

Harry Potter

Seeking the Silver

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Seeking the Silver

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Summary: Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley are happy with their lives.

They're both successful and content with where they are going. Fate, however, has very different ideas.

Chapter One

Harry Potter whistled as he walked up the short lane to the Burrow. It was such a beautiful spring day that he'd been happy to Apparate a short distance away and enjoy the crisp, clean country air as he ambled up the dusty road. It had been several days since he'd seen Ron, Hermione or anyone from his adoptive family. The case he'd been working up until yesterday evening had required most of his attention. He'd been thrilled when they'd found the missing young woman and taken her back to be with her family. Not all cases ended so well and Harry had decided to celebrate a bit. It had been late by the time his Auror team had returned to the Ministry so he'd opted to grab some Chinese take away and a bottle of firewhiskey. The food and drink had gone perfectly with the action film he'd been saving to watch.

That was the reason it was almost noon when Harry woke and found an urgent message from Ron asking him to come to the Burrow. Now, usually, Harry would be more worked up over such a summons. However, the fact that it was Ron and not Hermione who had written it might have meant a few things. One, Ron was in the doghouse with his beloved fiancé and was hiding out at the Burrow, needing Harry to assist his repentance. Two, the 'emergency' was really something minor that would amuse Harry, no doubt, and that Ron just didn't want to admit to Hermione he'd done something that Harry needed to help fix.

On the whole, Harry hadn't seen any clues to point to anything extremely urgent about the message that Pigwidgeon had delivered. So, he'd taken a shower and even shaved to make himself more presentable. He'd even donned his most comfortable jeans; it was his day off, after all.

The exterior of the Burrow seemed to be no worse than the last time he'd seen it, so Harry continued on in. His smile soon slipped from his face when he saw the sullen faces surrounding the table. Ron, Charlie and George started when he entered and they all winced when a rather large crash sounded from upstairs.

"Bloody hell," Harry cried. He'd immediately crouched and pulled his wand, his eyes widened when the others simply stayed sitting.

"It's only Ginny, mate," Ron mumbled and Harry searched the other faces for confirmation before sighing and slipping his wand away.

Harry took a seat and studied each face. All was silent except for the crashes and yelling from upstairs which Harry couldn't make out more than an occasional word. It made Ginny's brothers wince though.

"What happened to your eye, mate?" Harry asked as he took in the slightly purple ring surrounding his friend's left eye. Ron lifted a finger and gently touched his eye.

"Ginny did that too," George filled Harry in with a slight grin.

Harry raised both eyebrows. In all his years with the Weasley family he'd seen Ginny mad a few times but rarely enough to hit someone.

"What'd you say to her?" Harry asked with a chuckle.

Ron opened his mouth to answer but a rather loud crash of what sounded like glass echoed through the house. Hermione, wiping her brow and breathing rather heavily, appeared down the stairs.

“Was that glass?” Charlie asked delicately.

Hermione rolled her eyes and sat next to Ron after giving Harry a rather embarrassed smile. “Yes,” she said. “I conjured a box of plates for her to throw. I just know when she calms down she’ll regret ruining some of her nicer things. I thought it best to prevent that from happening.”

“You willingly gave her something to destroy?” Charlie burst out.

Hermione nodded and shrugged. “Molly has her wand, thank heavens.” Harry’s eyebrow’s rose in shock. Anyone close enough to take Ginny’s wand from her was likely to come out the worse for wear. Ginny was known as a formidable witch. “Besides, for some people there’s just nothing quite as satisfying as seeing glass shatter.”

Harry stared at his oldest friends in horrified awe. Was everyone here going completely barmy? Why was Ginny hurting others and destroying things, and why was no one doing anything to stop her?

“So,” he said after hearing another loud crash, “is anyone planning to enlighten me?”

They all looked at Ron who sighed and glanced up at him. Harry had a hard time not chuckling at the darkening purple bruise that Ron’s sister had inflicted. If he knew Ginny, and ten years of friendship should attest to that, Ron probably had it coming.

“Well, it all started this morning. See, Hermione and I came over for breakfast. Mum wanted to talk about the wedding plans.” Harry nodded for him to continue. “And then Ginny came down.”

They all winced again as a door slammed and Molly’s yelling could be heard again over the top of her daughter’s ranting.

“Then this owl showed up,” George put in, “from Gringotts.”

Harry nodded for him to continue but he just glanced at Ron who looked quickly away, his ears darkening red.

“An owl from Gringotts,” Harry confirmed, not completely sure where this was leading. Everyone looked around and Harry huffed. “And?” He was about to demand an explanation from Hermione when the back door opened and a rather defeated looking Arthur and Bill walked in.

Charlie stood immediately and gave his chair to his father. “I’m going to take it by the looks on your faces that you didn’t have any success.”

Arthur only scowled at the table and Bill sighed, glancing over at Harry and then looking away. Harry, once again, felt like there was something key he was missing. “It’s ironclad,” Bill stated.

