

Harry Potter

**I Want You
to Want Me**

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Contents

I Want You To Want Me	3
Chapter 1: I Want	4
Chapter 2: I Need.....	19
Chapter 3: I'd Love.....	30
Chapter 4: If You Say.....	35
Chapter 5: You To Want Me	44
Chapter 6: You To Need Me	54
Chapter 7: You To Love Me	62
Chapter 8: That You Love Me	79

I Want You To Want Me

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Summary: Desperate times call for desperate measures. After waiting years to tell Ginny the truth, Harry is driven to desperation when she doesn't believe him.

Chapter 1: I Want

His Saturday

Harry watched as Ginny buzzed about the flat, wearing only one shoe and twisting her hair into a messy knot behind her head. He tried not to smile because he knew if she caught him she'd probably hit him, but it was funny looking.

She breezed into the living room once more and dropped to her knees, crawling along the floor and sticking her bottom in the air as she looked under all the furniture.

Harry's eyes went wide and his body definitely responded to the view, but he forced himself to look away.

"Anything I can help you with?" he asked and turned a page in his Quidditch magazine, pretending that he hadn't noticed her dashing about.

Ginny's head peeked over the page he was looking at and she blew a long tendril of hair out of her eyes. "My shoe," she huffed. "I can't find it and I'm going to be late."

Harry sighed and set his magazine aside, acting like it was some great feat to heave himself off the sofa and look for her missing shoe. In a way it was, though. A very large part of him didn't want her to ever find her shoe because then she couldn't leave him here and go out with... *Brian*. And she'd stay home with him tonight where they could share the sofa and watch a film together.

Ginny let out an inarticulate grumble and hobbled back down the hallway. "I can't imagine where that got off to."

His heart gave a twinge and his stomach fluttered but Harry forced the feelings, and the thoughts that they brought, away. Ginny just wasn't interested in him. She was perfectly happy with their best-friends-and-nothing-more relationship. They were Auror partners, flat mates, and best friends.

Harry had no business watching her like he did or thinking and dreaming about her like he did. He was just *Harry*. She'd never really seen him, even though he'd had a crush on her since she was eleven and he was twelve. He was always just an older brother figure for her to joke with and play Quidditch with in the field behind the Burrow.

Harry was forever embarrassing himself in front of her: sticking his elbow in food at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, tripping over his tongue when he tried to say something to her, or simply feeling his face heat every time she looked his way.

The crush had tempered during the years of the war, but come back with a vengeance in the months after Ginny left Hogwarts and started her Auror Training. Harry did date other girls every so often, but he hadn't met anyone yet that could outshine Ginny's position in his life. He had an unwritten rule that no girl ever got more than two dates.

And Ginny, it seemed, was of the same mindset. She'd been all set to play professional Quidditch,

but a late seventh-year injury to her shoulder pushed that idea into a dream of the past, rather than the future.

It was Harry who suggested that she join the Aurors, and Ginny was a natural. She was fierce and strong, and had a wicked sense of humor that made being her partner a whole lot of fun.

He couldn't quite say when the old feeling of fancying her morphed into much stronger, much deeper feelings, but Harry was full into the sensation of it right now. He spent a long time denying he was feeling anything, and then more time trying to convince himself it was simply a silly little crush, and then even more time moping about and trying to decide if saying something to her was worth it.

Rubbing his hand over his face, Harry forced the thoughts away. Brooding about it hadn't accomplished anything yet, so he may as well stop. Ginny was still digging away in her wardrobe. Harry could hear the thumping of shoes being thrown around and clothing being scattered.

He gave the living room one more visual sweep and smirked when he saw the tip of the shoe she'd been searching for near the fireplace, peeking out from under the cloak Ginny had dropped there earlier today. He opened his mouth to call out to her but the words wouldn't come. If she didn't find the shoe, she'd be late, if she even went at all. And if she was late, perhaps *Brian* would think she'd jilted him, and the wanker would leave and never come back. Yes. That was the best idea all around.

"Found it yet?" Harry sauntered down the hallway and leaned against Ginny's open door.

She spun on her heel and Harry had to catch his breath. Rather than the pressed trousers and nice shirt she'd been wearing earlier, Ginny had changed into a dress.

"I decided to change completely," she sighed. "Zip me up?" She turned her back to him and Harry hesitated as he stared at the vast expanse of pale skin, dissected by the bright white bra strap. He'd certainly seen bits and pieces of her girly things before, draped over the shower rod in the bathroom, in the laundry that they usually did together, discarded on her messy floor, but actually *on* her was something very different.

Ginny gave an impatient glance over her shoulder and Harry jerked forward, his hands shaking as he reached for the tiny zipper.

"Sorry, was thinking about something else."

"I'm so late," she grumbled. Her hands reached up and untwisted her hair to let it cascade down over her shoulders. She ran her fingers through it roughly, ignoring the tangles.

Harry's blood thundered through his veins, and all he could think about was how pale and perfect her skin was, how soft it was against the back of his finger, and how much he wanted to reach out and taste one of the freckles on her shoulder, just to see if it was chocolate flavored, as he hoped it was. When he finally reached the top of the zipper, without thoroughly embarrassing himself by licking her, Harry let out a shaky breath.

"Then stay home," he managed after clearing his throat. "It's not like you have to dress up to be

here with me. We'll order take away and throw popcorn at the telly when we argue with the characters." They'd done that just last week and it had been one of the best times Harry could ever remember—just the two of them, laughing and sitting almost on top of each other. Perfection.

"As fun as that sounds, I do really want to go out tonight." Ginny hopped on one foot as she tugged on a pair of heels that made her legs look incredible.

Harry looked down at himself, wearing only a pair of track pants that were stained and rather ratty, and a t-shirt that had seen far better days. "Go out with me." He shrugged, trying to pretend the suggestion was completely innocent. "I can be ready fast, and we'll go out for dinner. We'll do whatever you want."

But Ginny only laughed at the suggestion, and patted his shoulder in that way she had for so long. Harry's heart gave a painful lurch.

"You can't be that lonely, Harry," she joked. "Go and pick up someone at the pub."

He knew her comment was made for fun, but he scowled as she darted into the bathroom to apply makeup and brush her hair out. He didn't *want* just anyone. And he certainly wouldn't find anyone decent at the pub. He wasn't looking for someone to shag, or just spend a night with—Harry wasn't into that kind of thing at all. He wanted someone he could really talk to, someone who understood his past, and had helped him create dreams for the future. Just anyone wouldn't do.

It had been Ginny in his dreams for so long that Harry was sure it would only ever be her.

"Why are you going out with Benny in the first place?" Harry asked. He purposely got the name wrong to see if it would rile Ginny. "I mean, what happened to your two date rule? You've already been out with Benny twice last week."

Ginny's face, complete with ring of toothpaste foam around her lips, appeared once again and she spoke around her toothbrush.

"Because I like *Brian*, Harry. And the rule was always more about guidelines, you know, rather than absoluteness." She ducked back in and Harry heard her spit into the sink.

The frustration and helplessness built inside him, and Harry pressed his back to the wall, bracing his hands behind it so he wouldn't reach out and pull her to him as she passed.

"Yeah, but what makes this one different?"

Ginny emerged once more from the bathroom and studied him for a moment before smiling. "Brian is nice. He likes Quidditch, and isn't intimidated that I'm an Auror."

Harry scowled at the description. *He* was nice, wasn't he? And he loved Quidditch. In fact, he and Ginny had spent hundreds of hours going to games, talking about games, and playing games.

And Harry loved that Ginny was an Auror. She was the best damned Auror he'd ever seen. That was probably biased since he was in love with her, but Harry did think she was amazing.

"He's funny and easy to talk to," Ginny continued. She walked down the hall and Harry felt powerless as he followed. He had to know why this one was different. Ginny had dated lots in the past; why was she suddenly so interested in starting a relationship?

"I'm funny," Harry protested, but he doubted Ginny heard him because she was telling a story now.

"This one time..."

Harry refused to listen to the words and focused on pouting. He was all of those things, yet Ginny didn't give him a second glance. He was still firmly entrenched in the friend-only category of Ginny's life.

He forced a small smile on his face when she laughed at the end of her story.

"Isn't that just so funny?"

"Brilliant." Harry nodded. He hadn't heard a word of it but he doubted he would be amused even if *Brian* was the funniest man on earth.

"And he's good looking, always dressed nicely, you know. And he... he makes me feel like a girl." Ginny shrugged and Harry had to look away. He couldn't bear to see that soft look on her face and know that he wasn't the one that put it there.

"I have to run," Ginny said once she had her cloak and wand. Harry noticed her scowl at the missing shoe that was unearthed, but she seemed to shrug it away. "Try not to sit here alone all night, yeah?"

She laughed and pressed her lips to his cheek before Apparating away.

Harry stared at the spot where Ginny had been standing for a long time, her words rattling in his head. He was everything that *Brian* was and more, why couldn't Ginny be interested in him? Why couldn't she just see everything she ever wanted in him? Then they could fall in love together, and get married, and have a family together. And Harry's life would be brilliant.

Slowly, he wandered into his bedroom and stared at the clutter lying on the floor. The dirty laundry was piling up, threatening to take over the entire room. He nudged a pile with his toes, and then pulled his wand and banished it to the laundry room down the hall. It took him twenty minutes of spells, but Harry finally was able to see the carpet again. The bed was made, and all the surfaces dusted, but he still felt out of sorts.

He migrated into the rest of the flat, cleaning as he went. The only room that didn't get a complete scouring was Ginny's. Harry couldn't bring himself to go in there, and Ginny would kill him if he even tried to organize her mess anyway.

At the end of it all, Harry felt more desolate than he had in a very long time. The flat nearly sparkled, but he couldn't make the questions stop popping up. And he didn't have answers as to why Ginny prized things in Tossler Brian that were extremely evident in Harry himself.

Harry decided that sitting around the flat tonight was definitely going to be too depressing. He

gathered some clean clothing, and took a quick shower, all the while grumbling about everything Ginny had said tonight.

The water ran over his body and Harry stared at Ginny's soap and shampoo bottle in the corner of the shelf. His body responded automatically and he felt his face heat. If Ginny ever found out that he got off almost every shower after smelling her shampoo and imagining her climbing into the shower spray with him, she'd probably hex his bits. Tonight's routine offered very little in the way of relief, but Harry's body refused to calm down until the routine was carried out.

He stood in front of the mirror for a long time, wrapped in his towel and staring at the man who looked back. He was good looking, wasn't he? Ruggedly handsome, at least. Maybe his hair was a bit long, and he could definitely use a shave right now, but surely he was attractive enough.

Harry finished getting ready and Apparated to The Hogs Head, where he knew Ron and George were going. They'd invited him earlier in the day, but Harry had declined, thinking that a night in with Ginny sounded better. So much for those plans.

The pub was full and loud, just how Seamus liked it on a Friday night. The Irishman had breathed new life into the old place after Aberforth sold him the pub, and it was a fun place to gather with friends to drown in a pint.

Ron, George, and Neville were seated around a table laughing and talking loudly. Harry nodded to a few people as he weaved his way toward them.

"Oi, you made it after all," Ron cheered. Harry tried to smile, but he thought it was probably a little weak.

"I made it."

"Have a pint on me." George slid a nearly full drink across the table, and Harry caught it just in time, preventing it from sailing off the edge and landing in his lap.

"We were just talking about the Cannons," Ron informed him. The other two complained loudly and Harry couldn't help but laugh. Ron always wanted to talk about the Cannons.

The conversation took off from there, with Ron defending his team while the others gave countless evidences against them. In the midst of it all, Harry felt better about getting out of the flat. His concerns about Ginny and what he felt for her were never far from his surface thoughts, but he allowed himself to set them aside and simply enjoy being with his friends.

Seamus kept their table supplied with drinks all night, and Harry, not normally a heavy drinker, drained his pint time and again. The liquid in his belly felt good. It helped to warm him.

"... and so I told her, Angelina, you'll just have to run the shop without me tonight. I've got somewhere important I need to—"

"I'm attractive, right?"

Why that question slipped out of his mouth right then, Harry couldn't say. Three sets of eyes

widened before the table erupted in raucous laughter.

"Er, sorry, Harry, you're not really my type." George shook his head.

Harry sank further into his seat. "I mean, you think I'm okay, yeah? I'm not some pretty boy, or flashy, or anything, but girls think I'm okay. At least, I think they do." Now that his mouth had opened, it didn't seem he could stop it from spilling everything.

"I think someone has had a bit too much tonight." Ron peered closely at him. "Are you ill?" He reached out to place the back of his hand along Harry's forehead.

"Geroff," Harry grumbled and pushed Ron's hand away. "I just... I just can't stop thinking about what she said. I'm everything he is, you know. Only better."

"That's right!" George toasted Harry's rambling obliviously, hoisting his pint above the table and sloshing ale over the edge.

"Maybe... maybe I just ruined my chance a long time ago. What if that's it? What if being with me hurts too much because it reminds her of the past?"

The realization was painful, and Harry's chest clamped down so hard it was difficult to breath. That had to be it. Ginny couldn't bear to think of him in a romantic way because he was a constant reminder of her lost childhood, of friends who would never return, of Fred, and everything she'd lost. Things she could ignore in a friend, because maybe they weren't nearly as close as Harry thought they were, would be impossible to ignore in someone you loved.

Brian was a safer choice because he'd never had a horribly embarrassing crush on her in the past. He'd never been at the center of a war where her friends and family had died. Harry had.

"I hafta go," Harry mumbled. He stood abruptly and knocked his thighs into the table. "I need to... need to think."

Both George and Neville protested and tried to get Harry to sit down, but the images from the past just kept washing over him: Ginny's small body lying still on the floor of the Chamber, the way she was so amazing when he watched her shyly from across the Common Room, her fierce determination in the face of anything that stood in her way, and, finally, the blood-smeared, smoke-smudged face of a sixteen year-old girl who had just lost her brother, and been forced to fight for her own life. It was a wonder she ever wanted to see him again. Harry shouldn't expect that just because he loved her she should return the feelings.

"Sit down, Harry," Ron demanded. His hand rested heavily on Harry's shoulder and guided him back into his chair. Harry thought everyone might be staring at him, and he wouldn't blame them. They must think he was insane, bursting in here and spouting on about nothing like he had.

Perhaps he *was* insane.

"You're not leaving here until we figure out what the hell you're talking about, Harry," Neville added his support.

"Yeah, mate," George said. "I'll even put up a privacy charm."

Harry sighed, knowing he wasn't going to get out of this. And a part of him didn't want to leave. A part of him wanted to tell his mates everything. Maybe they could help him figure out what he was going to do, and how to make the emptiness in his chest go away.

"We're not doing this on pints alone," George shook his head and made his way toward the bar. He came back a minute later with a full bottle of Firewhisky and four small glasses. Harry watched in silence as he set a privacy ward around the table, and Ron poured the drinks, slopping liquid onto the table. It hissed and smoked on the wood.

"Now, are we going to talk about what's bothering you, or should we just believe that you're a nutter?" George's eyebrows rose and he stared at Harry across the table.

Harry glared down at his hands. He growled low in his throat and snatched his glass of whisky.

"So?" Ron prompted. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, and waited for Harry. "I'm assuming this is about some bird, since you seem to have lost your mind."

Harry grimaced. "Not a bird." He rubbed his face with a hand, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead, and then settling them back into place. "A woman. A woman I lo..."

"What's the problem then?" Neville asked.

Harry felt his gut roll unpleasantly, and wondered if the whisky was burning holes in his stomach like it seemed to be on the table. "She... she doesn't see me that way."

"Now I see the problem," Ron nodded. "What does Ginny say about all of this? She's always got an opinion on the girls you date."

Harry didn't answer. He felt his cheeks heat until he had to tug at his collar. He hadn't ever come right out and admitted his crush on Ginny to anyone besides Ron. He'd told Ron everything, but his friend had always kept his confidence.

"I haven't... I haven't told her how I feel. Ever."

"Is this about Ginny?" George demanded, looking confused. "I knew you fancied her when you were younger, but..."

"I don't just fancy her." The admission burned the whole way up, and Harry fumbled for the bottle. Perhaps if he drank more Firewhisky it would drown out his words and he'd be able to save himself the humiliation of explaining his statement. Why couldn't they just... understand? Did he really have to humiliate himself in front of his mates like this?

The feral look on George's face confirmed it, though. Yes, Harry was going to have to pay for telling the truth finally.

"About time you admit it," Neville grumbled. Harry glared at his friend.

"Who told you?" Harry demanded.

"It's not like it was a secret, mate," Ron shrugged. "I think the only person who never figured it out is Ginny. She knew about the crush, but not... well, she never knew how deep it went, obviously."

"She always was a bit thick," George shrugged one shoulder.

"I told you not to let her move in with you," Ron scolded softly. He looked the most concerned out of everyone, and Harry supposed he had the right. Ron was always there to support Harry—no questions asked. And Harry had been less than honest with his friends for a long time. "I told you it was nothing but trouble."

"I thought I'd be fine," Harry sighed. "I thought... I thought it was past me."

"I thought you were well over this, mate."

Harry felt even sicker. "I tried," he whispered. "I thought I was, but she's just so... wonderful and beautiful. Living together is hard because I have to see her every day, but it's also brilliant because I *get* to see her every day. And she's a good Auror, you know, so I wanted her as my partner."

Ron studied him a minute and sighed before rubbing his face. Silence settled around the table. Harry watched their faces, waiting for the jokes to come.

"Why are you staring at me?" George demanded. He seemed to be swaying slightly to the side, but Harry wasn't sure if it was George, or Harry himself. The table seemed a bit wonky, too. Perhaps someone had spelled it to spin, like the rest of the room was.

"You're not going to... hex me?" Harry asked. "Or use me to test products?"

George laughed loudly. "Great idea, Harry, but no."

"It's brilliant, Harry," Ron smiled finally. "I think you and Ginny could be really good together."

"I agree," Neville said, tilting his glass in Harry's direction. "Ginny's great, Harry. I like the idea of the two of you together."

"You dated her," Harry narrowed his eyes, trying to decide why that fact had popped up in his mind. "I wanted to ask her to the dance, but you beat me to it."

Neville's face flushed and he stammered before downing the rest of his drink. "Ginny and I... just friends. I promise, Harry. I sort of guessed how you felt about her."

Harry's head wobbled on his neck. "Doesn't matter, really. She's seeing someone."

The words took a moment to land on the table and soak in for everyone.

"He'll be old news after the second date, and then you can ask her out," Ron dismissed. "You have that rule, after all."

"She's on the third with him right now." The idea made Harry's stomach protest, and he very nearly lost everything all over the table.

"Oh." Ron and Neville exchanged a concerned look that probably meant more than Harry could manage to wrap his mind around right now. The whole night was beginning to weigh down on him.

"Who... who is this bloke then?" George demanded. He looked angry now and Harry blinked at him.

"No idea," Harry grumbled. He poured himself another drink, filling the little glass all the way to the top. "We don't ever meet the other person's dates."

"You two are just... daft, you know," Ron sighed.

"I say we go hunt him down and castrate him," George cheered. He held up his glass to Neville in toast, but the other man just stared.

"Forget this tosser!" Ron turned in his chair and grabbed Harry by the shoulders. "Is she worth it?"

Harry stared at him. "I risk a lot by saying anything, Ron. I risk my partner and flat mate. I risk my... my best friend."

"I know," Ron nodded. "But is she worth the risk?"

"A million times over." The answer came with surprising clarity, and Harry felt that for the first time tonight he knew exactly what he wanted.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Neville asked.

"I just... I don't know how to tell her. How do I come out and say, 'Ginny, I think you're great. I fancy you. In fact, I more than fancy you, I might actually...'"

"You just tell her." George wobbled again in his chair, and Harry blinked the fuzziness away from the image of his friend.

"I want to tell her. I want... I want to be with her."

"Then get rid of the tosser. He's nothing to her, Harry. He's known her all of a minute. You've known her for most of her life. She's your best friend and partner. Surely you can think of a way to get under her skin. She's certainly gotten under yours." Ron looked more determined than Harry remembered in a very long time, and Harry took a small bit of courage from his friend's conviction.

"She says he's good looking and that he treats her like a girl."

The sentence made everyone freeze.

Ron scratched his head. "Er... Ginny doesn't like it when we—"

"That's what I thought," Harry protested. "She hates it when I open doors for her and pull out chairs. She hexed me once for doing it."

Harry shuddered at the memory. He'd been forced to try and eat dinner with hands swollen to twice their size. And he would have managed it too if they hadn't started flashing like neon signs at every bite.

"Well, maybe she's just..." Neville trailed off. He looked just as puzzled about the situation as Harry felt.

"I think it's my fault," Harry finally sighed. "I think that I've worked so hard to treat her like one of the blokes for so long that she doesn't see how I regard her."

"So make her see it." Neville shrugged. "It doesn't sound that hard. Start treating her like a girl."

Harry scowled and scratched his head. "Like... buy flowers for her and that?"

"Flowers, chocolate," Ron suggested. "Women like that sort of thing. She thinks you're one of her brothers; shove it in her face that you're not. Make her see that this is not some little crush, but that you... you know."

Harry contemplated it for a moment before sighing. "Do you really think I could just come out and say it?"

"Get over yourself, Harry," George snorted. "You can defeat Lord Moldysnorts but you can't tell my ickle sister that your loins burn for her?"

Harry grimaced and was just about to protest the vile comment, but Ron interrupted. "You're better for her than some bloke that none of us has ever met."

"I say we go and find them; check this bloke out," George nodded.

It was a good idea, Harry decided, even though he thought it might end with one or more of them at St. Mungo's.

"I agree," Ron nodded firmly and sloshed his glass forward. "We need to protect Ginny from unknown men who may be after only one thing."

"And make sure she sees that Harry's better for her," George continued. "Even if we *know* he's only after one thing."

"I don't know," Neville shifted uncomfortably. "I don't want to have bats fly out my nose again. They hurt."

