at his hands, becoming very aware of how quiet it was around them. But the room was still full—everyone was staring at them and he shifted uncomfortably.

"So, are you free next week? Say... on the eighteenth?"

"I may be," Remus nodded. "Although I do have to warn you, I may have to come to the wedding wearing absolutely nothing. Sirius has charmed everything I own to disappear."

"Nice," she nodded, the corners of her mouth twitching. "I may be able to take care of that for you."

"I'd appreciate it," he nodded. They were quiet for a few minutes before he looked at her again. "I'm sorry, Dora."

"I'm willing to give you another chance," she said softly. "No promises, from either of us, other than if either of us acts like an arse, there will be consequences."

He swallowed thickly, his heart pounding away in his chest. A second chance. Or perhaps it was a hundred ones that had passed before. "I appreciate it."

She slid off the stool she was sitting on. "If you want to know who charmed your stuff, though, I'd look beyond Sirius."

Remus' head snapped up as she walked away, his eyes narrowing at Sirius, who was standing next to a smirking Harry and Ginny.

Damn. He'd been completely had.

* * *

The wedding had been nice, but this was so much better, Ginny decided. The salty, warm air blew in through the door to the balcony, billowing the wispy curtains out toward the room.

When Harry had insisted on a honeymoon away from England, Ginny had been skeptical. Really, they should be home, setting up the nursery and getting things settled. But Harry assured her that all of that could wait, that they needed this escape.

And he'd been right. Ginny had been away from England, but never to a place like this before, with white sand, crystal blue waters, and the sweet scent of fruit in the air.

They'd been here for two weeks, tomorrow was their last day. It was going to be hard to leave, mostly because here everything was about just the two of them. When they returned to England, the world was waiting.

Her hand strayed down to cover Harry's on her belly—a belly that was firm and just turning round. Harry seemed utterly fascinated by the fact that he could see her baby bump now and spent hours rubbing his hand over it until the skin was almost too sensitive to the touch.

But she couldn't hold it against him. For him, the pregnancy was such an intangible thing, and it would be for a few more weeks, until he could really feel the baby move.

The day before the wedding, the midwife had taught them a charm to be able to hear the baby's heartbeat. Ginny's eyes filled with tears just thinking about it now; the soft little thump-thump that sounded like tiny little horses running inside her—that was their baby.

She should really be sleeping, like Harry was—his soft snores were ruffling the ends of her hair along her shoulder—but she just couldn't seem to quiet her mind right now. There was just too much to think about.

Was it really only a handful of weeks ago that her life had been going nowhere? It felt like years and

years.

But then Harry had found her, had stumbled on the little pub she worked in, smiled his crooked smile and looked at her through glasses smudged with his fingerprints.

They'd found each other, really; saved each other from the bleary loneliness that crept in too close at times. And now they had each other to cling to—them against the world.

As if sensing her thoughts, Harry's fingers flared over the baby and rubbed lightly, his breathing deepening again after a long moment.

Together, the three of them could do anything.