“Bugger,” George hissed out. Mr. Weasley raised his face to scold his son but sighed and looked away instead, possibly thinking that the word may have fit the situation.

“Will somebody please tell me what’s going on?” Harry demanded, flinching when he realized how

loud his tone was. The noise from above stopped suddenly and they all looked up.

“... Harry *bleeding* Potter...” Ginny’s voice now drifted down the stairs before Bill quickly pulled his wand and cast a silencing spell toward the rickety staircase.

Harry narrowed his eyes at the group, his suspicions rising. What would Ginny be screaming his name for? Surely he couldn’t be messed up in anything...

It was Hermione who finally answered after huffing at all the men in the room. “Harry, Ginny received a letter from Gringotts this morning. It stated that she was bound to an arranged marriage.”

Harry sank into his seat and let his eyes flit back and forth. Please tell me this is some colossal joke gone awry, he thought to himself. However, George’s drawn face hinted at no amusement as it may have if this had been some prank.

“You’re not joking, are you?” he managed to ask.

“No, Harry,” Hermione shook her head. “Supposedly, generations ago, the Weasley family was indebted to... well, to another wealthy pureblood family,” her eyes darted around the table and several of the occupants winced. Harry furrowed his brow, mentally trying to process what she was saying. “Apparently, the Weasley patriarch offered... this other family... the hand of their next born Weasley female to be wed to the heir of the... other family... the other patriarch accepted and a magical contract was forged.” Hermione sighed and glanced up as the ceiling above them rumbled threateningly.

“Ginny’s nearing her twentieth birthday and the contract needs to be fulfilled.”

“No kidding?” Harry whispered with a hint of pleading to his voice. “You’re serious, Hermione?”

“Absolutely,” Bill confirmed. “Dad and I’ve just been to the Ministry and then to Gringotts to see if we could get some kind of waiver or nullification. The law that the contract was made under no longer exists, although the contract is still binding according to the Wizengamot. Because the two families involved were both pureblood at the time, they don’t feel the need to meddle, they said.”

“Bloody bureaucrats,” Charlie growled and scuffed his shoe along the floor.

“Well,” Harry ruffled his hair, “what about this other family? Have you contacted them? Surely if they agree, the contract can be broken. Or does it require some kind of dowry or something?” An idea had just struck him and he spun on his heel to face Arthur.

“Mr. Weasley, if it’s a matter of money... well, you know that I’ve got more than enough... I’d gladly give anything...”

“Harry,” Arthur put up his hands in protest and a sad smile played on his face. “I’m grateful, believe me. But we’ve searched the entire law and there can be no buying our way out of it, as you’ve suggested.”

Harry sighed and growled in frustration. “So, we just have to let Ginny marry some... some git?

There's no justice in that!"

"Harry-" Hermione tried to interrupt but Harry was too incensed.

"No, Hermione, I'm not going to let someone who's like a sister to me be treated like some... some piece of meat." He began pacing, scowling at the floor, his mind racing to find a solution. "Who is it?" he demanded. "Please tell me it's not Malfoy or some other Death Eater spawn." His heart began racing when they all looked away from him.

"Ron," he whispered. "Please tell me it's not Malfoy."

"It's not Malfoy, mate," Ron said in a low voice. He raised his head and looked directly at Harry. "It's you."

* * *

Ginny finally allowed herself to sink to her bed and let the tears come. For two hours she'd yelled and screamed and thrown everything in sight. But now the anger had fizzled into tears.

Why did it always come down to this in her life? Why was it always about him? Harry-bleeding-Saviour-Of-The-World-Potter. It had all started with that hideous crush she'd had on him when she was younger. And then he'd saved her life and she'd forced herself to take him down off of the pedestal she'd put him on and really examine him. That's when the crush began to fade. And over the years she'd determined that he would never return any affection that she offered, so she stopped putting it out for him to see. Instead, she'd tucked it away and squashed it down so hard and deep that she'd been able to forget about it enough to move on with her life.

At times, she'd allowed it out of its dark corner and allowed it to flourish-if only a bit, before forcing it back into obscurity. There were a few times when she'd caught some hint that Harry might be thinking of her as more than his best mate's sister, or perhaps even his own sister. In her fifth year, she'd been seeing Dean Thomas at the time, Harry had seemed to begin hanging around her more. He'd laughed at her jokes and she seemed to catch him watching her at times. But then he'd never said anything, never done anything to take it further and she'd forced that part of her heart and mind to close down.

Then again, just after the Final Battle, she'd run to him and hugged him tightly. How could she not after her heart had nearly broken seeing him lying there dead in Hagrid's massive arms? And Harry had held the hug a moment longer than necessary. And he seemed to take in a deep breath when she finally pulled back. However, when he'd pulled away and then disappeared for two days, she'd savagely scolded herself and allowed herself to cry. After all, she had the perfect excuse now to appear with red eyes and a puff face-her brother had just been killed after all.

But here she was again, returned to the same position by the same man all over again. It really didn't matter that Harry was, obviously, completely ignorant that he was doing it. In her mind and heart, the same wizard was responsible for most of the heartache in her life. In this situation, it definitely wasn't Harry's fault, but years of regrets and repressed feelings made him an easy source to blame.