Harry very nearly backed out of the plan then and there. He'd been hexed once before, and he didn't fancy waiting for it to wear off. Only Ginny and Hermione knew the countercharm, and neither of them were likely to be very accommodating if they found out Harry was stalking Ginny.

"She's worth it," Harry repeated softly. "Let's go."

* * *

"Shhhh!" Harry pressed his finger to his lips and hissed at the men behind him. They were giggling like a bunch of school girls and were going to get them all killed.

The shushing only made Ron and George laugh louder, while Neville plastered his hand over his mouth to keep the sound in.

"Yer gonna get us all dead, mates!" Harry warned them. "She'll hear us comin' all tha way from Sco'land!"

"Where they suppos' ta be?" George demanded again. They'd already been to three pubs in search of Ginny and her date—stopping along the way for fortifications, as George called the additional pints they drank—but still hadn't found them.

"Haven't checked the Leaky yet," Neville pointed out. "Hannah will tell me if she's there. I like Hannah. She's got huge breasts." He made two rather large, vague shapes in front of him with his hands.

Harry snorted and slapped Neville on the back. "Does she put them in yer face so's ya can't breathe?"

"Sometimes," Neville admitted. His face turned red, and Ron nearly tripped trying to hold George up from laughing so hard. "I'll Appertate righ' over there and ask her."

"Don't get distracted by the tits!" George called out. Two elderly women walking through Hogsmeade glared at the group and hurried their steps past.

"I's okay," Harry reassured them, holding up his wallet. "I'm an Aurreerrr." They hissed their disdain and ducked into Madam Puddifoots, whispering disapprovingly.

"Yep," George assured Harry with a slap on the back. "Can'na go wrong with Harry Potter along." He hiccupped in the middle of Harry's name, and Ron started laughing again.

Neville took a step away from the group and gripped his wand tightly, screwing up his face.

"Is he Apparatin' or takin' a shite?" Ron demanded.

Harry was about to relay the question to Neville when he disappeared. He shrugged instead and stared around at the village. Hogsmeade was always a nice place. Harry liked it best when it snowed, though, because the quant little cottages were all covered in white.

"Think McGonagall would have our hides if we went for a fly?" George asked. They all stared longingly at the castle in the distance. A fly sounded perfect, actually, but Harry had a feeling old McGonagall would have them all skinned and tacked to her wall by morning if they tried it. If there was a spell for doing something like that, Minerva McGonagall would be the one to know it.

Completely distracted by the idea, George began to march in that direction. Harry called after him as he slipped and slid through the snowy street. It was the crack of Neville's return Apparition that did catch George's attention.

Harry spun and blinked at Neville. He was ruffled and the whole area around his mouth was covered by bright pink lipstick.

"She's there."

Harry grinned and let out a loud whoop. George came sliding back over, nearly knocking Ron to the

ground.

"Let's go."

"Wait," Ron called out. "I think maybe we should make one of them... Portkeys, so we all go the same place."

Harry nodded at the wise decision. Then again, he'd probably agree to anything that would allow him to see Ginny right now. The desire to see her again had been building all evening, bubbling up inside him until he wasn't sure if it was the alcohol in his system charging him, or the need to touch her, smell her hair, and tell her how much she meant to him.

"I can do it," he said firmly. He pulled his wand and prepared to say the spell.

"Wait," Ron interrupted again. "I think I better do it. I'm not as pissed as Harry is."

"Are too," Harry grumbled, glaring at his friend.

"I think I shou' be the one," George slurred. He pulled his wand also.

"Yer not an Aurrreerr," Harry pointed out. "Yers would be illegaaal."

"Never stopped me befor'." George laughed loudly and waggled his eyebrows.

"We need to go," Neville whined. "We migh' miss 'em."

"A contest!" George nodded. "Tha only way. Best spell wins an' they get to make it."

Harry stared moodily at his wand and tried to think of something grandiose he could do to impress his friends. Maybe something Hermione taught him.

George shot an impressive array of sparks from his wand that formed a leprechaun who then danced a jig before fading away.

Ron conjured a rather limp looking flower that flashed different colors.

Harry dug in his pocket for a galleon. They all watched as he held it in his hand and stared at it for a long time.

"Use yer wand." Ron nudged him in the side, as if Harry had forgotten to use it completely.

"Portus," Harry hissed and the coin glowed blue. "I win!" He grinned up at the others and they all laughed.

"Let's go," Neville nodded proudly, and slapped Harry on the back.

The Portkey deposited them in a heap inside one of the empty back rooms at the Leaky Cauldron. Harry quickly untangled his limbs from the others and hurried to the door. He pressed his whole face to the crack when he opened it, searching for Ginny.

His whole heart gave a lurch when he found her in one of the booths. The Twat was sitting across from her, holding her hand on the table top. She was laughing and smiling at him.

"She's *mine*, you tosser," Harry growled. He swung the door wide to go out and teach the berk a lesson, but Ron's large hands yanked him back into the room.

"What do'ya think yer doin', Harry?"

"He's touchin' her," Harry growled and pointed at the door. "Holdin' her hand an' stuff."

"I thought we were jus' gonna watch," Neville whined, looking between the door and Harry. "Hannah'll kill me if ya star' a fight in here."

Watching didn't sound like a good plan anymore, Harry grumbled to himself. He knew he couldn't sit there and watch her smile and laugh like that with another man.

"Come on," George urged them all forward. "We'll have a pint an' then figure it out."

Ron guided Harry to a booth on the opposite side of the pub from Ginny. Harry wasn't sure his feet knew who to obey right now, anyway—did they listen to his head, which said they were just here to watch, or his heart, which told them to go over there and stomp on Ginny's date until he would never touch her again. Too many decisions, so Harry let Ron take over.

Ron stuffed him into the booth and they all sank down low, so they could just see Ginny and The Twat over the back of the upholstered booth.

"I don' like him," Ron growled. He narrowed his eyes and glared at the man. "He's all wrong for her."

"Yeah," Harry nodded miserably. "I'm better lookin'."

"Definitely," George agreed and clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm gonna invent somethin' just for him. Smarmy Git Repellant." He nodded firmly and snatched a serviette off the table. He pulled a ballpoint pen from his robes and began scribbling all over it, muttering to himself about potions ingredients. Harry watched for a moment, but all the lines made him dizzy, so he returned to watching Ginny instead.

She was beautiful in the dress she wore, with her glorious hair spilling all around her shoulders.

"She's too pretty, ya know," Harry sighed. "Everyone likes her. But I love her."

"You got it bad, mate." Ron shook his head at Harry's rambling. "But I understan'. If someone else looked at 'ermione like tha' I'd rip his lungs out."

Harry shifted uncomfortably as the urge to march over and tear The Twat's limbs off built. He tried to focus only on Ginny, rather than think of her with another man.

"I do love her." He nodded solemnly to his mates. "I don't just wanna get her in bed, ya know."

Neville made a choking sound and Ron clapped Harry on the back solidly. "We know, Harry. But yer

talkin' real loud. If ya keep it up, everyone in here will know ya fancy her."

Harry felt his face turn red, but still couldn't tear his eyes away from Ginny and how lovely she looked.

"Maybe I want her to know," he sighed and shifted higher in the booth to stare at her. "Maybe I'm tired of sittin' by while she dates every git out there. I'm the git she needs."

"Shhhhh," George shushed him and tried to get Harry to sit back down, but he couldn't quite reach him over Neville's body. "She's gonna hear us."

"I'm not wearin' bats tonigh'," Neville grumbled loudly.

"Yeah, don't get us caught, mate," Ron scolded.

Harry laughed at the image of all four of them shaking under the fear of Ginny's wrath. She really had them all under her thumb, and Harry was perfectly happy to stay there.

"I want to touch her hair," he blurted out. The light hit the red tresses just perfectly, and he sighed loudly when she tucked a strand of it behind her ear. She was completely oblivious to him pining for her across the room.

"Shut up, Harry," George demanded. "Drink yer pint."

"This was your brillian' idea," Ron scolded George.

Harry watched as The Twat paid for their meal and Ginny gathered her cloak. "I need to tell her," he said, struggling to kneel on the seat so he could climb over the back. "She's leavin'. I need to tell her."

"Harry, sit down!" Ron yelled.

Ginny must have heard them because she turned and looked right at Harry. The others ducked low in the booth and tried to pull Harry down with them. Their hands scrabbled at his clothing, but Harry slapped them away. He felt as if Ginny had cast some sort of spell at him. He was frozen, staring at her, and couldn't seem to pull his eyes away.

"Hi." He waved weakly, and Ginny furrowed her brow in confusion. Her cloak was half-draped on her shoulders. She'd been distracted by the sight of him while putting it on and never completely finished the action.

He was just about to scramble over the back of the booth and walk across the room to talk to her, to tell her that he was in love with her, and that he wanted to marry her, and have her babies, and kiss her all over, when Ron finally managed to tug him backwards.

Harry fell onto the table, spilling their pints all over him and making a huge racket. He stared up at the ceiling that spun above him.

"Tha' was close," George slurred. "She almos' saw us."

The swirling beams above him moved faster and faster, and Harry closed his eyes against the motion. A laugh burst out of him at the stupidity of it all.

Ginny had looked genuinely surprised to see him. Surprised and not mad at all. That was a good thing, right? She hadn't hexed him. She hadn't told him to leave. She'd just looked at him. If only he'd been able to get away from the table, Harry could have told her everything.

And then she would have left with *him*, not The Twat.

Chapter 2: I Need

His Sunday

He was definitely going to die. Absolutely going to die. And the only consolation was that perhaps George, Ron, and Neville would die as well. They definitely deserved it for what they'd allowed him to do last night.

Harry's head pounded, and even though he was fairly sure it was well after noon he was still in bed. Ginny had been up for hours—the groaning of the shower pipes had actually woken Harry, but he stayed frozen in place, praying death would come swiftly or unconsciousness would claim him; anything to stop the pounding in his head and the cotton-mouth that was nearly choking him.

"Morning, Sleepyhead. I suppose I really should say 'afternoon' instead."

Harry groaned in answer to Ginny. He cracked one eye open and stared at the blurry floor where his head hung off the side of the bed.

"Go'way, Gin."

The bed wiggled as Ginny climbed onto it, and Harry's stomach protested violently.

"I don't think so," Ginny laughed. "I think this is too good of an opportunity to waste. After all, how often do I get to find a completely starkers Harry Potter passed out like this?"

Harry jerked up when Ginny's hand brushed over his bare back, and he scrambled for anything to cover him. It took him a minute of wrestling with the blanket to realize that Ginny had been lying; he wasn't naked. He was at least wearing his boxers. And his socks. And one shoe.

"Evil," he groaned and pulled the blanket over his head. "Leave me 'lone."

Ginny laughed again and tried to tug the blanket off his head. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself last night."

He finally allowed her to pull the covers back, and blinked blearily up at her. "I was a complete prat," he protested.

Ginny snorted and shook her head. "Not to me, you weren't. I can't vouch for whatever debauchery you committed before you arrived at the Leaky, though."

Harry groaned and rolled onto his side, involuntarily curling closer to Ginny. She lifted a hand and ran her fingers through his hair. Harry shivered against the touch as his body responded, just like it always did when she touched him.

"I knew you needed a night out," she said. "I just hope it was worth it."

"I think it was," he guessed. His eyes slipped closed as her fingernails scratched lightly along his scalp.

"I was planning on going into the office to finish up the paperwork on the Duncan case. Since you're in no shape to come in as well, you'll owe me."

Harry bit his lip and shifted away, trying to hide how aroused he was becoming. That probably wasn't the best way to tell her how he felt about her.

"I can't move," he whined. "It hurts too much. I hate George. He started the Firewhisky last night."

Ginny chuckled and took her hand away. Harry sighed, both in loss and relief. "I'm sure I can manage to finish the file on my own. Don't forget that we're supposed to be at the Burrow tonight for dinner."

Harry groaned loudly and rolled until his erection was pressed into the mattress. "I forgot."

"Mum will kill both of us if you don't come, Harry," Ginny scolded softly. "She seems to think that I'm your keeper or something. Before I moved in you always forgot about dinners there."

It wasn't true: Harry remembered, but there were times he chose not to go because spending that much time with Ginny in such a warm, wonderful place as the Burrow was too hard.

Plus, Mrs. Weasley was always badgering him to tell her about his dates or if he'd found anyone 'special'. There was never anyone he could tell her about, and she always wore a strange look on her face before she started in on Ginny with the same questions.

"I'll be there," Harry promised. "Just gonna sleep for a bit more."

Ginny laughed and leaned down to press a kiss to his temple before she bounced the bed one final time.

"Witch," Harry groaned.

"I'll expect you cleaned and pressed by five o'clock, Potter," Ginny growled playfully from the doorway. "Or I'll tell Mum about your wild night on the town last night."

* * *

Dinner at the Burrow was just like it always was: a loud, wonderful mess with a hundred different conversations and things going on at once.

Harry wasn't sure why he expected it to be different. He'd worried all day that he might have a hard time being in the same room with Ginny, or if the things he'd told George and Ron last night might change the way they acted toward him, or toward Ginny. But his worries were unfounded. The Burrow was just as welcoming, just as chaotic as ever. It was perfect.

"Where does that child get so much energy?" Mrs. Weasley asked when six year-old Teddy finally bounded away from her to play with Victoire. The Weasleys hadn't seen the vibrant, energetic boy for a few weeks, and he had plenty to tell Mrs. Weasley about. Sometimes it amazed Harry that Teddy could talk for hours straight without seeming to take a breath. It was a bit embarrassing to admit, but there were times that Harry's ears literally hurt from listening so long. He loved the lad,

but Teddy had more energy than one person should ever have.

"I wish I knew," Harry smiled. "I'd bottle it up and sell it to the world."

"One of these days you're going to have to find a nice girl to settle down with and have some children of your own, Harry," Mrs. Weasley scolded teasingly. She patted his cheek and winked, causing Harry's face to heat. "Have you met anyone that sets your heart aflutter lately?"

Harry was saved from answering by Ron, Hermione, and George arriving through the floo. The rest of the Weasleys arrived within the next few minutes and Harry ended up with Victoire on one knee, Teddy on the other. He was chatting with Bill and Ron about some of the cases he'd been working on, while trying to keep the two children on his lap occupied and their hands out of the food that Molly was levitating onto the table.

Ginny was the last to arrive, and she drew Harry's attention immediately. She looked amazing with windswept hair and bright red cheeks. She smelled like fresh winter air, and Harry wondered if she'd been out flying.

She fluttered around the room greeting everyone, kissing children and laughing in that warm, wonderful way she had. And all of it made Harry's heart twist.

He was completely gone over her.

Harry didn't even remember what he ate for dinner because there was too much going on. Teddy and Victoire sat on either side of him and they kept him busy with question after question about his work. It seemed they had somehow gotten the idea that being an Auror involved intense games of hide and seek. In the midst of an explanation, Harry looked up to see Ginny smiling at him.

"I think their idea is better, Harry," she grinned. "In fact, think how much more enjoyable our day would be if we spent it hiding in places around the Ministry, rather than doing stacks of paperwork."

Harry chuckled and his mind automatically thought of a few places he'd like to hide with Ginny.

"I assure you it is much more boring than playing games," Harry finished off his story of what an Auror does all day and Teddy scrunched his nose.

"Maybe I don't wanna be an Auror now," he said. His proclamation brought laughter from all around the table.

"You've got time, lad." Harry ruffled Teddy's blue hair affectionately, and turned back to a conversation that Bill and Arthur were having about Gringotts.

"Are we ready for the Exploding Snap Tournament?" George asked gleefully when the dishes were finally empty on the table.

Ginny nudged Harry's foot under the table. "You up for it?"

Harry should have expected that there would be a game: there was almost every time he came to dinner at the Burrow. And he and Ginny were always partners. They hadn't lost in well over a year

now.

"You think they'll give us any challenge this time?" Harry nodded his head toward Ron and George, bringing a squawk of protest from both men.

Ginny sighed dramatically. "Not likely, but we could play just for practice, you know. More out of pity than anything."

"I'll show you pity," George said as he pushed his chair back from the table and tossed his serviette onto his plate. "In fact, I'll bet Ron and I can win tonight. I'll get the cards set up."

"Harry, go and supervise," Ginny suggested, "otherwise that git is likely to hex the cards or something equally foul."

George gasped and clutched his heart. "Are you insinuating that I cheat?"

The table erupted in snorts of laughter.

"I'm not insinuating anything," Ginny protested. "I *know* you cheat."

"Well, that's better," George nodded primly. "I don't like insinuations. If something is worth doing, it's worth doing all the way, you know?"

"Looks like we're on," Harry nodded and scooted his chair back from the table. "I'll just go... supervise."

Once George and Harry were alone in the living room, George turned and looked at Harry. "Any idea what you're doing?"

"None," Harry sighed and ruffled his hair. "Absolutely none."

"Damn," George groaned. "You two were acting so normal I'd hoped that you had drunkenly confessed all last night when you got home and that the two of you were just trying to hide your secret love affair from us all tonight."

Harry both grimaced and laughed. "I wish."

"You'll figure it out, mate," George said. "Now look the other way so I can charm these cards. It's the only way Ron and I have a shot at winning anything."

The Weasleys trooped into the room en masse, draping over every surface and conjuring chairs around the room. Once the game heated up, they'd all huddle in closer, just like they always did.

"Alright, Partner, let's show these two why we make such a good team." Ginny nudged Harry's shoulder and he stared at her for a moment before nodding. He ignored Ron's concerned look and shuffled the deck.

The excitement of the game soon took over and Harry fell into his routine of pretending Ginny was nothing more than his best friend and partner. Sometimes it was easy to do that, and tonight with her laughing and smiling, trying to ignore George's blatant cheating, was one of those times.

Harry and Ginny won the first round, but lost the second when Harry's cards exploded and singed his fingertip.

"You're not going to get us on the next one," Ginny scolded. She shuffled the cards quickly and distributed them, grinning at Harry. His heart thrummed happily in that moment, surrounded by people who loved him, people who accepted him completely and were genuinely happy. And other than the situation with Ginny, Harry couldn't ask for a better life. And for just this moment, when Ginny was laughing and her shoulder rubbed against his, Harry could pretend that she loved him the same way he loved her. He could imagine them as a couple, maybe even married with a child of their own following soon after.

"Harry! Your cards!"

Ginny's exclamation startled Harry, and he blinked down at the smoking cards in his hand. He gritted his teeth and played the next hand while trying to hold them as gingerly as possible. The play rocketed around the table, cards slapping down into the discard pile and laughter pulsing. The intense action prompted the rest of the family to gather around, cheering on whichever team was their favorite.

In the end, Harry laid his last card down right before the entire pile exploded into a cloud of green smoke. The crowd cheered and Harry was swallowed by Ginny jumping into his lap and hugging him enthusiastically.

"We did it! I can't believe we managed it." She laughed and Harry took a deep breath, trying to center himself.

Ron nudged his leg under the table and tilted his head toward Ginny. George mouthed 'kiss her', but Harry shook his head. Not with all these people around. He couldn't do something that might embarrass both of them if Ginny rejected him.

He slowly returned the hug. "We make a good team, don't we?" he asked.

Ginny pulled back and laughed. "We do. Maybe that's why we're good partners too. I'll never find another person who can play Exploding Snap as well as you do, Harry."

He had to bite his lip to stop himself from saying anything right then, because the comment seemed to be leading right into how he felt.

"We're good together," he said finally. Ginny pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, and then bounded off to celebrate their win and taunt George.

"You've got to do something about this, mate," Ron warned. "You're going to go barmy if you continue like this."

Harry snatched his glasses off his face and rubbed at his eyes. "I know. I just... I don't know when..."

"Soon," Ron scolded. He clapped Harry on the back and wandered away.

When Harry returned to the flat from taking Teddy back to his grandmother's, Ginny was talking to someone through the floo. He took a moment to stare at her behind, amazingly framed in her worn jeans, before shaking his head and calling himself a pervert. He forced himself into the kitchen and tidied the dishes while trying to decide what to do.

Perhaps it was just the afterglow of an amazing evening at the Burrow, but Harry felt closer to Ginny than ever. Maybe tonight was the night to try and talk to her about what he felt. Even the idea of saying something to her made Harry's heart beat wildly in his chest. He stood in the kitchen and rehearsed what he'd say in his head, visualizing how Ginny would run and leap into his arms, proclaiming her hidden love for him.

"Did you get Teddy home alright?"

Harry blinked at Ginny and wondered what she'd asked. She looked beautiful with her cheeks flushed and her casual jeans and jumper. As much as he'd admired the dress she wore the other day, Harry liked Ginny best when she was just like this: casual and comfortable.

"Er... yeah. Teddy's... fine. At home."

"Are you feeling alright?" She peered at him and Harry shook his head.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked.

"Brian," Ginny said as she snatched a butterbeer from the icebox. "He wanted to know my schedule this week so we could find time to go out."

"You're going out with him again." It wasn't a question even though Ginny took it that way and nodded.

"Tuesday," she smiled.

"Don't," Harry blurted. His face heated, but he pressed on. Now that he'd started talking, the words seemed to jam up in his head, all fighting for the chance to spill out his mouth. "Don't go out with him again."

"Harry!" Ginny laughed and nudged him. "What's with you? You haven't even met Brian. Why do you not like him?"

He shook his head. "I just don't like him. I think... I think you and I should go out instead."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him and then snorted in laughter. "You and I go out all the time, Harry."

"I meant... on a date," Harry explained.

"What are you on about, Harry?" Ginny rolled her eyes at him, and Harry huffed out a breath in annoyance. Was she not listening to him, or had his words all jumbled and his meaning gotten lost in them?

"I... I don't want you to date Brian. I don't want you to date anyone. You and I are good together,

Ginny. We're best friends and partners. I just think that we could be good together... like we are at Exploding Snap. I... I fancy you." He let out a shuddering breath at the release and waited for her reaction. And even though it took all the courage he had, Harry wouldn't look away from her.

Shock and confusion warred on her face before she smiled softly and moved closer. Her warm hand slid into his and she stared up at him. "I'm not going anywhere, Harry. You don't have to worry about me leaving you alone. I'm always going to be your friend."

"That's not..." Harry huffed and pulled his hand from hers before running it roughly through his hair. "You're not understanding me. I really do—"

Ginny's arms came around him, trapping him in a hug that, for the first time, was not comfortable at all. "I *do* understand, Harry. You don't want me to date because you're afraid I'll fall in love with someone and leave you alone. Like Ron and Hermione did. But I promise I'm not leaving you, Harry. You don't have to worry about that."

Harry blinked down at the top of her head, wondering how he could have mucked this up so thoroughly. Only he could take the words 'I love you' and turn them into something that meant nothing. He sighed and returned the hug stiffly.

Ginny pulled back and laid her hand on his cheek. "I may date blokes from time to time, but I'm always going to need my best friend. I'm always going to need my partner."

Harry licked his lips and weighed the idea of simply leaning down to kiss her, but Ginny relaxed her grip and moved away.

"There will always be dinners at the Burrow, Harry," she smiled, "and Exploding Snap Tournaments where we beat the pants off George, even when he cheats. You and I will always be friends. Have a good night, Harry, and try not to worry about things so much."

Harry stared as she walked out of the kitchen. He replayed the scene over in his head once more.

"I'm going to have to make you understand," he finally sighed. "I'm not your brother. I'm not just your friend and partner." There was a pregnant silence in the kitchen as Harry tested the words on his tongue. "I'm in love with you, Ginny."

His Tuesday

Harry paced in his bedroom, feeling like an absolute prat for what he was about to do. There was nothing for it, however. He'd told Ginny how he felt—well, almost—but she had simply brushed it off. She saw him as only a friend, but that needed to change.

And she was bringing The Twat here tonight to meet Harry, so it was time to bring out the heavy artillery—as Ron told him.

"She's never going to look at you the same, mate," Harry told himself in the mirror, inspecting his bare chest. He was pleased with the way he looked. He'd never be a hulking man, but he was fit.

During a moment of weakness yesterday, Harry had run to Hermione who assured him that he was

very attractive. She seemed amused that his insecurities were showing, but assured him that plenty of women found him handsome, and that Ginny simply had her mind made up about the type of relationship she and Harry shared. It was up to Harry to shake that thought free.

He'd spent all of yesterday afternoon digging through the Ministry to find clues about who Brian Matthews was. He was wealthy—some sort of business man. Matthews would have been in the same year as Fred and George had he gone to Hogwarts. He was privately tutored instead. Hermione assured Harry that it did happen from time to time with some of the half-blood families like Matthews came from.

Harry even spent the morning trailing Matthews around London. Sadly, the man didn't seem to be involved in anything illegal or illicit, so Harry was forced to leave him alone rather than haul him into the Ministry.

Matthews was tall and thin, somewhat good looking, Harry supposed. His dark hair offset his bright blue eyes, and he smiled a lot. Perhaps that's what Ginny saw in him.

"This had better work," Harry scolded his reflection. The distinctive sound of two people Apparating into the flat rang out and Harry felt his heart give a jolt.

"Harry?"

He waited almost a full minute after Ginny called before stepping out of his bedroom, a huge smile pasted on his face.

Ginny's eyes went wide as Harry trotted into the living room clad in nothing but jeans.

"Sorry, you caught me just out of the shower." He shrugged an apology, and stuck his hand in front of Matthews. "Harry Potter. Nice to meet you."

Matthews looked him up and down, his eyes going wide at the scars on Harry's torso before he shook Harry's hand. The grip was limp, and Harry was tempted to clasp down until Matthews yelped in pain. It was a childish impulse that Harry just managed to evade.

"Brian Matthews."

Harry looked over at Ginny to see her puzzled expression. She shook her head a moment later and blinked at both men.

"Er..."

"So you're the lucky bloke my girl has been seeing," Harry grinned. He slung his arm over Ginny's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Hope you're being careful. She's one of the best Aurors around, you know. One wrong move and you'll be at St. Mungo's getting it all sorted back out again."

Matthews smiled weakly at the joke, and Harry bit his tongue when Ginny ground her heel into his bare foot.

"Leave off, you prat." Ginny shrugged his arm off and moved further into Matthews' side. "What's

gotten into you today?"

"Nothing," Harry dismissed. "Where are you two off to tonight?"

"Er... just going to dinner, actually," Matthews said. He wound his hand into Ginny's, and Harry had to force himself not to pull his wand and hex the bloke to Hades and back. The two men locked gazes and the silent challenge was issued. Matthews had seen past the act and could read Harry inside and out. Ginny may be thick about Harry's feelings, but this bloke understood precisely what was going on.

"Sounds good," Harry nodded, trying to sound casual. "Oh, that reminds me. Remember that case we closed a few weeks ago?" he asked Ginny. "Heimann?"

Ginny's face lit and she grinned. "It was beautiful," she explained to Brian. "Prat of a kid was mixed up in illegal potions and was selling them to kids at Hogwarts. The father of one of the girls promised us..." Suddenly she turned to Harry. "He didn't?"

Harry grinned and pulled two tickets off the counter, holding them up in his fist. "He did."

Ginny squealed loudly and jumped forward, throwing her arms around Harry. Her touch on his bare skin made Harry shiver, but he tried to hide just how much it was affecting him. Ginny wiggled against him and then pulled back, staring in awe at the tickets.

"When?"

"Saturday," Harry laughed. "You and me, box seats at the first Harpies game of the season."

Ginny cheered and jumped in place before hugging Harry again.

"I thought... I thought we were going out on Saturday," Matthews said weakly.

Harry smirked at the man. "Sorry. The father is one of the owners of the Harpies. He offered us the tickets when we arrested Heimann. And it's the Harpies, Gin's favorite team."

"I'm sorry, Brian. Could we reschedule our date on Saturday? I have to go to this game. I can't just give up box tickets."

Brian scowled down at her. "I suppose I could try and get a ticket."

Harry fought the urge to dance in front of the man. "Er... sold out. Sorry."

"We'll try for Friday evening, then," Ginny nodded.

"Actually," Harry interrupted once more. "You and I were on the schedule at work for Saturday afternoon. I had to trade us shifts to be able to go already. We're working on Friday night now."

Ginny gave him a look that promised swift retribution both for interrupting her, and for not talking to her before he made plans, but Harry could care less. He was spending two whole days with Ginny and there was nothing The Twat could do about it.

"I'm sorry, Brian," Ginny sighed. "But... it's the Harpies."

"She's not about to miss their first game," Harry nodded. "Not after she almost—"

"Almost won tickets in a contest," Ginny said over the top of them. "Just barely missed."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her and she gave a pleading look to him. Surely Ginny had told Matthews that she almost played Quidditch professionally. The Harpies had been scouting her when she'd been injured during her last year at Hogwarts.

"Yeah, the contest." Harry nodded lamely. She obviously hadn't said a word to him.

"We'd better get going, Ginny," Matthews said. "Our reservation is for seven. It's only a few blocks walk, but I don't want to be late."

Ginny tore her eyes away from Harry and nodded absently.

"It was nice to meet you," Harry quipped just as they walked out, closing the door behind them.

Harry stood in silence, staring at where they had been standing.

"Why hasn't she told him?" he asked the room aloud. It seemed strange to him that Ginny claimed to like Matthews, yet she didn't share that part of her life. The idea made him feel both happy and sad at the same time. He was thrilled that she wasn't sharing everything with Matthews—surely that was a good sign for Harry—but sad that she didn't feel comfortable enough with the bloke she was seeing to share something so basic about herself.

* * *

After getting himself ready, Harry dropped by the Muggle florist and ordered a huge bouquet of bright red tulips. They cost him a small fortune, but the florist assured him that the flower was the perfect declaration of love.

More pounds were slipped into the palm of the head waiter to have him place the bouquet on Matthews' reserved table, and seat Harry across from where they would soon be. Money well spent. If it worked.

Harry huddled behind a large folded menu and sipped at a glass of wine. It helped to soothe his nerves.

What the hell was he doing here anyway? Ginny was really going to hex him, if she didn't kill him completely.

He heard them approach, but didn't lower his menu. If either Matthews or Ginny saw Harry the whole plan would be ruined.

"Brian! Where did these come from?"

Harry peeked one eye out from behind the paper. Ginny's face almost glowed with how wide her smile was.

"I didn't—I mean, do you like them?"

Harry swore and very nearly jerked out of his seat when Matthews took credit for the flowers.

"I've always loved tulips," Ginny said. She ran a finger along the delicate edge of one of the petals and beamed up at Matthews. Harry's heart jumped into his throat, and he had to fight to swallow it back. Would that look still be there if she truly knew who had given her the flowers?

"What does the card say?" Ginny tugged at the little square envelope, and Harry watched Matthew's face turn red.

"You don't have to... er, just... Maybe it would be better to eat first. You said you were hungry."

Harry lowered the menu fully, and watched as Ginny ignored the man's rambling and slid her finger into the envelope. She read the message and blinked at it before looking up at him.

"Believe me? What's that supposed to mean?"

Harry stood slowly and took a step across the aisle toward their table. "It means I didn't lie to you, Ginny," he said softly. "Everything I told you was the truth."

"Potter," Matthews sneered and stepped forward, trying to block Ginny from Harry's sight. Harry stood his ground. The man didn't intimidate him in the least. Harry knew he could wipe the floor with him at any given moment. "You keep showing up at the most convenient times. I think perhaps I should report you to the Aurors for stalking."

"Harry?" Ginny looked confused. She stood and looked between both men. "You sent the flowers?"

"Believe me," he repeated softly before glaring at Matthews one more time.

"Is there a problem, Gentlemen?" The waiter walked over, rubbing his hands together nervously, and looking between Harry and Brian.

"I was just leaving," Harry informed him. "I've said all I need to say tonight."

Chapter 3: I'd Love

His Thursday

"You're sure this is the place?" Harry stared down at the parchment that George slipped into his hand.

This idea was the most insane of all. It even beat out prancing around the flat in a semi-dressed state. Ginny hadn't commented on *that* yet. Unless you counted snorting tea and toast all over the table yesterday morning when Harry walked out clad only in his pants. He supposed that was commenting enough.

"Positive," George nodded. "Ron brought it to me this morning. He said Hermione talked to Ginny today at lunch, and Ginny told her where The Wanker was taking her tonight."

"Don't call him that." Harry scowled. "I don't want that picture in my head."

George laughed for a second before it dawned on him what Harry meant. "Ergh, nevermind. The Bastard. That's better."

Harry tucked the parchment away in his pocket. "You're okay with this?"

George blinked at him a moment. "With you making a fool of yourself over my ickle sister? Yeah. Completely okay with it. If Ginny wasn't so blind, the two of you could have been married with a whole tribe of little barbarians running around right now."

Harry's face heated, and he tried not to think too hard about the fact that this was Ginny's brother encouraging Harry to procreate with her.

"She's going to hex me. I just know she is."

"Probably," George grinned. "My only regret is that the rest of us won't be there to see it. Mum even asked if I had any Polyjuice potion handy. I think she wanted to sneak over there just to watch Ginny's face."

The picture made Harry smile. Having the Weasleys support him in this felt amazing. Of course, it was highly likely to backfire at any minute and end up a huge, flaming mess in his lap, but perhaps that was just part of the whole thing. After spending so many years pining for Ginny, Harry was willing to lay everything on the line just to get her to at least consider that he was being honest and sincere. That's all he was asking right now.

"I have to run if I'm going to be there on time. Any last words before I march off to my death?"

George held out his hand for Harry to shake, but then pulled him into a rough, back-slapping hug. "You go and stalk her good for us all, yeah?"

Harry snorted. "I'll give it my best."

George walked away to ring up a customer and Harry stared down at the paper in his hand.

"Just do it," Harry scolded himself. "Just effing do it!"

He closed his eyes, ignoring the gasp from the little old lady who had heard his little pep-talk while letting her grandson browse George's shelves, and Apparated away.

* * *

The theater was dark, but Harry knew where Ginny and Matthews were sitting. He'd watched them come into the theater after scouting the location this afternoon. And even though he'd reconsidered breaking up Ginny's date all day, the challenging look Matthews had given him the other day when they'd been introduced cemented the idea in Harry's mind.

Ginny was *his* and Harry wasn't about to let The Prick win this battle of wills.

Where Matthews had once been called "The Twat" in Harry's mind, he had now fully graduated to being "The Prick." It seemed much more insulting to Harry.

The room had just gone dark and the previews of upcoming films were showing when Harry, clutching an enormous container of popcorn, made his way down the aisle and into the row behind them. He apologized in hissed whispers for stepping all over people to get to the seat directly behind Ginny and Matthews.

"Sorry," he mumbled to the large woman seated right next to the empty spot when he bumped into her.

Both Ginny and Matthews seemed annoyed by the ruckus Harry had caused, but neither turned around. Harry grinned at the back of their heads and ignored the trailers playing.

"That one looks like a good one," he leaned over to the woman on his left and nodded toward the action film that was being previewed. She gave him an annoyed look, but then softened when she fully turned to look at him. Any annoyance faded away and she smiled.

"I think so, too."

Matthews rolled his shoulders in irritation, and Harry smirked. He could see the frustration in the way the man locked his jaw. This was going to be entertaining.

The woman next to him was now going to be a willing participant in Harry's plan, as she seemed to be more interested in Harry than the feature that was now starting. Harry could use that to his advantage.

"My best friend told me about this film," Harry whispered, loud enough that several people shushed him. "She said it would be interesting."

"I've seen it twice," the lady smiled and batted her eyelashes at Harry. He grinned and offered her some of his popcorn.

"I'm not normally interested in romance—"

"Will you kindly be quiet?" Matthews hissed over his shoulder. He didn't even fully look at Harry before turning back.

"Sorry." Both Harry and his new friend sniggered.

"I love a good romance," the woman continued unapologetically. "You don't see too many of 'em today, do you?"

"Not at all," Harry nodded and munched loudly on a handful of popcorn. "It's all about the big budget movies now. Spending millions of pounds on something that has to explode every few minutes just to keep your attention? What's the entertainment in that?"

"I know," she agreed.

This time it was Ginny who turned around to shush the two, but she stopped mid-scold and stared wide-eyed at Harry.

"Harry Potter," she hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi Ginny," Harry grinned and gave a little wave. "I didn't realize you were here. I thought a film sounded like a good way to pass the time."

He turned back to his new friend. "That's my friend I was telling you about!" She looked less than happy, especially since Harry stood and clambered over the seats to take the spot next to Ginny.

"Look, there's a seat right next to you."

"Harry, I—"

"We're on a *date*, Potter, in case you didn't recognize it," Matthews hissed. The people around them groaned loudly, and some of them even suggested that the three take their discussion out to the lobby.

"Well, I won't bother you then," Harry shrugged and sat back in his new chair, munching popcorn. He tipped the bucket back over his shoulder, offering the woman some. She stared grumpily between him and Ginny for a minute before taking a handful. Harry unleashed his best smile on her and heard Ginny snort.

"You're not sitting next to me," Ginny protested, rather loudly. Harry shushed her and her eyes narrowed dangerously. It was all he could do not to erupt in laughter right there.

"It's a perfectly good seat." Harry wiggled his behind into it and rested his head on the back while staring up at the screen.

Ginny was agitated; he could tell by the way she stared straight ahead and crossed her arms over her front. She didn't even let The Prick hold her hand like he had been before.

Everyone was quiet for a minute, and Harry forced himself to get lost in the scene. He counted inside his head, and just as The Prick reached for Ginny's hand, Harry tilted the bucket her way.

“Popcorn?”

The man next to him had apparently had enough. “Do you know how much my ticket cost me? I’ll be damned if I let you talk through the whole thing.”

“Sorry,” Harry grinned, although he wasn’t contrite about it at all. He’d gladly refund the entire theater the price of their tickets if he could see Matthews grind his teeth once more, and have Ginny growl at him in that low, dangerous way.

The movie continued with the fallen hero crying over his long-lost love as he lay bleeding and broken on the floor.

“That’s not very realistic,” Harry whispered as he leaned toward Ginny. “In real life, the bloke would confess his love, and the bird would drop him on his arse, saying she didn’t believe him.”

Harry’s popcorn nearly went flying when Ginny stood abruptly and knocked his side. “Out!” She pointed toward the aisle. Harry pretended to be contrite while he was laughing inside.

“Uh oh,” his new friend giggled in the row behind him. “I’ll hold your place.”

“Thanks,” Harry laughed and handed her the popcorn. “Hold that for me too, will you?”

Ginny stood in the aisle with her arms crossed in front of her, glaring at Harry while he tried to gingerly make his way out.

“What the hell are you doing here, Harry?” Ginny exploded once he reached her and more people hissed at them to be quiet.

Harry took Ginny’s arm and guided her up the aisle toward the lobby. “If you’re going to be loud, Ginny, we probably ought to go out. These people are trying to enjoy a film.” It was hard not to laugh when Ginny jerked her arm away from him and stormed off. Harry glanced over his shoulder to see his new friend give a wave and Matthews scowl at him.

Ginny looked less than amused when Harry exited. Obviously, she didn’t think much of Harry’s plan for how to spend an evening.

“Explain.”

“I thought a film sounded nice tonight—”

“Do *not* lie to me, Harry Potter.” Ginny leaned in closer to him and poked violently at his chest. “You’re here only to make things awkward for me. If this is your plan to try and get me to stop seeing Brian, it’s ridiculous. I know you’re worried that I’m going to leave you alone, but—”

“Don’t be stupid,” Harry sighed. He rubbed at the bruise that was forming where she’d dug her fingertip, and glanced around at the people who were beginning to watch the argument. “You know that’s why I’m here. I’m trying to make you understand that I fancy you, Ginny.”

“By following me and my date everywhere?” she yelled. “That’s what the restaurant was about? Is that what happened the other night at the pub too? At first, I thought it was just coincidence that

you ended up there at the same time. But you've turned into some sort of... stalker!"

"Perhaps if you believed me the first time I told you I fancied you, then I wouldn't be forced to follow you around and make sure you don't end up doing something stupid." He grabbed her hand when she swiped at him and tugged her closer.

Ginny struggled for a moment, but then stopped as she stared into his eyes. There was a spark of attraction between them that Harry knew Ginny felt. He was just about to lean in and kiss her when Matthews cleared his throat from behind Ginny.

"The film has already started, Ginny. Are we going back inside?"

Ginny's eyes went wide and she pulled away. Harry swore and ran his hand through his hair.

"Are you going back inside, Harry?" Ginny asked. She sounded more composed now, and Harry wished for just a minute that he could make her yell once more. The way her cheeks flushed, and the way she moved in closer made him want to do it all over again.

"It seems I have a date in there," he nodded toward the closed door and smirked.

Ginny rolled her eyes and turned to Matthews. "I'm not going back in now."

"Fine," Matthews nodded and glared at Harry. "We'll go somewhere else."

Harry returned the glare. "I'll be sure to tell you how it ends."

"Your date or the film?" Matthews challenged.

"Both." Harry shrugged and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "She seemed into me."

The humor in the statement caught Ginny, and amusement warred for dominance in her expression. Harry could always make her laugh.

"Enjoy the movie, Harry."

"I will. Don't do anything stupid, Ginny," he warned. She looked as if she might just challenge him back, but Matthews slipped his arm over her shoulders and turned her away.

Chapter 4: If You Say

His Saturday

Harry couldn't even say what happened in the first half of the Quidditch game. He knew the Harpies were winning, because the crowd was screaming loud enough. All that Harry could focus on was Ginny, sitting next to him.

It had been six days since he confessed his feelings for her, and Harry couldn't stop reliving her words. He'd been replaying every minute of the week, wondering if there was something more he should have done to convince her that he was genuine, and what he felt for her was real.

"Can I ask you a question without you getting mad at me?"

She hesitated, and Harry stared out at the pitch, looking all over for the Snitch. He finally found it hovering near the base of one of the stands across the pitch. The jerky movement of the ball alerted him, but neither Seeker seemed to be anywhere near seeing it.

"I can't promise an answer until I know the question."

Harry tore his eyes from the fluttering golden ball and stared at her. "And you'll answer honestly?"

"If I can." She fidgeted in her seat, but Harry believed her. She'd never lied to him in the past.

"Why didn't you tell Matthews about playing Quidditch?"

"Because I didn't play Quidditch," Ginny sighed. She rubbed her eyes and blinked out at the field. "I'm not sure why I didn't say anything to him about it."

"It was your dream," Harry said softly. "And you would have been brilliant. I would have come to see every single game." He would have. He knew that much. Work be damned; if Ginny had been playing, Harry would have worked any shift he could just to be able to see her.

"You wouldn't have made it to every game," she laughed. There was no humor in the sound, though, and Harry thought he might just be breaking through to her. Finally.

"I would have tried," Harry insisted. The idea that Ginny didn't share such an important part of her life made him sad. If you loved someone, you should be able to tell them everything about you—your dreams, your fears, and your failures, along with your triumphs.

"It just didn't seem like something important to tell him. Some dreams should remain in the past, you know."

Harry stared at her for a long minute. "Seems to me that if you were really serious about this bloke you'd want him to know everything about you."

"No one knows everything about me," Ginny denied.

I do. How much he wanted to tell her that, show her that he loved her enough to pay attention to the big things, as well as the little things.

He knew how crushed she was when the chance to play Quidditch faded from her future. He knew that she still listened to every Harpies game through the small wireless they had hidden in their office. He knew that she still had the rejection letter from the Harpies, and that she still read from it once in awhile.

He knew how she took her tea—piping hot with only a drop of honey—and how she ate her toast—marmalade only, no butter. He knew she hated currants, and her mother’s mince pie, but loved the taste of lemon tarts.

He knew she preferred wearing long pants to shorts, because she hated the freckles on her knees, and that if she could walk around barefoot all the time, she would be truly happy.

He knew everything.

“I know a lot,” he said. “You could save yourself a lot of time with all these blokes, and just go out with me.”

“You’re a prat, Harry,” she laughed. “I told you I’m not going anywhere. You don’t have to worry about—”

Something deep inside him burst, and Harry very nearly Apparated out. He turned and looked at her, truly looked at her as if was the first time he was seeing her.

“You never did really see it, did you?” The revelation was a slap to the face. No matter how transparent he’d been through the years, no matter how many times he’d made a fool of himself in front of her... she hadn’t seen it. Not for what it truly was, anyway. The thought shed light all through his body and made his skin tingle.

Ginny gaped at him, and her mouth opened and closed several times.

“What I felt for you, what I *feel* for you,” he continued “All this time, I thought you were just trying to be nice, trying not to rudely reject me because you could never love me, but you really, truly never saw it.”

With one last look out over the pitch, Harry drained the last of his butterbeer. He needed to get away from here. He needed to be somewhere where he could think this through and decide just what he was going to do next.

He stood slowly and picked up his cloak and hat.

“Harry, wait—”

“I think maybe I’ve waited enough,” he said honestly. He didn’t mean to say it aloud, but now that it was out, he couldn’t make himself take it back, because it was real.

“You can’t be serious,” she whispered.

Harry stopped moving toward the door to the box. His fists clenched by his side until his hands hurt. Perhaps no matter how hard he tried she would never see.

“What if I am?” he asked. “What if I’ve been serious about this from the first time I turned red in front of you? What if I never really gave up on you? What if all this time you’ve looked at me like a brother, but I’ve really been someone who was stupid enough to fall in love with someone who could never love them back?”

“You... you’re like a brother to me, Harry.”

The words were a blow, knocking the wind out of him and filling his whole body with fury. He growled low in his throat and dove for her, roughly tugging her against him, and pressing his lips onto hers.

The kiss was fire and ice at the same time. It sent a charge that woke his whole body to everything he’d been feeling for years, and feeling only for seconds. He was short of breath when he pulled back, yet wanted nothing more than to crush her lips with his again, and keep kissing her until she understood—really understood—just what he could feel for her.

“I have *never* wanted to be your brother, Ginny.”

The words tore from his throat, and Harry knew he needed to leave. He had to get away from this place and away from Ginny. Everything was just too poignant, too charged to deal with it right now.

Every touch of her skin on his, every look she gave, burned to his core, and Harry thought he might just explode if he stayed another minute.

So he left. He gathered his cloak, pulled his knit hat down over his head, and Apparated out.

* * *

The flat seemed empty and desolate when he arrived. The red tulips that Harry had given Ginny were sitting on the table, and he walked forward until he could reach out and touch the edge of one of them.

“No wonder you didn’t understand,” he said softly.

The urge to talk to someone grew as the minutes clicked away on the clock and Ginny didn’t follow him. A part of him wished she would simply show up so they could talk this out, or argue, or even kiss some more. Anything would be better than standing in the flat alone.

“I can’t be here right now,” he told the flowers. “I can’t...” He trailed off, not really understanding why he needed to explain anything.

He Apparated to the landing outside Ron’s flat. He knew Hermione was probably here; Ron was working, covering Harry’s shift at the Ministry, actually, but Hermione had Saturdays off.

In truth, he didn’t know what he was doing here, other than he always came to Ron and Hermione when he needed someone to talk to.

“Harry!” Hermione seemed pleased to see him, until she remembered where he was supposed to be. “What happened?”

“Can I come in? Or should I just spill my troubles here on your doorstep?” Harry asked as he glanced behind him.

Hermione tugged him in by the wrist, and shut the door after him. “Tell me everything that happened,” she said while she pulled at his cloak and stole his hat. She charmed a stain off the cloak and hung it up near the door.

Harry stared around at the tidy flat and wondered how on earth Ron and Hermione actually thought no one believed they lived together. Ron would never keep his flat this clean.

“Nothing happened.”

“Don’t lie to me, Harry,” Hermione scolded. “Sit down, and I’ll make us some tea.”

“No, I really mean it. Nothing happened.” He shrugged and sank into the sofa, laying his head along the back. “I’ve told her everything, Hermione, and it doesn’t matter. She really, honestly doesn’t see me romantically at all.”

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment before she levitated a tray full of biscuits and tea over to settle in front of him on the low table. “Tell me what she said exactly.”

Harry huffed out a tired breath and closed his eyes. “I realized something today. I always thought... I always thought that she just didn’t want to embarrass me. She never said anything about me fancying her while we were growing up. I thought she was embarrassed to have me sniffing around. But it’s more than just that. She really never saw me as someone she could be interested in. I was always just her brother’s friend. She... she told me that I’m like her brother, Hermione.”

“I’m sorry, Harry. I really thought...” Hermione stopped speaking and scowled down at the biscuit she’d been nibbling on. “What did you say when she told you she saw you like a brother?”

Harry felt his cheeks turn red, and stared up at the ceiling. The memory of the kiss was almost as good as the actual event. Harry had never kissed anyone with so much emotion behind it. He’d kissed girls just for fun. He’d kissed them to forget about Ginny. He’d kissed them to try and help himself get over Ginny. And none of it had worked, because the moment his lips met Ginny’s he knew it was the last kiss he ever wanted to have.

“I kissed her.”

Hermione gasped and choked on the bit of shortbread she’d just put in her mouth. “Er... wow.”

“And I told her that I have never wanted to be her brother.”

He couldn’t help but smile. It was funny, actually. Ginny’s expression when he’d kissed her was more shocked than he could ever remember seeing her. The smile turned into a chuckle that rolled up from his belly and burst out of him. Hermione seemed surprised, but the more he laughed, the more she smiled. Eventually, they were both tipped toward each other on the sofa, shaking with

laughter.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry," she said, finally drying her tears. "I don't mean to laugh."

"I started it," he dismissed her concern and snatched a biscuit from the tray. He contemplated it for a minute before stuffing it in his mouth. "And it is sort of funny. It's taken seven days, Hermione, for me to get this far. If you told me when I was thirteen that I'd still be in the same place ten years from then, still in love with the same witch, still no closer to anything, still thinking about her when I..." He trailed off and shoved another shortbread in his mouth.

Hermione cleared her throat. "I'm sorry we let you flounder for so long, Harry. One of us should have done something."

"Like what?" Harry scoffed. "It was always up to me. Ginny didn't... she didn't see, Hermione."

"I think she saw more than you think, but... Well, I'm not sure what went through her mind in those years," Hermione sighed. "She and I weren't always as close as we are now."

"I'm not asking you to break a confidence." Harry shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. Was it only days ago that Ginny was making the same motions along his scalp? And now he'd probably ruined that forever. She was going to move out of the flat and request a new partner at work. After all her promises not to leave him alone, Harry was afraid that was truly going to happen now. He'd just ruined everything.

And yet, he couldn't imagine not telling her now that it was out. There was a weight off his shoulders that had been there a very long time. If Ginny never spoke to him again, if she was never able to consider him as anything more than Harry Potter, Harry would know that he'd done everything he could do. He'd held nothing back.

"I don't even know why I'm here, honestly," Harry said.

"I'm glad you came," Hermione said as she reached forward and took his hand in hers. "No matter what, Harry, Ron and I will always be here for you."

"I know."

"Because I love you like a brother," Hermione continued with a mischievous smile. When she didn't continue, Harry narrowed his eyes.

"I'm not kissing you, Hermione."

She laughed. "Good. I was testing you. I thought perhaps it was some sort of curse or something."

Harry sank lower in the sofa and relaxed fully into it. "Afraid not. That was all my own prathood."

"You're not a prat, Harry."

"Ask Ginny if I am," Harry quipped. "She called me a prat today."

"She didn't mean it. Not in a bad way," Hermione explained. "I think you gave her a lot to think

about today. I know you've been telling her that you fancy her for days and days, but this really put things in perspective for her. Now she can't misunderstand your meaning."

Harry sighed and took his glasses off. He pressed his fingers into his eyes. "I feel better, you know, but worse at the same time."

"That makes sense, actually. You've carried that secret around for a very long time. And you've lived with the consequences of carrying it—those can be harder than keeping the secret, I think."

Harry nodded. He really didn't want to slip into a melancholy mood about this whole thing. He'd spent too long living in that space, and he didn't want to go back. No matter what, Harry's life had changed forever. Now it was just time to wait and see where the pieces fell.

"Do you want to stay for dinner?" Hermione asked finally. "Ron should be home soon."

He thought about it for a long minute before nodding. "That sounds great, actually. I haven't been good company for a long time have I?"

"We understood," Hermione pulled him to his feet, and they cleared the tea away before moving into the kitchen. "You were doing everything you could at the time just to stay..."

"Alive," Harry supplied the missing word, and it made Hermione cringe.

"You were always alive, Harry," she scolded softly. "But I know what you mean. The thought of Ron not understanding what I feel for him makes me..."

"It makes you sick in your stomach," Harry explained, and pulled the vegetables Hermione had taken from the icebox toward him. "And yet you still love them enough that you can't imagine giving up on them."

They were both quiet for a time, chopping vegetables and cooking meat. At times one of them would nudge the other, or block their way when they moved around the kitchen, bringing teasing and some laughter, but they mostly worked in companionable silence.

"Hello, love," Ron cheered from the living room when he got home.

"Thanks," Harry called back, "good to see you too, but next time I could do without the term of endearment. And if you grab my arse when you come in here I'll hex you."

Ron snorted and joined them in the kitchen. "You're too ugly to grope, you git."

Harry laughed and moved out of the way to let Hermione through. He turned back to the pan on the stove while they greeted each other.

"Do I want to know why you're here right now instead of at the game?" Ron asked as he stole a bit of dinner.

"Nope," Harry answered promptly.

Ron studied him a minute before clapping him on the shoulder. "Good enough for me, mate."

"Boys," Hermione huffed and rolled her eyes. Ron hopped up on the counter, and they talked about his day, everyone carefully avoiding mentioning Ginny or the Quidditch match.

Harry was grateful for his friends. They really were the best. They seemed to know that he didn't need to talk about it anymore, but simply needed a distraction, something to laugh about and someone to be there. And they provided all of that and more.

The sound of the floo activating took Hermione away, but Harry and Ron dished up dinner side by side and laughed about everything and nothing. When Hermione returned, she wore a concerned expression on her face.

"What's wrong?" Ron demanded. "Did something happen? Is it the family?"

Hermione looked at him and then at Harry.

"It's okay, Hermione," Harry nodded as he understood what was going on: Ginny had just flooded. "If she needs you..."

"I don't want to leave if—"

"I'll be fine." Harry shook his head and motioned toward Ron. "Ginny is your friend, too, and if she needs you... Besides, this git will keep me company. Right?"

Ron looked between them and opened his mouth, presumably to argue, but then closed it with a snap. "Yep. We'll be fine. Just a couple of blokes having dinner. We'll probably forget the serviettes and not use the silverware, but we'll manage."

Hermione scowled at him and then threw herself at Harry. "I don't want you to think I'm choosing sides, or abandoning you."

"I understand, Hermione," he assured her with a squeeze. "I'm really not angry. I'm not upset. I'm not... well, I'm not really anything."

"If you're sure..."

"Hermione, just go," Ron groaned. "We've managed without you before."

"You have no tact, Ronald Weasley." Even though she scolded, Hermione still kissed him goodbye. "I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"I know where the bed is," Ron laughed. He glanced up at Harry who smirked and took a bite of his dinner. Hermione gave Ron a significant look that Harry knew all too well. He'd never heard her vocalize it, but he knew it meant 'take care of Harry because he doesn't take care of himself, make sure he's eating enough, and wearing clean underwear, and don't let him brood too much.' That look had happened a lot over the years.

And Harry appreciated it.

"I thought she'd never leave," Ron sighed and fell back onto the sofa. "Now we can eat and watch the telly at the same time."

Harry snorted and kicked his shoes off, propping his feet on the coffee table. "Sounds perfect."

"You know if you want to talk..."

"I don't," Harry shook his head. "I've talked too damn much the past seven days."

Ron gave a firm nod and mashed his thumb on the remote to turn the telly on.

* * *

Hermione wasn't home when Harry left. He and Ron watched several programs before Harry finally heaved himself from the sofa.

"You know you can stay here," Ron pointed toward the sofa. "It's not the most comfortable thing, but it'll do in a pinch."

"Thanks, but I think I'll be fine at home." Harry chuckled at Ron's doubtful look.

"Are you really going to be alright?"

Harry hesitated in answering. The past few hours he'd been able to put Ginny aside in his mind. He hadn't forgotten about anything, but he'd been able to laugh and spend time with Ron without worrying that thoughts of Ginny might take over completely. The real test would be when Ginny decided what she wanted to do. The Quaffle was on her side of the pitch now, and Harry was the one waiting. If she decided that she wanted nothing to do with him, Harry was going to have some tough decisions to make. Ideally, he wanted to show up at the flat and have Ginny there waiting to confess her hidden feelings for him, but he knew that wasn't going to happen.

"I will be," he nodded, "one day."

Ron gave a pained look. "I warned you back when you were thirteen that she was trouble, mate."

Harry snorted. He vaguely remembered the conversation. A part of him wished he'd been able to believe Ron enough to put the feelings behind him. It felt like a betrayal the moment the thought entered. He couldn't discount what he felt because it was real; it was a part of what made him Harry Potter. Like it or not, Harry Potter was in love with Ginny Weasley.

"I still wouldn't change it," Harry shook his head. "Even with all that I've gone through."

Ron was quiet before nodding. "I understand. We love who we love."

"Being in love with your best friend is not for the feint of heart." Ron shook his head at Harry's comment. "Can you imagine yourself in love with someone other than Hermione?" Harry asked.

"No," Ron answered automatically. "It's part of what makes me who I am."

Harry nodded firmly. "I can't stop myself from loving her, even if she never loves me back. A part of me will always be that person. And if she doesn't want to take a chance on what we could have together, it's going to hurt. It's going to hurt like hell. But one morning I'll wake up and it won't hurt as much. I might even be able to find someone to make it hurt a little less, but I'm not ever

going to be able to forget her. There will always be the 'what if' of us. I had to let her know."

"I know." Ron nodded solemnly. "And for what it's worth, I think she's a bloody git if she doesn't take a chance."

Harry smiled. "Thanks."

"What're you going to do?" Ron asked.

"Don't know," Harry answered honestly. "Wait, I guess."

Ron was quiet. He looked like he wanted to say more, but finally nodded. "Have a good night."

"You too."

The flat disappeared around him and his dark living room materialized. Either Ginny wasn't home or she was already in bed.

Harry stared at the tulips as he walked by, and noticed that they needed water.

"I'm still here waiting too," he commiserated. He used *Aguamenti* to fill the vase, and then wandered slowly down the hall. Ginny's door was closed and there was no light on at the bottom. He paused by the side of it and pondered knocking, but what would he say if she answered?

'Hi. Sorry I kissed you earlier and shoved how I feel about you in your face, but it's really your own fault for not noticing when I make a complete prat of myself for ten whole years, or more, and for not realizing that I'm telling you the truth. I really do love you, by the way. Night.'

Yep. Complete prat again.

His hand hovered in air before falling to his side. Ginny probably needed time to process what all of this meant to her. Harry knew if the situation were reversed, he'd definitely need some space to deal with the changes to his life that the confrontation would bring.

Harry didn't even bother turning on a light when he entered his bedroom. He stripped to his boxers and climbed in between the cold sheets. His glasses were set on the table next to the bed, and Harry rubbed his eyes until bright spots shined in them.

"I'm not going to sleep at all," he mumbled up to the ceiling. Too many thoughts ran through his head to be able to rest peacefully, anyway. He curled around the extra pillow, pulling it tight to him and tried to think of anything that would help him drift away.

Chapter 5: You To Want Me

Her Saturday

"That's the last of it, Mum," Ginny called out as she set the basket of laundry on the table in the kitchen. It smelled of clean, crisp air and sunshine. And even though it was threatening to snow any day now, Ginny could understand her mother's desire to get that one last batch of laundry dried by the air today, rather than magically dried. The jumpers and t-shirts never smelled the same when they were dried with a wand.

"Thank you, Ginny dear." Her mother's cheeks were red from the cold, and she lowered the hood on her cloak and ran her fingers through her hair. It wasn't the brilliant red it had once been, but Ginny thought her mother looked wonderful. At least she could smile again. There were times right after the war that Ginny wasn't sure she'd ever see another warm, Molly Weasley smile.

"Are you off, or do you have time for tea?"

"I have time," Ginny nodded. She really should be getting home to get ready for her date. Brian had said six. But that was still hours away, and Ginny knew she'd be fine to simply pull on a jumper and run a brush through her hair. She might even twist it up; Brian had complimented her neck the other day, maybe he'd like to see a bit more of it.

Her face heated as the next thought came into her head. She wouldn't even be opposed to him getting a much closer view of it, actually. But it was far too soon for that. They'd only shared a few kisses, after all, and thinking of much more was a bit... forward. It excited her, though. There hadn't been many men she'd shared even her kisses with. A few.

"Since your father is off with Bill today, it'll just be us girls for tea." Her mother giggled like a young girl, and Ginny laughed.

"Can we have biscuits right from the box?" Ginny asked guiltily. That had been one of their guilty little pleasures on Ginny's last year home before leaving for Hogwarts. There were many of these little mother/daughter moments that they shared before Ginny set off into the world to make her way.

"I'm sure no one will mind."

Once they were settled in the deep window seat that was tucked away in the far corner of the living room, Ginny dove into the box of biscuits and crunched happily on the little lemon flavored ones.

"Things are going well at work?"

Ginny nodded and chewed faster to empty her mouth before she spoke. "Things are great. Harry and I closed a case just the other day."

"Dear Harry," her mother sighed and nibbled on a raspberry biscuit. "I do worry so about him. The poor boy doesn't take nearly good enough care of himself."

Ginny smirked at the look on her mother's face. She'd seen it there countless times over the years. Harry rankled under that look at times, because it usually meant that the formidable Molly Weasley was going to check to make sure behind his ears were clean, or pinch his side to see if he'd been eating enough and if she could feel his ribs. Sometimes it meant she was going to get him to take out the Grocer's daughter or someone equally horrifying. It was all amusing to Ginny to watch, but she knew how Harry felt. If Harry wasn't the target of the nitpicking then Ginny was, and she much more preferred to see Harry squirm trying to get out of Molly's sights than do it herself.

"Harry's doing fine, Mum," Ginny corrected. "He's a little..." She trailed off, trying to find the right word for what she thought Harry was being lately. "Tired," she inserted, knowing it didn't fit right, but the accurate term evaded her. A picture of him lying on the sofa and staring unseeingly at the telly came into her mind.

It wasn't depression, she thought, or even melancholy. Perhaps more of the second than the first, although Ginny wasn't sure quite what was going on with her friend. He was just as energetic as ever while they were working, and was always enthusiastic about doing something together, but he'd been... down lately too.

"Well you make sure he's not overworking himself, and that he's getting enough sleep."

"I'm not his wife," Ginny snorted. "We just share a flat."

Her mother's lips pinched together tightly and Ginny knew she'd said the wrong thing. The whole flat sharing thing was a touchy subject, and Ginny knew the words that were coming next. They always came next.

"Yes, I know, even if I don't approve. But you're his best friend, Ginny, and he listens to you. He occasionally listens to Hermione and Ron still, but mostly he listens to you." She got a strange look on her face this time when she said it, one that Ginny didn't know the meaning behind.

"I'll do my best." Ginny shrugged her acceptance of the job.

"And make sure he remembers that we're having dinner here tomorrow evening."

"I'll remind him," Ginny nodded.

"Now, are the two of you seeing anyone new?"

Ginny fought the urge to roll her eyes. This was another question that she expected. At least this time she had an answer.

"Harry hasn't dated anyone in months," she dismissed. "But I met someone. We're going out again tonight, actually."

The strange expression spread across her mother's face again: tight lips, wrinkling at the corners of her eyes. It faded into a pleased smile as her mother patted her hand. "Tell me about this young man."

"Well, his name is Brian, and we've gone out twice already."

"And tonight is your *third*? What happened to the two date rule?"

Ginny scoffed. "It was a joke between Harry and I that went a bit far, actually. I think it's more Harry's way of keeping himself away from witches that are after his name and a headline in the paper than anything."

"I can't blame the poor boy," her mother shook her head sadly. "Can you imagine how hard it must be for him to find someone he's comfortable enough to share his life with? Someone he can simply be himself around and share a laugh with?"

Ginny bristled at the idea of Harry being comfortable with anyone. She couldn't say why it bothered her. Maybe because she was so comfortable with him. They were best friends and shared everything.

"I'm not sure if he'll ever find anyone, Mum. Harry doesn't like to open himself up at all. Even Ron and Hermione probably don't know everything about him."

"You seem to know more."

The statement made Ginny scowl as she tried to decide the intent behind it. "Of course I do. We're best friends and we live together. He'll find someone," she said finally. "I think he's just tired of dating for a bit. He goes through these phases where he'll date everything that walks by, and then not at all for a while. He'll find someone to turn his head."

"And what about Brian?" her mother asked with a smile. "Does he turn your head?"

"He does," Ginny grinned.

* * *

By the time Ginny made it to the flat, she was already running late. She took a quick shower, and brushed off Harry's offer to watch a program with him.

Trousers and a nice shirt that exposed just enough of her neck would be perfect tonight, and Ginny hurriedly pulled them on while she searched for her shoes. One was found near the door and she slid it on.

She hobbled down the hallway, looking under discarded clothing and Daily Prophets for the wayward shoe. This place was a disaster and if she ever got more than a minute or two she should clean it. Harry obviously showed no interest in doing so.

"Anything I can help you with?"

He sounded amused as he slouched on the sofa in his worn track pants and t-shirt, thumbing through a Quidditch magazine that he'd read at least a dozen times, and watched her crawl along the floor searching for the shoe.

"My shoe," she grumbled. "I can't find it and I'm going to be late." She looked away from him and stuck her head under the edge of the sofa. Definitely need to clean, she told herself when all she

found was a dirty sock of Harry's, and more Quidditch magazines. "I can't imagine where that got off to."

It wasn't in the living room; that was for sure. Ginny grumbled as she walked back down the hallway and dove into her wardrobe, pulling out shoe after shoe, searching for the match.

She didn't want to be late. She liked Brian, and didn't want to give him the impression that she wasn't interested. She was definitely interested. He was the first bloke in quite some time that didn't flinch or get that strange pinched look on his face when she told him she was an Auror. He actually looked impressed, and was interested in what she did every day. That was a change from the men whose eyes bulged and they hurried through the date simply to be rid of her.

The shoe was missing and Ginny glared at the empty floor of the wardrobe, knowing she was going to have to change now. She pulled the shirt off over her head and tossed it in the direction of the bed before reaching into the closet. Her hand settled on the soft fabric of the only dress she owned. It was not too formal, and had no frills at all, actually. She held it up for just a moment before sliding the zip down and pulling it on. The anticipation of seeing Brian's face when he saw her tonight gave a thrill, and Ginny hurriedly tugged her trousers off.

"Found it yet?"

Harry leaned against her door and Ginny sighed in relief. She wouldn't have to magic the back zipper up after all.

"I decided to change completely. Zip me up?" She turned and presented the open zipper to him. He didn't move at all for a moment, and Ginny looked at him over her shoulder, wondering what his problem was. He knew how to work a zipper, didn't he?

"Sorry, was thinking about something else." He jerked into action and slid the zip up her back, causing a shiver to go through her whole body when his finger brushed her skin.

"I'm so late," she grumbled. She untwisted her hair—the messy upsweep just wouldn't work with this dress—and ran her fingers through it.

"Then stay home," he suggested. "It's not like you have to dress up to be here with me. We'll order take away and throw popcorn at the telly when we argue with the characters."

Ginny smiled. "As fun as that sounds, I do really want to go out tonight." She snatched her heels from the floor and pulled them on.

"Go out with me. I can be ready fast and we'll go out for dinner. We'll do whatever you want."

The suggestion took her by surprise and Ginny laughed. Harry was always trying to get her to do things with him. He really needed to find himself a girlfriend. Not just a date now and again, but a real, honest girlfriend that he could do things with. She patted his shoulder as she walked by. He'd hate it if she suggested finding someone. He always scoffed at the idea.

"You can't be that lonely, Harry," she joked. "Go and pick up someone at the pub."

"Why are you going out with Benny in the first place?" Harry asked. "I mean, what happened to your two date rule? You've already been out with Benny twice last week."

Ginny nearly choked on her toothbrush when Harry got Brian's name wrong twice. She had the feeling that he'd done it on purpose, but couldn't imagine why. He must just be in one of his moods again.

"Because I like *Brian*, Harry," she explained. "And the rule was always more about guidelines, you know, rather than absoluteness."

"Yeah, but what makes this one different?" Harry's voice.

Ginny left the bathroom and studied him for a moment. He was leaning against the wall, scowling at the floor. Definitely one of his moods.

"Brian is nice," she shrugged. "He likes Quidditch, and isn't intimidated that I'm an Auror. He's funny and easy to talk to."

Harry mumbled and Ginny told a story about Brian on their first date. He'd been so funny, pointing out things as they walked through Diagon Alley that made her laugh. Harry seemed to be ignoring her.

"And he's good looking, always dressed nicely, you know. And he... he makes me feel like a girl." Ginny shrugged. She wasn't exactly sure what the last part meant, but now that it was out, she felt it was true. Brian was nice, and when she was with him, there was no doubt that he knew she was a woman. He always told her how attractive she was, and didn't treat her like another one of the boys. She got plenty of that at work and while growing up.

"I have to run." Ginny grabbed cloak and wand. Underneath her cloak was her shoe from earlier. Ginny glared but dismissed it. Far too late to worry about things like that now. "Try not to sit here alone all night, yeah?"

She laughed and pressed her lips to Harry's cheek before Apparating away.

* * *

"Can I at least take you home tonight?" Brian asked. His smile made Ginny warm inside, and she looked down to where his fingers played with hers on the table.

"I don't know," she answered doubtfully. "I told you that Harry and I have that agreement..."

"I know," he sighed. "I still don't fully understand. It's your flat just as much as it is his."

Ginny scowled. She wasn't quite sure why the idea of letting Brian take her home didn't sit well with her. It wasn't as if he was going to start showing up unannounced and bother Harry. He wasn't like some of the girls that Harry dated. That's one reason they'd established the rule of no dates at the flat—so that the fangirls that Harry dated wouldn't show up at all times of the day. Plus, Ginny didn't fancy walking in on anything, and Harry felt the same. It was just a good rule all the way around.

"It is, but Harry's my friend, Brian. And he deserves a little privacy."

Brian nodded, but Ginny wasn't sure he did understand. When she'd first told him her flat mate was Harry Potter, Brian had scoffed. People just didn't hang around with Harry Potter. They didn't watch the telly with him, or scold him to clean up his mess. Harry Potter was... he was a legend. Brian's words rattled through her head, sounding like everyone else's reaction when they heard she was friends with Harry Potter.

That's what everyone thought, but Ginny knew that Harry was so much more than what everyone pictured. And less, at the same time. Harry was human. He was moody and stubborn. He had the ability to make her laugh at the most inopportune times, and he was the best friend she could imagine ever having, but he was far from perfect.

"It's getting late and I have to work tomorrow."

Brian seemed reluctant to end the date, and Ginny could understand. They'd had a wonderful time talking about all sorts of things.

"What about a walk through part of London?" Brian asked. He didn't look at her, but played with her fingers. Ginny's face flushed when she guessed what he was asking, and her heart pounded in her throat. If she couldn't have a goodnight kiss on the doorstep, then a romantic walk through London sounded wonderful. And there would be plenty of time for kissing before she Apparated home.

"Sounds perfect," she agreed.

The Leaky was boisterous tonight, and Ginny smiled at the energy that pulsed around them. She hadn't noticed before now how many people were here, drinking, laughing, and simply enjoying a Saturday evening.

"Ready to go?" Brian asked after paying for the meal. Ginny nodded and gathered her cloak. She was lifting it to slide her arms inside when she heard Ron's voice.

"Harry, sit down!"

She looked up and saw Harry kneeling on the back of one of the booths, staring right at her. Two redheads and a thatch of brown ducked low in the booth, and Ginny blinked at them. Ron, George and Neville tried to pull Harry down off the seat, but he kept batting their hands away.

"Hi," he said and waved. He wobbled precariously, and Ginny almost burst out in laughter. He was pissed. Completely and thoroughly pissed. And from the hissing and curses emanating from the booth, her brothers and Neville were too.

Ron finally got a hold on Harry's shirt, and he tumbled over backwards, flying onto the table.

Ginny snorted and laughed. Brian scowled at the scene and helped her slide the cloak further up his arms.

"Is that—"

"That's Harry," Ginny nodded. "He seems to be enjoying himself tonight." The sound of Harry's laughter rang out, and Ginny let it wash over her. She hadn't heard him like this in a long time—free and unfettered. Perhaps it was just the alcohol, or being with friends, but Harry seemed truly happy tonight.

"Let's go," Brian slid his arm around her waist, and Ginny gave one last look over her shoulder to Harry before letting Brian guide her out into the chilly London night.

Her Sunday

Harry was definitely alive. Ginny watched as he shifted in bed, groaning against the bright afternoon light that was streaming in the window. She wondered if he would be with how much alcohol she assumed he'd had the night before. It had to have been a lot for him to be that sappy.

Thank Merlin he'd only made it so far in getting undressed last night, or Ginny would be getting quite the show right now. As it was, he was lying face down diagonally on his bed, wearing only his boxers.

His right foot was buried under the messy wad of blankets near the foot of the bed, but his left, complete with sock and shoe, were hanging off the side. Ginny giggled as she came further into the room.

The whole place smelled like a pub, and Ginny shook her head. At least Harry seemed to be having a good time last night.

"Morning, Sleepyhead. I suppose I really should say 'afternoon' instead."

Harry groaned when Ginny spoke. "Go'way, Gin."

Ginny laughed and climbed on the bed, making it move as much as possible. He groaned again, and she rested her hand on his back, tracing patterns on the skin there. "I don't think so. I think this is too good of an opportunity to waste. After all, how often do I get to find a completely starkers Harry Potter passed out like this?"

Harry jerked away from her, and scrambled to cover himself with anything he could find, tugging at the blanket and sheet.

"Evil," he groaned and pulled the blanket over his head. "Leave me 'lone."

Ginny laughed again and tried to take the blanket off his head. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself last night."

He finally allowed her to pull the covers back, and blinked blearily up at her. "I was a complete prat," he protested. Ginny wondered just what he'd managed to get up to. With her brothers and Neville as companions, no doubt all sorts of things had gone on. The combination of those four never meant good things.

"Not to me, you weren't," she said and shrugged. "I can't vouch for whatever debauchery you committed before you arrived at the Leaky."

Harry groaned and rolled onto his side, pressing his face into her thigh. She lifted a hand and ran her fingers through his hair. He sighed, and she wondered if he wanted her to make him a hangover potion, or if he simply wanted to sleep it off.

"I knew you needed a night out," she smiled. "I just hope it was worth it."

"I think it was." He scowled slightly, as if he couldn't quite remember all that happened.

"I was planning on going into the office to finish up the paperwork on the Duncan case," she said. "Since you're in no shape to come in as well, you'll owe me."

"I can't move," he protested. "It hurts too much. I hate George. He started the Firewhisky last night."

Ginny laughed and took her hand away. "I'm sure I can manage to finish the file on my own. Don't forget that we're supposed to be at the Burrow tonight for dinner."

Harry grumbled and rolled away from her. "I forgot."

"Mum will kill both of us if you don't come, Harry," Ginny scolded softly. "She seems to think that I'm your keeper or something. Before I moved in, you always forgot about dinners there."

"I'll be there," Harry promised. "Just gonna sleep for a bit more."

Ginny laughed and leaned down to press a kiss to his temple before she bounced the bed one final time.

"Witch," Harry groaned.

"I'll expect you cleaned and pressed by five o'clock, Potter," Ginny growled playfully from the doorway. "Or I'll tell Mum about your wild night on the town last night."

* * *

The whole day had been wonderful. Ginny rose from talking to Brian through the floo, and dusted the knees of her jeans off. She smiled contentedly and glanced around the still-clean flat. She wasn't sure what had gotten into Harry lately about cleaning, but the place looked great.

Harry was in the kitchen; she could hear the clink of dishes in the sink. He must have returned while she was talking to Brian.

"Did you get Teddy home alright?"

Harry was staring off into the kitchen when she walked in. He startled when she spoke. "Er... yeah. Teddy's... fine. At home."

He seemed so different now than he was at the Burrow—much more sullen now. Perhaps something had happened in the few minutes they were parted. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Who were you talking to?" he asked. His bright eyes turned on her, and she couldn't read the

expression in them.

"Brian. He wanted to know my schedule this week so we could find time to go out." She got herself a butterbeer, and leaned on the counter next to Harry.

"You're going out with him again."

"Tuesday," she smiled.

"Don't," Harry blurted. "Don't go out with him again."

Ginny stared at him incredulously. "Harry!" she laughed and leaned into his shoulder. "What's with you? You haven't even met Brian. Why do you not like him?"

He shook his head. "I just don't like him. I think... I think you and I should go out instead."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him, trying to see what he meant exactly. He honestly couldn't be asking her out, could he?

"You and I go out all the time, Harry."

"I meant... on a date," Harry explained.

"What are you on about, Harry?"

"I... I don't want you to date Brian. I don't want you to date anyone, Ginny. You and I are good together, Ginny. We're best friends and partners. I just think that we could be good together... like we are at Exploding Snap. I... I fancy you." His eyes bore into hers and Ginny stared at him, trying to figure it out in her head.

It almost sounded like he was jealous when he demanded that she not see Brian again. That didn't make sense at all, because Harry didn't feel anything like that toward Ginny—even that little crush he'd had on her when he was younger went away as they got older. They were just friends now.

Something clicked inside her—*friends*. Harry didn't want to lose her as a friend. He was afraid if she saw Brian she'd eventually be taken away from him. Ron and Hermione had pulled away as the romantic side of their relationship built. Harry was afraid that his friendship with Ginny would be lost if she dated Brian. And Harry had lost so much in his life that he couldn't bear to lose anyone else.

Ginny moved closer and took his hand. "I'm not going anywhere, Harry," she assured him. "You don't have to worry about me leaving you alone. I'm always going to be your friend."

That had to be it. Harry would do anything to hold onto his life. He never liked change, and always grumbled about it until it happened.

"That's not..." Harry huffed and ruffled his hair in annoyance. "You're not understanding me. I really do—"

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly. Ginny didn't know what more she could do

to convince him that she was always going to be his friend. She was never going to leave him behind because she loved him. They *were* good together... like Exploding Snap. The comparison made her smile. They made a good team, and Ginny wasn't about to break that up over Harry's worries.

"I *do* understand, Harry. You don't want me to date because you're afraid I'll fall in love with someone and leave you alone. Like Ron and Hermione did. But I promise I'm not leaving you, Harry. You don't have to worry about that."

His arms came hesitantly around her, and Ginny sighed into the hug. Finally, he was starting to see. She lifted her hand and laid it on his cheek. "I may date blokes from time to time, but I'm always going to need my best friend. I'm always going to need my partner."

The panic she'd felt in him earlier began to recede, and Ginny let her arms slip away. She was glad that he was seeing now that he didn't need to pretend to fancy her so that she would stay with him.

"There will always be dinners at the Burrow, Harry," she smiled, "and Exploding Snap Tournaments where we beat the pants off George, even when he cheats. You and I will always be friends. Have a good night, Harry, and try not to worry about things so much."

She left Harry standing in the kitchen, hopefully feeling much better about their friendship.

It was more than a little barmy the lengths Harry went to hold on to what was comfortable and normal in his life, but Ginny could definitely understand it. She wasn't going anywhere. Dating Brian was... well she didn't see it as anything more than spending time with someone who appreciated her for her. She didn't think it was going to turn into some grand romance that would sweep her off her feet and they'd disappear into the sunset together.

Those sorts of things were only for stories. Ginny believed in reality.

Chapter 6: You To Need Me

Her Tuesday

"I'm not sure about this, Ginny." Brian fidgeted in place and adjusted the collar of his jacket. "Maybe we should just..."

"It's only Harry, Brian," Ginny sighed. "It's not like I'm taking you to meet my whole family. That would be like being dumped into the middle of the wolf pack. This is just..."

"Harry Potter," Brian quipped. "Not intimidating at all."

Ginny laughed and wrapped her arm through his. "Harry is hardly intimidating. He's just... Harry. He's my best friend, Brian. What he thinks matters to me, and I want you to meet him."

She needed to prove to Harry that Brian was a decent bloke. He needed to understand that there was nothing to fear from seeing Ginny date now and again. Maybe if Harry and Brian met, Harry could truly see that he didn't need to run around inventing silly stories to convince her to stay.

Brian chewed on his lip for a moment before leaning down to kiss her. Ginny smiled into the sweet little peck, knowing she'd won this small battle.

"I still say he's intimidating." Brian's smile was lopsided, and Ginny used her thumb to wipe away the small bit of lipstick that transferred to him with the kiss. "But I'll do anything for you, Ginny; anything to make you happy."

"You'll be fine," Ginny laughed. She slid her hand down his arm, straightening his jacket with her touch, and then placed her fingers into his. "I promise to protect you if he pulls his wand. I'm faster on the draw than he is, anyway." She laughed when Brian swallowed audibly.

"Forgive my moment of insecurity, but define your relationship with Harry Potter again for me?"

Ginny laughed at his nervousness, and swung their hands just a little. "He's my best friend. He's... more like my brother than anything, really. We grew up together, and survived the war together." She'd told him all of this before, but perhaps actually facing the man that people thought was more legend than not was completely nerve-racking to someone who didn't understand that Harry was nothing more than a man.

"More importantly, he and I are Auror partners. He's the person I count on most to protect my back when we're in a tight situation, and I'm the person he trusts the most. That makes it a very close relationship—you have to understand the person you're protecting, and value their life as much as you value your own. The things that Harry and I have gone through simply make that bond all the stronger. We make a damn good team."

She smiled just thinking of how well she and Harry worked together. It made her feel warm and happy to know that Harry was there for her, no matter what, just like she was there for him.

"Come on, let's not put this off any longer."

Brian scowled and then sighed. "I suppose."

"You'll see," Ginny chuckled as she wound her arm through his to Dual-Apparate him into the flat. "Harry's the quietest, most relaxed person ever. He's probably lounging on the sofa in his horrid track pants, watching the telly. He's harmless." She placed a quick kiss to his cheek before closing her eyes and Apparating them.

* * *

The telly wasn't on, and Harry wasn't flopped in front of it when they arrived at the flat. Ginny wondered where he'd gotten off to, and called out for him. He didn't answer, but she thought he might be in his bedroom because the light was on down the hall.

When he came out, hurrying toward them in just his jeans, Ginny stared. She opened her mouth to ask what the hell he was doing prancing around with no shirt on, but Harry explained.

"Sorry, you caught me just out of the shower." He shrugged an apology, and held his hand out for Brian. "Harry Potter. Nice to meet you."

Well, at least he'd thought to put something on rather than meet them with only a towel wrapped around him. His hair was still wet, dripping down his chest, and running down the pale skin there. Ginny watched one particular drop as it ran down his shoulder and into the scar over his heart, shaped like the Horcrux locket. Next to it was a lightning bolt scar that made her shudder. She tore her thoughts away from the memory of seeing him limp in Hagrid's arms, and back to see both men looking at her.

"Er..."

"So you're the lucky bloke my girl has been seeing," Harry grinned. He slung his arm over Ginny's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Hope you're being careful. She's one of the best Aurors around, you know. One wrong move and you'll be at St. Mungo's getting it all sorted back out again."

Ginny hissed and mashed her shoe into Harry's foot. Was he trying to scare Brian away? Brian hadn't seemed intimidated by Ginny the Auror yet, but if Harry kept up Brian was likely to turn and walk right out the door.

"Leave off, you prat," Ginny growled. She pushed his arm off her shoulder, and moved closer to Brian. "What's gotten into you today?" she demanded.

"Nothing." Harry denied, but his eyes wouldn't quite meet hers. "Where are you two off to tonight?"

"Er... just going to dinner, actually," Brian said. His fingers found Ginny's, and she smiled up at him. His palm was sweaty, and she wondered if he was relieved to see that Harry was just a normal, every day git, versus the unapproachable hero that everyone thought he was.

"Sounds good," Harry nodded. He gave a little jump and turned to Ginny. "Oh, that reminds me. Remember that case we closed a few weeks ago? Heimann?"

Ginny almost laughed at the smile on Harry's face. He looked like an excited child on Christmas morning.

"It was beautiful." She turned to Brian to explain. "Prat of a kid was mixed up in illegal potions, and was selling them to kids at Hogwarts. The father of one of the girls promised us..." She gasped as she realized what Harry might be excited about. "He didn't?"

Harry grinned and pulled two tickets off the counter, holding them up in his fist. "He did."

Ginny squealed loudly and jumped forward, throwing her arms around Harry in delight. "When?"

"Saturday," Harry laughed. "You and me, box seats at the first Harpies game of the season."

Ginny cheered and jumped in place before hugging Harry again. They were going to see the Harpies' first game of the season.

The Harpies.

A small bit of longing mixed with her excitement, but Ginny tamped it down quickly. Nothing could change the past, and even if she still dreamed of playing Quidditch in the professional leagues, Ginny knew it was nothing more than wishful daydreaming.

Brian made an impatient sound in the back of his throat. "I thought... I thought we were going out on Saturday."

Ginny pulled back from Harry and blinked at him. Oh. They had made plans for Saturday afternoon.

"Sorry," Harry apologized. "The father is one of the owners of the Harpies. He offered us the tickets when we arrested Heimann. And it's the Harpies, Gin's favorite team."

Ginny bit her lip and weighed the options. Really, it was no contest. The Harpies with Harry won out over whatever it was she and Brian were thinking of doing. Besides, they could just go out later. "I'm sorry, Brian. Could we reschedule our date on Saturday? I have to go to this game. I can't just give up box tickets."

Brian frowned thoughtfully. "I suppose I could try and get a ticket," he offered.

"Er... sold out. Sorry."

"We'll try for Friday evening, then," Ginny followed right after Harry's apology. It didn't matter when they went out, really. Friday was the same as Saturday.

"Actually," Harry interrupted. "You and I were on the schedule at work for Saturday afternoon. I had to trade us shifts to be able to go already. We're working on Friday night now."

Ginny glared at him. How could he have just switched her schedule without asking? They were going to have to have a little talk about him taking liberties with things before talking to her. But she really couldn't be too angry with him. In the past, it wouldn't have mattered what he did to get them to the game. Now it was just an inconvenience because Brian expected her to be with him.

"I'm sorry, Brian," Ginny sighed. "But... it's the Harpies."

"She's not about to miss their first game," Harry nodded. The smile on his face was huge, and it made Ginny happy to see it. Harry was looking forward to the game just as much as she was. "Not after she almost—"

Panic rose up inside her and she scrambled to think of anything she could say to stop Harry. "Almost won tickets in a contest," Ginny blurted. "Just barely missed."

Harry gave her a strange look, and she begged him with her eyes not to say anything. She couldn't say why she hadn't told Brian about being scouted to play for the Harpies. It just didn't seem important, really. It was in the past. Who wanted to hear about dreams that didn't come true?

"Yeah, the contest." Harry nodded lamely.

Ginny felt her heart swell with gratitude for Harry. He'd saved her again. She knew she was going to have to explain this to him—he would never let something like this simply slide—but at least he wasn't pressuring her right now.

"We'd better get going, Ginny," Brian said. "Our reservation is for seven. It's only a few blocks walk, but I don't want to be late." He held out his hand for Ginny and she looked away from Harry to nod.

Harry looked like he might say something, but swallowed it back. Ginny sighed gratefully. He looked... almost sad, and Ginny wondered what he was thinking about.

"It was nice to meet you," Harry said just as they were leaving.

* * *

The whole walk to the restaurant, Ginny struggled to find something to say. Why didn't she just tell Brian about the Harpies? The question rattled in her brain, and she argued with herself about the answer.

Simply put, it was in the past—it didn't really matter anymore. Ginny had been thrilled when the Quidditch scouts had come to Hogwarts to watch her play. When she'd been injured during the last game of her final year, the dream fell by the wayside.

It was Harry who gave her something to hope for again, by suggesting she apply to the Auror Academy. And things worked out—possibly for the better. Who knew what would have come of a career in professional Quidditch. Ginny was a good Auror.

"Harry Potter is not just your friend and flat mate," Brian huffed. His hand was holding hers tightly, and she had to hurry to keep up with his long strides.

"I told you," Ginny sighed, "we've been through a lot together. How can you be *just friends* with someone who you've fought shoulder to shoulder with in a war? There's... there's no way for me to explain it to you, really, because you didn't live it. And I know that sounds horrid," she excused when he scowled at her, "but it's honest, Brian. When you've lived through something like we did

there's a bond that is formed. Harry saved my life, literally, on countless occasions. He and I... we share something that I can't share with anyone else, ever."

Brian's face fell and he nodded stiffly. "And it's nothing more than that?"

Ginny narrowed her eyes at his tone. "What do you mean?"

Brian stopped them on the sidewalk just down from the restaurant they were planning on eating at. He looked around and Ginny was puzzled by the frustration on his face. Surely he couldn't think—

"You're not in love with him?"

His question made her snort in laughter. "I love Harry, I really do, but I'm not in love with him."

Brian stared into her eyes for a long minute before he looked somewhat mollified. He slid his hand along her cheek and leaned down, capturing her lips. Ginny was surprised at how much emotion was involved. Kissing Brian was always very pleasant. He was a good kisser, and knew ways to make her body hum with his touch. But tonight there was a desperation in his touch that stole her breath away.

"That's good," he said when they finally broke apart. He looked at her a minute more and pressed his lips to her forehead before pulling her along to the restaurant.

Ginny tried to compose herself, straightening her shirt and blowing out a breath. Brian's question, and then the strange kiss, had shaken her. Surely he understood the relationship she shared with Harry. Maybe not, though. As she'd told him, it was impossible to explain the type of bond and trust that she and Harry shared—that anyone who had gone through the war like they had shared.

The waiter showed them to their table while Ginny looked around. It was a nice restaurant, and Ginny had never been here. It was fancier than she expected, and Muggle. Brian seemed extremely comfortable in the Muggle world, and Ginny remembered that his father was a Muggle, while his mother was a witch. She'd have to make sure to pay extra close attention tonight so she could tell her dad about it. He'd love to learn about some obscure Muggle food tradition he didn't already know.

"Here is your table." The waiter bowed low and Ginny blinked at the fine china, crystal and the large bouquet of gorgeous red tulips sitting in the middle of the table.

Ginny grinned. "Brian! Where did these come from?" He must have made arrangements to have them sitting at their table.

"I didn't—I mean, do you like them?" Brian grinned and pulled the back of her seat out for her.

"I've always loved tulips," Ginny said. Ginny ran her finger along the delicate edge of one of the flowers. Tulips were one of her favorite flowers. They weren't overly frilly like roses or some other flowers. They were strong, and forced their way up through the ground, battling against the spring weather to be one of the first to bloom. She remembered a dozen fall days planting the bulbs with her mother and waiting for them to push their stems from the muddy ground in the spring. And then the delicate, bright flowers would arrive, bringing cheeriness and hope for the coming warmth.

She slid into the seat and grinned up at him. How had he known about her love of the flower? Or was it simply coincidence? And tulips at this time of year had to be horribly expensive.

"What does the card say?" Ginny reached for the little square envelope that was nestled among the bright green leaves.

"You don't have to... er, just... Maybe it would be better to eat first. You said you were hungry." Brian's face turned red, and Ginny smiled. He was probably embarrassed to have her read the card. Perhaps he'd written something horridly sappy on it.

Ginny ignored his nervousness and slid her finger into the envelope. She read the message, and blinked at it before looking up at him.

"Believe me? What's that supposed to mean?"

It didn't make sense. What was she supposed to believe him about?

"It means I didn't lie to you, Ginny." Ginny jerked in her seat when Harry stepped forward. He looked so out of place standing here in the middle of the restaurant where she'd come with Brian. How had he ended up here, and why was he talking to her about the flowers Brian had bought for her?

"Everything I told you was the truth." The earnestness on his face shook her, and she tried to remember a time when she'd seen him this powerful. Only a few times came to her mind, and they terrified her in their intensity.

"Potter." Brian stepped in front of her and stared at Harry. "You keep showing up at the most convenient times. I think perhaps I should report you to the Aurors for stalking."

"Harry?" Ginny was confused. She stood and looked between both men, hoping that one of them wouldn't do something stupid. "You sent the flowers?"

Why would he send her flowers and write that on the card? What was she supposed to belie—

No. He couldn't still think that she was going to stop being his friend because Brian was here. He wouldn't keep on with this ruse after she'd assured him that nothing between them was going to change. Would he?

"Believe me." His words were whispered, but Ginny felt them down to her core. He honestly thought she was going to change what they had between them and possibly leave him alone. Ginny opened her mouth to respond, but the waiter interrupted.

"Is there a problem, Gentlemen?" He looked nervously between Harry and Brian who were squaring off. Neither had pulled their wand, but Ginny thought it might happen at any minute. Should she warn Brian, or should she simply get out of Harry's line of fire? He didn't like to be challenged, and she had no doubt she'd be hauling Brian to St. Mungo's if Harry got worked up enough.

Harry shook the moment away. and tore his forceful stare from Brian. "I was just leaving," he said softly. "I've said all I need to say tonight."

Ginny sank back down into her seat and watched Harry go. His shoulders were stiff and he didn't look back. The way he'd looked at her and said the words made her think that perhaps she'd gotten it all wrong before. Could Harry really think that he fancied her?

There was no way. Absolutely not. She couldn't have gotten it wrong, because Harry would have told her. He would have made her see that he did feel something more than friendship for her.

"Ginny!"

She jerked when Brian waved his hand in front of her face and stared up at him. He looked furious, and she had the thought that he'd been talking to her but she hadn't responded.

"Brian, I..."

"I knew this was going to happen," he sighed and glared through the restaurant where Harry had disappeared.

"I think... I think I want to go home now," Ginny said. She wasn't exactly sure what she wanted, to be honest, but her head was spinning, and all the sounds from the room around her sounded harsh and loud in her ears. "I don't think I can eat right now."

"Of course not." He nodded jerkily and ground his teeth together. Ginny glared at him and stood. She gathered the flowers into her arms, and started out of the restaurant without him. If he was going to be a prat...

"Ginny... Ginny wait!"

Ginny spun on her heel and glared at Brian. "I'm already dealing with one git, don't force me to deal with another," she hissed. Calling Harry a git probably wasn't fair, but he was confusing the hell out of her. One minute he was fine, playing Exploding Snap with her like nothing was wrong, and then the next he was showing off his naked body in front of her, and making odd gestures like showing up in the middle of her date and sending her flowers.

Her head hurt trying to figure it all out.

"I'm sorry," Brian answered contritely. "You shouldn't have to deal with him."

The tightness in his tone at the end of the statement made her narrow her eyes. but she didn't pursue it. Brian obviously felt threatened by Harry, and Harry was... She had no idea what the hell Harry was doing.

"I just want to go home."

Brian nodded and walked behind her. He didn't open the door or take her hand while they walked in silence to the flat. The whole time, Ginny was trying to figure out what she should say. She wouldn't apologize to Brian for ruining the date because it wasn't her fault. And she also couldn't completely blame Harry for it. Not until she figured all of this out in her head.

"I'll floo you tomorrow," Brian said when they stood outside the flat door. He looked torn between

kissing her and simply Apparating away, however, and glared at the flowers she held in her arm.

Ginny sighed and set the vase next to the door before planting her hands on either side of his face and kissing him. He seemed shocked at first, but then poured himself into the kiss, wrapping his arms around her.

"Have a good night, Ginny," he said finally when he'd pulled back. He looked as if he wanted to say more, but simply nodded and Apparated away.

Ginny slumped against the door and watched the spot where he'd left from. Even though she'd initiated the kiss, mostly to avoid an argument with Brian, and to set her mind straight, it confused her further. She should have felt more than she did. The kiss should have left her wanting more. It should have swept thoughts of Harry from her mind. Instead, it only made her feel as if her life was spinning out of control around her.

Ginny stared down at the gorgeous flowers. "What the hell is going on?" she asked them.

Chapter 7: You To Love Me

Her Thursday

"You look like you're too busy to get away for lunch."

Ginny looked up from the file she was making notes in to see Hermione leaning against the doorway.

"We were supposed to go today," she groaned and rubbed her face. "I completely forgot."

Hermione smiled. "It's okay. I've had days like that."

Ginny let her head fall to the desk, and thumped it there several times. "I'm having a week like that."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Ginny sighed and looked up, wondering if she should say anything. Hermione might know what was going on in Harry's head. Then again, she might not. Harry wasn't always forthcoming with Ron and Hermione, she knew. What if he hadn't said anything to them about whatever was going on, and Ginny mucked it all up even worse by spouting off about something she wasn't even sure was happening?

"No," she settled on saying. "I just need to get some things straight in my head."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "And get through all your paperwork."

"All the paperwork that Harry left when he conveniently had a meeting with the Minister," Ginny nodded.

Hermione laughed. "I promise it's a real meeting. Harry went in just as I was coming out. I have a feeling he'll be in there awhile."

"Perfect," Ginny growled. Despite the front she was putting on for Hermione, Ginny did think it was better if Harry stayed away. There was too much going on in her head to deal with him right now. And every time she saw him she was reminded of 'the incident' from last night. Her cheeks heated just thinking about it. She wasn't supposed to fantasize about her best friend like that, let alone act on those fantasies.

"You'll get through it just fine," Hermione dismissed.

"Only if I work straight through," Ginny said. "I'm sorry. Robards wants this on his desk before I leave today. And I was hoping to go home early."

"You have a date?" Hermione's question was innocent enough, but Ginny watched her before answering. Had Harry really not said anything to her? Ron had definitely seen her with Brian at the pub last weekend.

"Yeah," Ginny nodded. "Brian just sent an owl. He asked me to go to a film tonight."

"You don't sound excited about it," Hermione said perceptively.

Ginny grimaced slightly. "I'm not sure what to feel, honestly. My life is... it's a mess right now, Hermione, and I don't know what to do about it."

Hermione gave a thoughtful look. "You do know I'm here if you want to talk about things?"

"I do," Ginny smiled half-heartedly. "And I appreciate it. I need to get it all straight in my head first though." How would she tell Hermione, one of Harry's oldest friends, that she was having fantasies about Harry? How would she tell Hermione that everything Ginny felt was sure and solid in her life had recently tipped until nothing was firm any more?

"I'm here if you need me," Hermione nodded. "In the meantime, try and enjoy tonight. What picture are you seeing?"

Ginny told her the name, and Hermione smiled. "My parents went to see it and told me that it was enjoyable."

"I could use a good distraction right about now," Ginny sighed. She rolled her shoulders and looked down at the file. Paperwork was always tedious, but even worse when her mind kept wandering to someone she wasn't supposed to be thinking about.

"I'm going to bring you some lunch so you can eat while you work." Hermione nodded firmly. "Anything in particular you want?"

"Anything is fine," Ginny said gratefully. "Thanks."

"No problem. You'd do the same for me."

"Don't count on it." Ginny winked and Hermione laughed.

Ginny turned back to her paperwork, and stared at the numbers and letters. They meant nothing to her right now. She had to figure this mess out before it drove her around the twist. What did last night's little fantasy mean? Did she fancy Harry, or was it simply her mind dealing with his behavior over the past few days? And if she did fancy him, what did she feel for Brian?

Harry had barely spoken to her today—a few clipped phrases here and there as he readied his reports for his meeting, and then he was off, dashing around the Ministry. Normally, Ginny wouldn't think anything of his behavior. He had a lot on his mind right now with the meeting. But last night had caused a tilt in their relationship that Ginny wasn't sure how to deal with. Now it wasn't just Harry rocking the boat, it was Ginny reacting to his actions.

And it scared her, because she didn't understand what the consequences to all of this were.

* * *

"You're more than a bit distracted tonight." Brian's words weren't meant to be annoying, Ginny knew, but she couldn't help but find them so. Little things she thought she enjoyed before—his hand

on the small of her back, asking her permission before he did *anything*, opening every single door for her—were now things that made her skin crawl with irritation.

“Sorry. It was a busy day at work. My head must still be there.”

He studied her for a minute, and she knew he caught the lie in her statement. Of course she was thinking about Harry; that’s all she did lately. She hadn’t seen him at all this afternoon after he disappeared into Kingsley’s office. Ginny hadn’t gone this long without talking to Harry in some time, and it unnerved her because she didn’t know what he was thinking. The silence was driving her mad.

Brian let the lie go rather than pressuring her to explain, thankfully. “Perhaps the film will help you relax.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed. The theater was bright and exciting. Harry had brought her here several times over the years, but it was always fun to come again. Part of her wished he were here now, sharing his popcorn and sitting close enough that their shoulders rubbed. He always talked through the previews and people shushed him. Then, he would talk during the film, low enough that his voice was merely a whisper in her ear, telling her his favorite parts, or what he didn’t think was believable.

Brian would probably not speak through the whole picture.

“Are you ready to go in, or did you want to get something?” Brian’s hand on her back made her jump, and she blinked at the counter in front of her. It was filled with bright boxes of treats and popcorn.

“Nothing, thank you.” She shook her head and Brian’s hand slid down to the small of her back. It felt wrong there, just barely brushing the skin, like he was guiding a young child who might wander away at any moment. There was no firmness, no conviction in the touch.

“I think maybe after the film we need to talk,” Ginny sighed as they entered the dark theater. Brian’s hand slid away completely and he nodded stiffly. He looked down at his ticket and indicated the row she should enter. Ginny took the seat and stared straight ahead.

“That’s probably a good idea,” he agreed once they were finally seated. They sat in silence until the few low lights in the room went dark, and the screen lit with trailers from new films coming out.

Some obnoxious git was making noise behind them, stumbling over people’s toes and getting shushed by everyone the whole way. Brian bristled next to her but Ginny fought to keep a smile off her face. It was something Harry would do.

Whoever it was kept talking all through the trailers, explaining his interest in the upcoming film to the woman next to him. Brian grew more and more agitated, and Ginny placed her hand on his arm simply to calm him down. They exchanged a look and Ginny shrugged one shoulder. What could they do, really?

Finally, Brian had enough and turned. “Will you kindly be quiet?”

The two people apologized, but it didn't sound sincere. And Ginny knew it wasn't when they continued talking.

Ginny rolled her eyes when Brian huffed mightily and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

She sighed and turned, placing her arm over the back of the seat. "Shh! There are people—" Her words died out when Harry's face beamed back at her. "Harry Potter!" she hissed, glaring at him. Even though she'd wanted to see him all day, she was shocked to see him here. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi Ginny." Harry waved at her and grinned stupidly. "I didn't realize you were here. I thought a film sounded like a good way to pass the time."

He turned to the woman next to him. "That's my friend I was telling you about!"

Abruptly, Harry stood and climbed over the seat in front of him to take the empty spot next to Ginny. She stared with wide eyes, unable to do anything more than gape at him.

"Look, there's a seat right next to you."

"Harry, I—"

"We're on a *date*, Potter, in case you didn't recognize it," Brian hissed.

"Well, I won't bother you then," Harry shrugged and sat back in his new chair, munching popcorn. He tipped the bucket back over his shoulder, offering the woman behind him some. Ginny wondered if he was being polite, or if he was simply doing anything he could to make Brian slouch lower in his seat. He grinned at the woman when she took some popcorn, and Ginny rolled her eyes. Definitely the second.

He'd spent all day ignoring her. Two full days without really speaking to her at all, and now he showed up, in the middle of her *date*, and acted like nothing was wrong?

Ginny was furious with him. How dare he treat her this way! "You're not sitting next to me," Ginny protested.

"It's a perfectly good seat." Harry relaxed back into the seat, and Ginny glared at him. It was quite obvious that he wasn't planning on going anywhere. He stared up at the screen and dug around in his popcorn container.

Brian tried to reach for her hand and Ginny pulled it away. He was only trying to hold it so that Harry would get worked up again. Ginny was tired of this game between the two men—treating her like some prize that it was perfectly acceptable to fight over. Perhaps she didn't want to be with either of the prats.

"Don't be like this, Ginny," Brian whispered and reached for her hand again.

"Popcorn?" Harry nudged her with the container.

Ginny growled and Brian bristled.

The man on the other side of Harry hissed something to which Harry replied, "Sorry." He wasn't sorry at all, evidenced by the smile on his face. The prat was thoroughly enjoying working everyone up.

It was his only purpose in being here—to disrupt Ginny's date, and make a general nuisance of himself until Ginny finally exploded and confronted him. She was right on the edge of doing so when he stilled again, watching the film.

Ginny didn't see anything up on the screen; she watched, but inside she was fuming. What could she do about this? Harry wasn't going to go away easily, and now that he was completely disrupting her life and everything she'd thought she always wanted, Ginny didn't want him to go away.

The thought rankled, and she shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She wanted... Truthfully, she wanted what she'd had in her fantasy the other day. The thought made her cheeks heat, and she stared down at her lap, rather than at the screen.

How could she be feeling this way about Harry? He was... he was practically her brother for Merlin's sake. She shouldn't be attracted to him. He shouldn't be able to get under her skin like he had the past few days.

Harry's antics were ruining everything. She couldn't think straight, she couldn't eat or sleep. She could barely work right now without drifting away in thought. This couldn't happen. Ginny couldn't allow it.

Harry leaned into her side and whispered, as if they'd come together on a normal outing. "That's not very realistic." Ginny blinked up at the screen, trying to understand what he was talking about. "In real life, the bloke would confess his love and the bird would drop him on his arse, saying she didn't believe him."

The building irritation just under her skin finally broke free at his words, and Ginny stood, knocking into him. "Out!" She pointed toward the aisle.

Harry blinked up at her innocently, and she forced her way past him and stood in the aisle waiting.

"Uh oh," the woman in the row behind him giggled. "I'll hold your place."

"Thanks," Harry laughed and handed her the popcorn. "Hold that for me too, will you?"

Ginny stood in the aisle with her arms crossed in front of her, glaring at Harry while he stepped on people and apologized the whole way through the row.

"What the hell are you doing here, Harry?" Ginny exploded once he reached her and more people hissed at them to be quiet.

Harry roughly took Ginny's arm and forced her up the aisle toward the lobby. "If you're going to be loud, Ginny, we probably ought to go out. These people are trying to enjoy a film." Ginny snatched her arm away from him and stomped out.

"What a bastard," she hissed under her breath. *Now* he was concerned about being quiet for the

people in the theater? She scowled at him when he came out.

"Explain."

He shrugged unrepentantly. "I thought a film sounded nice tonight—"

"Do *not* lie to me, Harry Potter." Ginny jabbed her finger into his chest. "You're here only to make things awkward for me. If this is your plan to try and get me to stop seeing Brian, it's ridiculous. I know you're worried that I'm going to leave you alone, but—"

"Don't be stupid." Harry moved away from her poking and rubbed absently at where she'd touched him. "You know that's why I'm here. I'm trying to make you understand that I fancy you, Ginny."

She couldn't believe he'd actually admitted it. And even though she knew that's why he had come, it was overwhelming to think about. Had he been following them everywhere? Certainly the restaurant. What about the pub?

"By following me and my date everywhere?" she demanded. "That's what the restaurant was about? Is that what happened the other night at the pub, too? At first I thought it was just coincidence that you ended up there at the same time. But you've turned into some sort of... stalker!" She swiped at his chest.

Harry's eyes went dark behind his glasses, and he snatched her hand from the air and tugged her closer. "Perhaps if you believed me the first time I told you I fancied you then I wouldn't be forced to follow you around and make sure you don't end up doing something stupid."

Ginny's heart beat wildly in her chest, and she sucked in a breath that was full of his heat, his smell—pure Harry, full of energy that tingled and pulsated.

Time slowed, and Ginny watched as Harry licked his lips. He leaned in slightly and Ginny clenched his arms tightly, waiting for his lips to brush hers, just as they had in her fantasy.

"The film has already started, Ginny. Are we going back inside?"

Ginny nearly choked when Brian cleared his throat. He looked furious standing there staring at the two of them. He'd probably seen everything: how they had argued, and how easily Ginny gave herself over to Harry's embrace. He must think she was some sort of tart, using him to make Harry jealous.

Harry swore and moved away. The energy bled off him, though, and made Ginny shiver with the intensity. She took several deep breaths, and willed herself to be in control again.

"Are you going back inside, Harry?"

He paused for a minute and then smirked. "It seems I have a date in there."

Ginny huffed in annoyance and turned to Brian. "I'm not going back in now." There was no way she could walk back in there and sit next to Harry, or even in front of him, with what had just passed between them. It had to have been just the moment—just the out of control moment spurred on by

her temper and Harry's stubbornness.

"Fine." Brian's gaze nearly bore a hole through Harry with its menace. "We'll go somewhere else."

Harry glared at Brian, and Ginny nearly walked away from both of them. "I'll be sure to tell you how it ends."

"Your date or the film?" Brian quipped.

"Both." Harry shrugged and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "She seemed into me."

Ginny stared at him, awed that he could recover so quickly from something that had shaken her so deeply. She smiled at his humor, appreciating that he could find something to lighten the moment.

"Enjoy the movie, Harry," she said softly.

"I will," he answered back automatically. "Don't do anything stupid, Ginny." His words were a challenge; Ginny could feel it. She opened her mouth to ask him what the hell he meant, but Brian slipped his arm over her shoulders and turned her away.

"Let's just go, Ginny," he whispered. "This whole thing has been a colossal failure."

For a moment Ginny wasn't sure whether he meant the evening or the whole relationship. Both could qualify, truthfully.

Ginny wanted to turn and look at Harry, but Brian's arm prevented it. He abruptly pulled away from her the moment they were outside the theater, and he tucked his fists into his trouser pockets.

"I saw this coming," he sighed and glanced at her before looking ahead. "I saw it from the first moment I met him."

"Saw what?" Ginny demanded even though she had an idea what he was hinting toward.

Brian stopped walking and stared at her with wide eyes. "Do you really not see it? The posturing and flowers, the declarations... He's in love with you, Ginny."

Ginny snorted and rubbed her forehead. "I... I don't..."

"Maybe it's best if we have a few days apart. You need to figure out what you want, and what you're going to do about that." He nodded back toward the theater and Ginny looked away.

She had a feeling that this was his way of saying goodbye. No confrontations, just a gradual drift away from an unpleasant situation.

"I never meant—"

"I know," he bristled. "I... I'm sorry that things worked out this way. I really like you Ginny, and I think we could have something good between us." He leaned in and hovered for a minute, silently asking permission to kiss her. Ginny didn't move. She waited for him to initiate something, and didn't participate in the dry, fast kiss when he finally moved forward.

"I'll talk to you in a few days."

Before Ginny could respond, Brian Apparated away.

Her Saturday

The roar of the crowd was thrilling, and Ginny felt it in her veins, thrumming along with her pulse. The Chasers whizzed by, battled over the Quaffle in mid-air before one of them raced off toward the goal at the far end.

"This box is perfect," she mumbled. The awe of having a private box, complete with complimentary omnioculars and all the butterbeer they could drink, was a decent distraction, if only for a few minutes before her mind returned to the man next to her. What was she going to do about all of this?

All of yesterday spent apart—other than working in silence across the office from each other—and still Ginny felt she was no closer to deciding what needed to be done.

"It's pretty spectacular," Harry agreed.

The Harpies scored, and they both cheered loudly. Ginny could feel the weight of Harry's gaze, but tried her best to ignore it. He'd been watching her most of the day—well, really, all week if she was honest with herself. There was an awkwardness between them that Ginny couldn't seem to define completely. One minute Harry's frustration was pouring off him in visible waves, and the next he seemed to have dismissed it completely. It was bloody irritating that he could turn it off and on so easily when Ginny couldn't stop thinking about it ever.

She'd come to several conclusions during the hours of silence, but still had no idea as to the course of action she needed to take.

Harry believed he fancied her right now. He'd stated so now on several occasions with a sure conviction. It had to be a recent thing, though, over the past few weeks. There was no way that Harry Potter could be harboring real feelings for her after all these years. He'd gotten over that little crush of his long ago. By his sixth year he wasn't even blushing or stammering about anymore. And Ron did say—

"Can I ask you a question without you getting mad at me?"

She flinched at his request. Harry wasn't looking at her, but studying the pitch. His eyes scanned the whole field before they widened just a tiny bit. He'd found the Snitch—he was such a natural Seeker.

Ginny swallowed several times and considered his question. "I can't promise an answer until I know what you're going to ask."

Harry tore his eyes from the fluttering golden ball, and gave her a look similar in intensity. "And you'll answer honestly?"

"If I can," she nodded. She couldn't lie to him. Respect and trust was everything between them.

“Why didn’t you tell Matthews about playing Quidditch?”

“Because I didn’t play Quidditch,” Ginny sighed. She rubbed her eyes in irritation, and watched the Harpies Chasers setup another scoring run. “I’m not sure why I didn’t say anything to him about it.”

“It was your dream,” Harry said softly. “And you would have been brilliant. I would have come to see every single game.”

Ginny snorted and shook her head. She drank the last of her butterbeer, but it made her belly ache slightly. Or maybe that was just the indecision and unease of the situation.

“You wouldn’t have made it to every game,” she said, even though she believed he might try.

“I would have tried,” Harry corrected. The earnestness in his statement made Ginny shiver. Just as she couldn’t lie to him, he wasn’t lying to her.

She looked at him for a long time before answering. Her eyes dropped to her hands as they twisted in her lap. “It just didn’t seem like something important to tell him. Some dreams should remain in the past, you know.” Looking up right then was a mistake, because Harry was staring again. His piercing green gaze stole the breath right out of her until he looked away.

“Seems to me that if you were really serious about this bloke you’d want him to know everything about you.”

Ginny clamped down on the truth—she wasn’t serious about Brian, and hadn’t ever really been. Brian was someone who made her feel special for a few minutes, but the novelty of being with him wore off quickly. Maybe if Harry hadn’t chosen right now to say something about his feelings, Ginny would have stayed with Brian longer, but that was impossible right now.

“No one knows everything about me,” Ginny scoffed. It wasn’t true, but she prayed he would leave it alone. Harry was probably the only person who did know everything about her. Well, almost everything. The things that he didn’t know he could probably guess, or he didn’t want to know anyway.

The whole Harpies fan section jumped to their feet as Imogene Shires, the Harpies Seeker, went into a steep dive, chasing after a glinting bit of gold. She narrowly missed the Snitch, and it darted off, disappearing into the distance and leaving both Seekers searching once more.

“I know a lot,” he challenged softly. “You could save yourself a lot of time with all these blokes and just go out with me.”

She almost couldn’t believe he’d said it again. “You’re a prat, Harry.” She forced herself to laugh at how brazen he was. “I told you I’m not going anywhere. You don’t have to worry about—”

“You never did really see it, did you?” he asked. Ginny blinked at him, and tried to figure out what he was saying. The fight drained out of him and his shoulders slumped.

“What I felt for you, what I *feel* for you,” he continued when she floundered. A sad look spread over his face. “All this time I thought you were just trying to be nice, trying not to rudely reject me

because you could never love me, but you really, truly never saw it.”

He stood and finished the last of his drink before he gathered his cloak and hat.

Her heart jolted in her chest and Ginny swallowed past the lump in her throat. Now was the time to talk to him, to get whatever this was out in the open between them so that they could both get on with their lives.

“Harry, wait—”

“I think maybe I’ve waited enough.” His words were soft, but they held the weight of a fist knocking Ginny in the chest.

“You can’t be serious,” she breathed out. He couldn’t leave right now. She couldn’t let him.

The haunted look that Harry wore all through his last years at school, and for a long time after the war, was back. It made his green eyes look hollow, and he looked so much older than he should.

“What if I am?” he asked. “What if I’ve been serious about this from the first time I turned red in front of you? What if I never really gave up on you? What if all this time you’ve looked at me like a brother, but I’ve really been someone who was stupid enough to fall in love with someone who could never love them back?”

“You... you’re like a brother to me, Harry.” The response was automatic, even if it made Ginny feel sick to her stomach. For so many years she’d seen him as just that—a surrogate brother—that the words just came naturally.

In the next second, his lips were on hers, pressing demandingly. The passion in his kiss was like fireworks—flash and brightness that stole her breath away. She barely had time to understand what was going on before he pulled back.

“I have *never* wanted to be your brother, Ginny.”

Ginny could do nothing but stare at his back as he walked out the door. His words hung heavy in the stifling air of the box, and Ginny felt as if she couldn’t breathe. Her skin was on fire and her whole body shuddered from his absence. She could feel the places on her arms where his hands had been, burning hotter than anywhere else.

How had she not seen him? All the time she’d thought his crush on her was some cute little thing from the past; she never saw it for what it truly was.

Harry *loved* her.

He’d never given up on her, and he still loved her, even after she’d ignored him for so long.

The crowd cheered around her, but Ginny stayed in her seat, up in the top of the highest box, and replayed every moment she could remember with Harry, trying to piece together how she could have not seen this.

She was still sitting in the box long after the game was over and the crowd had left the stadium. Ginny was sure the Harpies had won the game, but she didn't see any of it after Harry left. Her mind was far too occupied to be worried about Quidditch right now.

Ironic that she'd been looking forward to the game with such excitement ever since Harry showed her the tickets, yet she hadn't seen more than a few plays before Harry had kissed her. And she hadn't seen any afterwards.

He kissed her.

He told her that he didn't want to be her brother.

He loved her.

Ginny's mind swirled, and she knew she was going to have to talk to someone, get it all straight in her head before she made some horrid mistake—like ignoring Harry for another ten years.

This should be simple. She should know exactly what to do, but she just didn't.

Harry couldn't be the one she talked to, because Ginny couldn't bring herself to face him right now. She owed it to both of them to get this all figured out before seeing him again.

Hermione was the only person Ginny could think of that could help her. But would Hermione talk to her, considering this was all about Harry? Or would Hermione be uncomfortable talking about him?

Ginny knew she had to try. Days of trying to figure this out by herself hadn't worked. She needed someone that might have a bit more insight into the bigger picture.

The flat was dark and silent when Ginny got there. She wasn't sure if she'd expected Harry to be sitting on the sofa, waiting for her or not. Part of her was relieved that he wasn't here, demanding answers that she just didn't have yet, but another part of her wanted to see him, wanted to touch his hands and face, and make sure she hadn't imagined all of this, that it was truly real.

Hermione came to the floo when Ginny called, and gave her a tight smile.

"He's there, isn't he?" Ginny asked.

"Harry is here," Hermione confirmed. "He's with Ron in the kitchen."

"Can I..." Ginny trailed off and almost ended the connection. This wasn't fair of her to do. How could she ask Hermione to step into the middle of this mess?

"Do you remember what I offered when I saw you on Thursday?" Ginny bit her lip and nodded. "The offer still stands, Ginny."

"I need someone to talk to," she answered Hermione in a whispered voice. "I need... I need someone."

Hermione smiled, and Ginny had the impression that if she could, Hermione would have reached through the fire and wrapped her arms around Ginny's shoulders.

“Let’s meet at my flat in a few minutes. I’ll make sure Ron and Harry will stay here; we don’t want to be interrupted.”

Ginny stared for a long minute at the green flames. “Is he... is he okay?”

“He’s... he’s alright,” Hermione said. There was just enough hesitancy in her voice that Ginny knew Harry wasn’t happily sharing a butterbeer with his friends. She’d really hurt him, first with her inaction, and then her disbelief.

“Go to my flat, Ginny, and I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Ginny let the connection close, and watched the black fireplace until she had to physically shake herself. If she hadn’t been there hundreds of times over the past few years, Ginny wondered if she would have made it to Hermione’s flat. But it materialized around her and she sank into the sofa, letting her fingers trace the patterns along the floral print.

Hermione arrived a few minutes later, smelling like onions and something wonderful. Ginny’s stomach growled, but she pressed her hand against it.

“Do you want something to eat, Ginny?”

She shook her head automatically. “I can’t eat right now.”

“Are you sure—”

Ginny jumped off the sofa, and winced as her skin crawled with... something: frustration or anger... maybe guilt.

“What are you feeling, Ginny?” Hermione sat on the sofa and watched as Ginny paced back and forth.

“Confused,” Ginny bit out first. “And angry.”

“That makes sense,” Hermione nodded. “A lot has happened over the past week.”

“And guilty,” Ginny admitted.

Hermione looked like she was going to respond, but changed her mind with a shake of her head. “Why don’t we talk about them in order?”

Ginny paced for a few steps before shrugging. It really didn’t matter how they talked it through, she just needed to talk.

“What’s the most confusing thing?” Hermione prompted.

Ginny looked at her, expecting her to pull out a file to take notes in. She shook the thought away and rubbed her temples.

“Harry can’t have... he can’t have felt this way—”

"Loved you," Hermione corrected, and then motioned her onward.

Ginny flinched at the words, and tried to ignore the way they made her stomach roll and her skin prickle. "He just can't."

"What if he has?" Hermione asked.

Ginny's pacing stopped and her shoulders slumped. "How did I not know? How did I not see?"

Hermione bit her lip and weighed her words. "Harry has gotten very good over the years at hiding things from all of us. Ron and I both knew about his crush when you were younger, but we honestly thought he'd worked through it."

"Ron told me Harry didn't think of me like that." Ginny threw her arms up in the air. "Hermione, I would have... I would have..." She shook her head as nothing came to her. She didn't know what she would have done if she'd known.

"You weren't ready," Hermione said softly. "And to be honest, neither was he."

"Not when we were younger," Ginny conceded. "But all these years... And he was the one who suggested that I move in with him!"

Hermione snorted out a laugh. "I know. He and Ron had quite the row about it."

"Ron didn't want me there?"

"He was worried about Harry, actually: worried that Harry was doing it for the wrong reasons, worried that he wouldn't be able to handle seeing you every day. I'm sorry to say, but I think you were the least of Ron's concerns. You've always taken care of yourself, Ginny."

"That's the part I'm angry about," Ginny sighed. She rolled her shoulders to release the tension. "No one thought to talk to me about any of this. Harry kept it bottled up inside all these years. You and Ron knew."

"Your whole family knows, Ginny." Hermione shook her head. "What would you have done if one of us had taken you aside and told you that Harry was in love with you?"

Ginny glared at her friend. How could her family treat her this way? "I would have told you that you were off your nut."

"Exactly. I can't speak for everyone, Ginny, but I know that what I knew was told to me in confidence. I honestly didn't feel comfortable saying something to you about Harry's feelings."

"I can understand that," Ginny dismissed. "But Harry... he didn't let me have a choice in it, did he?"

"He is now," Hermione pointed out. "Ginny, do you understand how hard it had to have been for Harry to even understand what love is, let alone how to properly show someone that he loves them? Who did he have to teach him that? I think it's a miracle that he can feel it at all, really."

Ginny moved to the window and stared out over the neighborhood. She pressed her forehead to the

window. "Why did he have to choose right now? Why did he wait until I had finally met someone decent?"

Hermione answered from right next to her and Ginny jumped. "Someone decent?"

"Brian is a nice bloke, Hermione. He's handsome and... and... nice."

"Decent, handsome, and nice," Hermione repeated the words rather dully. "How does he make you feel?"

Her whispered question rankled, and Ginny pushed away from the window, pacing in the small living room.

"Like... like..."

"Let's try a different question," Hermione suggested. "How does Harry make you feel?"

"Furious," Ginny burst out. "I want to hex him until he can't walk anymore."

Hermione nodded after laughing softly. "Alright. How else?"

"I don't know what's going to come out of his mouth at any given moment anymore," Ginny sighed. "He's all over the place—stalking me, buying me flowers, walking around the flat starkers. How can I deal with this?"

"Harry walked around the flat naked?" Hermione gasped, and made a sound like a choking laugh.

Ginny glared, even though she felt her face heat. "I never know what he's going to do next."

"So he makes you feel on edge because he's unpredictable." Hermione nodded her understanding. "Close your eyes and think about Harry before all of this—before he told you how he felt about you, before Brian."

Ginny sighed stubbornly and then closed her eyes. Her fingers rested on the back of the sofa in front of her. This felt a bit silly, but she trusted Hermione to be helpful.

"What did that Harry make you feel?"

"Safe," Ginny admitted. The warmth of the feeling made her skin prickle and she gripped the cushion until her fingers ached. "Safe and strong."

"Harry made you feel strong about yourself because he supported you being an Auror."

"Yes," Ginny admitted. "He believes in me." Her voice cracked when she remembered Harry's statement today that he would have been at all of her games if she had played Quidditch.

"What else do you feel?"

"Trust and... and friendship."

"Those are good things, Ginny."

Ginny let her eyes open. "I just... I love him, I really do. But he's like my brother, Hermione."

"I don't think he is, Ginny." Hermione's look was intense. "I think you've stuck him in that category for so long that you can't picture him as anything but."

Ginny snorted, but any humor died when the thought really sank into her mind. Did she really see Harry that way?

Hermione was quiet for so long that Ginny shifted uncomfortably. "Can I ask you something without you getting angry at me?"

"What is it with that question?" Ginny mused moodily up to the ceiling. "Why does everyone just assume that I'll—" She cut off at Hermione's knowing look. Oh. Good point.

"Have you ever gotten aroused when you're with Harry?"

"No," Ginny denied far too fast, and her cheeks heated.

"So that's a definite 'yes'." Hermione's lips twisted into a smirk and Ginny growled.

"That's... I can't control that, Hermione. I'm a healthy young woman, of course I get aroused when he walks through without his shirt, or when he's... you know, taking charge of an investigation or something." The last bit slipped out, and she cringed. Did she really think Harry was sexy when he was in charge?

A picture of his dark, flashing eyes came into her mind, and Ginny felt her pulse quicken and her knees weaken. Damn it.

"So you love Harry because he makes you feel safe and strong," Hermione began to list what Ginny had said, and Ginny climbed over the back of the sofa, pulling a pillow into her arms and hugging it tightly as she listened. "He respects you and trusts you. He's someone you can confide in with anything, and he protects you. You're good friends with a lot in common. You know he loves you. And you're physically attracted to him."

The quietness of the room was deafening and Ginny felt a single tear slip down her cheek.

"That's not a brother, Ginny, and I think you know it."

Another tear followed the first, and Ginny breathed harshly against the pillow. "How... how could I not know?"

"You're too close to the situation, maybe." Hermione shrugged helplessly. "I think you've loved Harry for some time now, but you never let yourself see it for what it was. You thought he was supposed to be a brother, a partner, so the little things didn't add up to you."

"I don't know what to do next," Ginny said. She felt like she'd fallen from too far—she'd shattered on the dirt and might never be whole again. "I feel... I feel so very tired."

"What do you want, Ginny?" Hermione prompted. "What do you really want?"

"I don't know," Ginny said. She rested her head on the sofa and curled tighter around the pillow.

"I think you do." Ginny looked up sharply at Hermione's firm tone. "I think you know what you want. It's okay not to tell me, it really is."

Ginny blinked away the moisture in her eyes and sat up. She put the pillow aside and rubbed her face.

"But you do need to talk to Harry about it."

"I do," Ginny nodded. "And I want to, I just... I needed to understand what I'm feeling."

"Talking helps."

"I still don't know if it's right," Ginny protested. "But it doesn't frighten me as much as it did. I... don't know what Harry wants."

"He's not asking for a commitment, Ginny," Hermione said with a smile. "He hasn't proposed, and he's not even asking you for sex—although I'm sure he wouldn't be opposed."

Ginny snorted and looked away. Just the thought made her head fuzz beyond comprehension right now.

"All he's asking is for you to believe him when he tells you he loves you," Hermione continued. "What the two of you decide from there is between the two of you. We all want to see you together because we think you can both be happy. We've seen you together for years, Ginny. Harry smiles and laughs when you're around. He relaxes and enjoys life. And you trust him more than you trust anyone else. You really let go of the inner Ginny when Harry is around."

"The inner Ginny?" Ginny snorted at the phrase. "Am I so horrible when Harry's not around?"

"Well," Hermione hesitated, "we didn't like to say anything..."

Ginny tossed the pillow at her friend who blocked it from hitting her head. "I think I know what you're saying. We're both better people when the other is around."

"I wouldn't say better," Hermione protested, "but definitely happier. All we want for both of you is to be happy."

"And you think it'll really work out?"

"I have no idea," Hermione admitted with a shrug of her shoulders. "That's up to the two of you."

Ginny moved and looked out the window once more, letting her eyes slide out of focus until the street lights were blurry. "I want to be happy," she said quietly. "Harry... Harry makes me happy." She wasn't sure if it was a question or not, but the answer came as a calming feeling in her chest.

Harry made her happy.

"I need... I need to talk to him." She looked back over her shoulder to see Hermione wiping her eyes with a tissue. "I need to tell him that I... that I believe him."

"That's a good start," Hermione nodded and gathered her into a hug. "Be honest with him, Ginny, and honest with yourself. You both deserve everything this world can give you."

"I will," Ginny promised, both Hermione and herself. "I just..."

"What is it?" Hermione pulled back from the hug and peered closely at her. "More doubts?"

"Yes. No. I don't know?" Ginny laughed at her indecision. "He's felt this way for a long time, Hermione. I can't... I can't compare with that. I just now realized..."

"He won't compare," Hermione assured her. "It's not a contest with him. I think you'll find he understands more than you think. You both needed to be in the same place for this to work."

Ginny chewed the side of her lip. "I want to... to love him like he loves me, Hermione. He deserves that."

Hermione smiled and brushed a lock of Ginny's hair behind her ear. "I think you'll be surprised at how much you really do love him, Ginny."

Ginny sighed. She wasn't sure if she believed Hermione, but she was too tired to argue—too tired to fight anything anymore. Now that she'd broken through what she was feeling, and understood it just a little better, Ginny felt drained.

"Can you make it home alright?"

Ginny rubbed her face and nodded. "I'll be fine. Thank you for—"

"For just helping you sort your thoughts." Hermione bobbed her head firmly. "That's all you really needed, you know. I didn't give you anything that wasn't already there."

"Except a listening ear," Ginny said and hugged her friend once more. "That's what I needed most."

Chapter 8: That You Love Me

Their Saturday

The flat was quiet again, and Ginny almost growled at it. This flat wasn't supposed to be quiet and dark. It was supposed to ooze life, as it once had. This thing between her and Harry had sucked the very life out of everything. It smothered their friendship until it wasn't comfortable and welcome like it had once been.

Ginny hesitated at Harry's door. She could tell he was home. His shoes were discarded near the sofa and his cloak was hung by the door. Should she really wake him to talk right now? Perhaps she should wait until the morning, when they'd both had a few hours of sleep.

The urge to talk to him right now just wouldn't go away, though. There were so many times when she'd woken Harry from a good night's sleep to talk to him about something that had been bothering her, or something exciting that happened. Those were sweet, wonderful memories, and Harry had never minded. He never complained about the lack of sleep, or the trivial things that Ginny told him.

Her heart twinged when she thought about it. Was that really what love was? Waking someone up just to tell them about something you'd accomplished, no matter how small? Wanting to see their eyes light with pride and respect?

Without thinking any further, Ginny slowly opened his door. She didn't knock, but simply walked inside.

Harry was stretched out on the bed, but the covers were a mess, tangled around his legs. He looked so young lying there with his mouth partially open and soft snores coming from him. Ginny almost turned around and walked out the door to let him rest. The need to tell him that she believed him was still there, though, and Ginny knew she wouldn't be able to sleep until she did.

Slowly, she sank onto the side of the bed. Harry rolled toward her and she thought about just last Sunday morning when she'd been right here, stroking his hair. There was a much different feel about the action when she reached out and touched his head now. She caressed it gently, and watched the way his eyelids fluttered in dream.

She loved him. She couldn't deny it now. She may have only realized it an hour ago, but the feeling wasn't new. As Ginny surrendered to it she felt her cheeks wet with tears again.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

Ginny nudged her shoes off, and climbed fully onto the bed. Harry's head lifted groggily from the pillow, and he blinked unfocused eyes at her as she moved closer and closer.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered again and again.

Harry gathered her in, and cradled her against his chest. "Don't cry, Gin," he whispered. She could

feel him reach for his glasses and he pulled them on before lifting her face.

"I didn't understand," she continued. "I thought... And I was wrong. So very wrong."

He looked at her for a long minute before shushing her and kissing her forehead. "It's okay."

"It's not," Ginny said and swiped angrily at her tears. "It's not alright the way I treated you. It's not okay that I really didn't believe you when you told me how you felt. And it's not okay that you've spent so long keeping this a secret."

His smile at her growing temper was even more infuriating, and she poked at his chest.

"Damn, that's the same place. I have a bruise now."

"Don't change the subject," Ginny scolded. She wanted to lean forward and place a kiss to where she'd hurt him, but she didn't need the distraction right now.

His fingers fumbled for hers and wound them together. "I'm going to assume, in my extremely tired state, that you climbing into my bed means you finally believe me."

Ginny snorted and laid her head on his chest. "I believe you."

He was quiet for a minute, and Ginny lifted her head to see him grinning a smile that stretched ear to ear.

"Don't act smug, Harry," she warned. "I'm mad as hell that you didn't just talk to me years ago about this."

His amusement faded and he brought her fingers up to his lips to press a kiss there. "I should have and I'm sorry."

They looked at each other for a second before Harry leaned closer. "Can I kiss you now?"

"Don't ask me for permission," Ginny snapped. "If you want something—"

Harry kissed her without letting her finish. He laughed into the kiss and rolled her until his weight pressed her into the mattress. Ginny sighed in happiness.

This was loving someone, she decided right then and there.

"I hope you know I don't just fancy you," Harry said breathlessly when he pulled back from the kiss.

"I love you," Ginny burst out. Her cheeks heated but there was no way she was going to take it back now. Harry's face lit with something she didn't think she'd ever seen before, but didn't know how to describe.

"But not like a brother," he clarified and wiggled his body against hers.

Ginny sucked in a breath at the sensation, and nodded jerkily. "Not like a brother."

He kissed her again, angling her head so that his tongue could slide into her mouth. He was demanding and passionate, while holding her so gently that Ginny felt herself shatter for the second time tonight.

They kissed for several minutes, and Ginny's mind raced ahead, wondering if she was really ready for where they seemed to be headed. Harry's touches began to slow, and he eventually pulled back and cradled her into his arms.

"I'm in love with you, Ginny," he said and kissed her forehead.

Ginny let the feeling of that phrase—one she'd never heard before—break over her, filling her soul completely.

"I wish... I wish I'd seen it sooner, understood sooner."

"We have now," Harry protested.

"But—"

Harry pressed his fingers to her lips. "You can't blame yourself for something that wasn't completely your fault. I mean, you were rather thick about the whole thing, but—Ooof." He stopped speaking when she hit his stomach.

"I'm to blame just as much," he finished after capturing her hand, and holding it against his chest. "Probably more."

Ginny kissed his chest lightly and stared at the scars there. "I want to... to love you as much as you love me, but I'm afraid I won't."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked and pulled back to look at her.

"You've known for years. I've known for... for hours... minutes, really."

"I don't think that has anything to do with how much you love someone, Ginny."

She nodded even though she wasn't completely convinced. "When did you know?"

Harry bit his lip and pulled back. His fingers traced the features on her face. "I was horribly taken with you right from the beginning."

"I remember the spilled pumpkin juice at the breakfast table in the Great Hall, and the way you tripped up the stairs," Ginny said. Harry scrunched up his face and growled while digging his fingers into her side.

"Let's not talk about my prattish tendencies, please."

Ginny laughed. It hit her in that moment that she didn't feel tired and drained. She didn't feel that the flat was cold and lifeless, anymore. Harry was here, he was teasing and laughing and... happy. She was teasing and laughing and undeniably happy.

"I think it was in the Chamber that it really hit me," he explained. He smoothed a piece of hair away from the side of her face. "You were so pale, so quiet, that I thought you'd died. And a part of me went with you. That's why I didn't hesitate to kill the Basilisk or fight Riddle. I knew it didn't matter if I died, because you weren't there to live for."

"You were only twelve," Ginny protested as she tried to understand. "Twelve year old boys don't think about things like that."

Harry shifted and looked thoughtful for a minute. "Dumbledore always said the most powerful force in the world is love. It's terrible and wonderful at the same time. I don't know why I felt it then, in that moment, but it changed everything for me."

Ginny's eyes filled with tears and she blinked them away. She'd done far too much crying today. "I wish it had worked for me that way."

"I don't know why," Harry denied again. "But the next few years were... they were hell."

Ginny winced and pulled away until she could look at him fully. "I'm sorry—"

"Not your fault," he shook his head. "What I felt for you got me through it, Ginny. Please don't apologize for that."

"But if I'd only felt the same, maybe it wouldn't have been so bad."

"Voldemort still would have come after me," Harry denied. "No one but him could have changed that. I still would have had to fight. I still would have had to..." He trailed off swallowed thickly.

"You still would have had to die," she said. Her fingers found the lightning shaped scar on his chest and brushed over it. Harry shivered beneath her touch.

"Yes, I still would have had to," he agreed. "When I did, though... I did it because of you. Ron and Hermione too, but... mostly you."

Ginny felt all of her breath leave her, and she struggled to think of what to say. "I'm not sure I can love you like that," she whispered.

"You already do," he shrugged far too innocently for what he'd just confessed.

He'd died *for her*.

"How many times have you saved me from some suspect pointing his wand at me?" he asked. "How many times have you made sure that I was taking care of myself, and that I didn't stay here alone in the flat?"

"It's not the same," Ginny protested.

"It is to me," Harry insisted. He pulled her closer, and his breath was hot against her cheeks. "You save me every day, Ginny Weasley. You save my when you smile at me, when you make me laugh. You save me when you don't let me get away with being a git."

"That one is extra hard," Ginny agreed. She smiled through her tears and blinked them away.

"It's not some sort of competition, you know," Harry said. Ginny snorted. Hermione had said that same thing. "It doesn't matter to me that you've loved me for a second or two."

"It's been longer than that." Ginny scowled and kissed his collar bone. "At least a few hours."

Harry laughed and lifted her face to kiss her. "I love you," he whispered against her lips. "And you love me."

"Mmmhmmm," Ginny agreed. Her mind was beginning to shut down again as Harry's fingers found bits of skin. He traced the place where her shirt rode up, and ran his fingertips up her arms until she shivered. He kissed her neck and collarbone, tugging aside her shirt until it was pulling at her neck.

She wanted to tell him it was alright to take it off, but was that being too forward? Would he think she was a tart for saying something like that when they'd only been in this place in their relationship for an hour?

Harry finally settled against her, resting his cheek on her shoulder. She could feel how worked up he was, and was flattered, but unsure how to proceed.

"It gets harder and harder to stop," Harry sighed. He rubbed his face and then lifted. "But you do know that I will stop if you tell me to, yeah?"

Ginny nodded. She had no doubt that he would hold back heaven and earth for her if he could. "I do."

"I trust that you'd hex my bits if I got too carried away." The conviction in his statement made her laugh and Ginny leaned up to press a kiss to his cheek.

"Thank you for trusting me to take care of myself. It's one of the reasons that I love you, you know."

Harry's face lit again. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Ginny brushed her hand along his jaw and shivered when his whiskers caught the skin there. "You let me be who I am, and you don't judge me for it."

"I love who you are," Harry said, "even when you're stubborn and I have to knock you upside the head with a Beater's bat to get you to notice how much I love you."

Ginny snorted. "Was that tomorrow's plan?"

"Or Monday," Harry shrugged. "I wasn't being too particular. My plans sort of evolved with the situation, you know."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I can't believe you did all of that."

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat," Harry laughed. "It worked."

"It did," Ginny conceded. "But I doubt either of us will be allowed back in the theater anytime soon."

Harry laughed and kissed the end of her nose.

"You never did tell me how your date went."

"Great," Harry grinned. "In fact, it went so well that I'm taking her to see the same film again tomorrow night. Hope you don't mind."

Ginny pinched his side, and Harry squirmed away from her fingers. "I *do* mind, actually. It's taken me a lot of long, hard thinking to understand what I feel for you, Harry. I'm not about to let some popcorn-eating, film-watching tart steal you away from me."

She leaned up and kissed him then, staking her claim on him. Harry didn't seem to mind, however, because he pulled her on top of him and his hand slid down to caress her bottom. Ginny chuckled into the kiss and enjoyed the way he was touching her.

"Maybe we can give her Brian's floo address," Harry suggested.

Ginny snorted, but then sobered. "I should really go and talk to him."

"Forget him," Harry said. His tongue on her neck, and the way he suckled the soft spot just below her ear, made Brian Matthews fly right out of her head. "The Prick is history."

"Be nice," Ginny scolded gently. "I feel bad about how I treated him."

"He's a big boy, Ginny," Harry protested. "He'll live."

Ginny scowled, but let Harry's hands distract her one more time. "This... this is going to change everything, isn't it?"

Harry laid his head back on the pillow and looked up at her. "Yes and no," he said. He wiggled them until they were cuddled side by side. "I don't think it will change much because we're still best friends. But it will change everything because I hope to one day have sex with you."

Ginny snorted and kissed his chest one more time. "Still best friends," she repeated his words. The warmth of Harry's embrace, and the peace of the place they were now, made Ginny feel happier than she ever remembered being.

One Week Later: Their Sunday

The crooked Burrow had never looked more inviting, and then again, more imposing, as they walked toward it. Their feet crunched on the snow as they walked, and small clumps of it dusted their shoulders and woolen hats.

"Come on." Ginny tugged at his hand, pulling him along and glanced over her shoulder at him. "You're being slow today."

"Sorry," Harry answered automatically. His eyes lifted to take in the looming structure, coming closer and closer.

Ginny slowed her step and moved closer. "Are you... You're nervous?"

"I shouldn't be," Harry chuckled softly and shrugged. "I've been here a thousand times, but... it feels different tonight."

"How so?" Ginny asked. She wrapped her arms around him, and rocked them side to side slightly.

"I just... I've been here as Harry, Ron's friend. I've been here as Harry, friend of the Weasleys. And I've been here as just plain Harry—"

"Who was in love with me," Ginny pointed out.

"True," he agreed. "But it still feels different."

"Maybe because I love you back now?" Ginny's eyebrows contracted together slightly. "Or because we're sleeping together?"

Harry snorted, and looked down at her rosy cheeks and the end of her nose that was pink with the cold air. "That's probably it."

Ginny laughed and let out a sigh. "We've been together a week, Harry. Ron and Hermione know, that means everyone knows."

"I know," he nodded and looked back up at the Burrow again. It was just the same as always, and yet it felt like so much more was entailed with stepping through that back door. Ron had told him how happy the Weasleys were about Harry and Ginny's relationship. George had even sent an owl with a horribly obnoxious singing note. Ginny had vanished it the moment the first lewd suggestion popped out. So why did it feel so strange to be here now?

"It's been two weeks since we were here," he mused. "Two weeks, and everything has changed."

"It has." Ginny nodded against his chest, and turned to look at the house as well. "And yet it hasn't. You love me, I love you. Everyone in that house loves the both of us. Merlin, we're never going to get over the teasing." Harry grinned and squeezed her in his embrace. "And we're still going to kick everyone's arses at Exploding Snap."

"There is that," Harry agreed. He leaned down and pressed his lips to the end of her nose, warming the red spot with a kiss.

"Let's get this over with," Ginny sighed. "I swear to you if George sings that horrid little song, I'm going to spill every detail of our sex life all over the dinner table just to see his eyes pop out and roll around on the floor."

Harry snorted and grimaced at the same time. "I'd rather not..."

Ginny pulled away and yanked on his hand. "I'm not going to tell them the truth, Harry. I'm sure I have a creative enough imagination to at least get him to leave us alone."

Harry braced his foot and pulled her back to him. Her eyes widened and he felt his pulse beat just a bit faster. "I just... Ginny, you know I love you. Merlin, I've told you enough over the past few days. Or maybe I haven't—"

Her finger pressed to his lips. "I know."

"And no matter what happens in there," he nodded toward the house, "I want you to know that what you and I have between us, what we've shared... Ginny, it's the most important thing ever to me."

"I know," she said once more. Her expression softened, and Harry shuddered at the fire burning deep inside her gaze. It reminded him of every intimate moment they'd spent over the past few days, and he instantly wanted to Disapparate right now, take her home and do horribly un-family-friendly things to her.

"And nothing anyone says will change how I feel about it."

Ginny's smile widened and she kissed his chin. "Good, because I have a feeling you and I are in for it."

"No doubt," Harry snorted. "Ron's here. That's enough without adding George to the potion as well. George. Ron. Explosion." His eyes went wide as he pictured the whole Burrow bursting with the energy of a nuclear detonation.

Ginny laughed. "They can be a bit much at times, yeah?"

Harry gave one last look to the house and nodded firmly. "Let's go."

The warmth that washed out when Ginny opened the door stole Harry's breath for a moment. He couldn't help but grin, though. This was home. Chaos and clutter, warmth and noise. Home.

A loud cheer went up when they were fully in the room, and Harry blinked around at all the faces staring at the couple.

"I think they figured it out," Ginny whispered, loud enough that everyone heard.

"What's with the, er..." Harry pointed at the bright colored balloons floating near the ceiling, and the banner that hung. He couldn't quite make out the whole word as it was hanging rather crookedly.

"Congratulations?" Ginny mused. "Er... Thanks, I suppose."

Everyone piled toward them, and Harry struggled to remove his cloak and hat through all of the handshakes and back slapping that went on. Ginny looked as confused as he felt, although she was still smiling.

"I knew you had it in you, mate." Bill clapped Harry firmly on the back, and Harry had to take a step forward to keep from tipping flat on his face.

All this for simply getting together with Ginny? Wasn't it a bit... much?

After extracting herself from a very exuberant Fleur Weasley hug, Ginny curled into Harry's side.

"They've all gone barmy," she muttered through a teeth-clenching smile.

"I admit I'm happy, but..." Harry shrugged. Perhaps everyone was simply so thrilled that he and Ginny were now together that they felt a need to celebrate.

"Well done, Harry!" Ron grabbed both of them into a breath-stealing embrace, and Harry's head knocked against Ginny's.

"Ow, Ron!"

The tall redhead didn't seem phased at all when Ginny mashed her foot down on his to get him to release them. Harry simply patted Ron weakly on the back, and tried to let his brain catch up to what was happening.

"Let me through!"

His eyes widened, and he and Ginny exchanged a momentary worried glance before Ron's arms were replaced with Molly Weasley's.

"Oh, my babies. I'm so happy for the both of you. It's been so long since we had such wonderful news to celebrate!"

Harry could tell Ginny was getting agitated—or perhaps she simply couldn't breathe—because she struggled against his side.

"Yeah, it's... it's great, isn't it?" Harry asked lamely. His brain still hadn't quite figured out why everyone was so excited.

Molly pulled back and swiped at the tears in her eyes. "It's perfect," she proclaimed.

"A toast to the happy couple!" Arthur cried as he held up a glass of something pale and sparkly. Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Percy shoved a glass in his hand and one in Ginny's. They shared one last confused look before Harry lifted his glass and then took a huge swallow.

Why not celebrate? He was happier than he'd ever been in his life. He was in love, and surrounded by a family that was just as happy about it as he was.

"It's not every day your daughter gets engaged to Harry Potter, after all."

Harry choked on the liquid in his mouth, and tried to force it down while Arthur's words hammered inside his head. But the champagne simply wouldn't cooperate, and kept spluttering out his mouth and nose.

Ginny swore loudly beside him, and clapped him hard on the back.

"Engaged?" she demanded. Her expression was caught between horrified, and thinking her family was all being possessed. If Harry hadn't been in the process of choking to death on the fuzzy little bubbles that kept exploding inside him, he might have demanded to know who had hexed the whole

houseful of Weasleys, as well.

"Oh look, Harry's all embarrassed," George piped up. His smile was just a bit too evil to be real, and Harry opened his mouth, barking out a hoarse question that no one heard or understood.

"Now," Molly clapped her hands in front of her face and beamed at them. "We have so much planning to do. I think we can manage a late spring wedding if we start getting the details now."

Ginny made a whimpering sound, and Harry felt her fingernails dig into the flesh of his arm.

"I think... there's been some sort of... misunderstanding," Harry finally choked out. What he wouldn't give for something horribly alcoholic to swallow right now. Not that bubbly rubbish that they'd toasted with, but something that might make his throat clear enough that he could speak.

"There are invitation lists to be made, and announcements in the Daily Prophet," Molly continued on right over him, and Harry's eyes bulged. Merlin, if the Daily Prophet got hold of this story...

He forced a deep breath into his lungs, and glanced over at Ginny. Her face was getting redder by the minute, and Harry wasn't sure if she was embarrassed or angry. Her whole body shook next to his and he knew, either way, he was going to have to jump in before this got even further out of hand.

"We're not engaged," he yelled. Silence answered him back and eyes widened. Harry's pulse raced, and he panicked, trying to think of a way out of this. "Ginny and I... we're just dating. We've just started dating, actually. I think that marriage is... well, I'm sure it's wonderful and all, but..."

Bill stood and scowled. Harry hadn't ever really thought of him as an overprotective man before, but the look he wore made Harry's legs shake. "Are you saying that Ginny's not good enough—"

"Merlin, no!" Harry burst out. He groped for Ginny's hand, and clutched it tightly. "Ginny's... she's amazing. I'd be lucky to have her. Any bloke would. What I'm saying is that we... it's a bit soon to be thinking of..."

"Yeah, but you live together," Hermione pointed out. Harry's eyes bulged.

"And now that you're seeing each other," Ron added in, "you might as well get married, you know. It's not like you'd have to change much, and then poor Mum wouldn't have to think about her daughter as a scarlet—"

"Enough!" Harry exploded. There was no way he was going to let Ron finish that sentence. His whole body shook with energy, and he took a shuddering breath.

"I'm in love with Ginny, and I have been for a very long time. We're seeing each other, but we've just started. We're not going to rush into anything to please anyone else. We're going to do things for us, when we want to do them."

"Harry—"

"And one day, I will most likely ask Ginny to marry me, but it'll be when we feel it's right and not—"

"

"Harry." Ginny's voice finally broke through, and he gaped at her grinning face. "They're taking the piss."

"What?" He blinked and his mind jumped ahead, trying to process what she'd said with what he'd just inadvertently admitted, and the wide grins on everyone else's face.

"The family," Ginny nodded toward the room as a whole. "They're completely winding us up, Harry."

He blinked down at her, and then looked over at Hermione and Ron who were unsuccessfully trying to hold back rolling laughter. It broke free and Harry's jaw dropped as everything clicked in his mind.

"You... you threw me under the bus," he accused. "You... you told them about us and they..." He gestured around to the balloons and banner.

The whole room burst into wild, roaring laughter.

"Sorry, mate," Ron shrugged. "But the both of you deserved it after all that you've put us through over the years. Couple of thick gits."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but then snapped it shut. Ginny was laughing now, too, and he glared at her. "This is *not* funny."

"Awww, come on, Harrykins," George said. "You have to admit it was a little funny."

"Yeah," Bill agreed. "You turn some very interesting shades of red."

"I can't believe you," Ginny said as she wrapped her arm around Harry's waist, and glared at her family. She was having a hard time keeping her amusement inside, though. "Tricking us both like that."

"It was worth it." Molly and Arthur raised glasses of champagne, clinked them together and drank. Harry and Ginny exchanged looks and shook their heads.

They'd been had. Completely and thoroughly had. Harry snorted and it grew into a chuckle. Ginny's giggles gave way to full laughter. Harry leaned down and kissed her then, ignoring the whistles and cat calls from her family.

"Did you mean what you said, Harry?" she asked quietly when they pulled back.

Harry felt his face heat. He knew he'd meant it, but admitting it right now, after being together only a few days, felt too soon. "We'll see. I might decide that your family is too barmy to be around, after all."

"You'd chuck me over them?" she asked, tilting her head to the side with an incredulous look.

"Maybe you can convince me you're worth it," he murmured as he lowered his head once more.

Ginny laughed into the kiss, and something exploded over the top of them. Showers of sparks rained down and tickled Harry's skin where they landed.

"Ahem!"

They broke apart when Percy directed two new glasses of champagne to nudge their heads.

"To happiness!" He held his glass aloft, and everyone repeated the phrase loudly.

Harry looked down at Ginny, her eyes sparkling just as much as the glass he held. "To happiness." He said it out of sync with the others.

"And many more years of making Harry panic," George added.

Ginny grinned up at him. "To Harry's panic," she toasted and kissed him once more.

Harry knew this was how life was supposed to be. Chaos and noise, fun and warmth. Home. Love.

And now it was his.