"It's not fair," she mumbled out and her mother's strong arms wrapped around her shoulder.

“No, it isn’t, love.”

“How can they do this to me? I’ve worked so hard to get past this... to get past him and then we’re pushed back together again.” She cried even harder and her mother wiped at her own tears.

“I wish there was something I could say, Ginny-girl. Something I could do to take the pain away. You know, though, it could be much-”

“Please don’t tell me it could be worse,” Ginny sighed. “Believe me, I know it could. But I don’t want to think about that right now. Right now there’s nothing worse than being bonded to... that git... who won’t ever be able to make me happy and who I won’t be able to make happy. Our lives will be miserable and there’s nothing either of us can do about it.”

“Oh, Ginny,” Molly sighed and smoothed her daughter’s hair.

“We should just let the consequences happen,” she mumbled, mostly to herself.

“Ginevra Weasely!” Her mother screamed and pulled away violently, grabbing her shoulders. “Don’t ever let me hear you say that!”

“Well, it’s true, mum,” Ginny said stoically. “Dying certainly can’t be worse than living with someone who despises you day after day.”

“Harry does not despise you,” Molly shook her shoulders just a bit. “He loves you.”

Ginny scoffed. “No, he pities me. And, you know, if he actually does agree to this... he’ll only be doing it because he thinks he owes so much to our family. I’ll be a bride of pity.” Her anger was returning just a bit and she grabbed her pillow and hugged it to her hard. “Nothing could be worse than that.”

“Let me tell you something,” Molly scolded, “losing a child is like hell on earth.” Ginny winced as she internally groaned. She’d obviously not thought about her words before she’d said them and the reaction her mother was having was entirely justified. “And I won’t do it again, young lady, just to satisfy your pride. Not when it can be avoided. So, I don’t care if Harry will accept this out of honor or pity or whatever other ulterior motives your little head can come up with. If he does accept it, I’ll be indebted to him for my entire life.”

She suddenly found herself in one of the tightest hugs she could ever remember receiving. “Please don’t do that to me, Ginny—don’t do it to your brothers or your father... or Harry even.”

A feeling of resignation began to settle on her as she sat there in her mother’s protective arms. The bitterness of the situation was still distasteful but maybe, just maybe, there was a right thing to do here. That feeling, however, dissipated when she heard Harry’s yells echoing up through the floor.

* * *

“M-me?” Harry managed to stammer out as he groped blindly for a chair. Bill stood abruptly and guided Harry’s weaving frame into the chair he had just occupied. He felt a strange mixture of relief and lightheadedness along with a healthy dose of disbelief.

"You," Hermione confirmed. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm actually surprised that you didn't know about this already. Surely there should have been something in your Gringotts paperwork."

Harry let his eyes drift down to the table, searching his mind for anything that would have hinted at something this large.

"You did read it all, didn't you?" Hermione half-asked, half-scolded. His burning face must have given the answer away. "Oh, Harry."

"It's a lot of papers, Hermione," he defended, although even to him it sounded rather weak. "You think that I would have known about this and conveniently forgot to mention it?"

"Harry—"

"No, Ron," Harry yelled. "It's not like this is a good thing for me, right? I mean, I'm not ready to get married... I'm barely ready to date!"

George sniggered only to be silenced by Bill's swat to the back of his head.

"Bloody hell," Harry mumbled as he pushed back from the table and settled his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He tried to breathe deep, afraid of passing out if he didn't. "What if... why..." His questions ended when he realized he didn't know exactly what to ask.

"You said ironclad?" he finally mumbled down to the floor.

"I did," Bill said.

"What if I refuse?" Harry asked, keeping his head down so as not to face any disappointment he might see. "What if she... doesn't want that?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "There is no refusing, Harry," she said in her careful tone that meant to Harry that she'd had the same questions and had researched it herself. "The contract is binding. If either of you refuse, then you both suffer the consequences."

Harry raised his head and peered at her above his glasses and through his black fringe when she didn't continue. She quickly looked away.

"You both die, Harry," she said in a soft voice.

"So, Potter," Charlie growled, "You're going to do it. You're going to march right up there and—"

He didn't continue, however, as Mr. Weasley stood and slammed his hand down on the table.

"That's enough," he roared. When his sons were sufficiently cowed, he turned to Harry and laid a hand on his shoulder. "This is obviously a surprise to you as well, Harry. And trust me when I say that none of us blames you for this. It's likely that any paperwork you may have had regarding this would have been generations old and almost impossible to understand, had you even been able to find it. Molly and I—" He cleared his throat here and Harry looked up at him to find more emotion than he could remember seeing for quite some time on the aging face. "We wish it had been another way, Harry—something that you and Ginny had chosen, instead of being forced on you both,

but... well, we just want you to know that we trust the two of you and... if it had to be anyone..." He let his voice trail out and Harry stared at him before nodding his understanding.

He gave one last glance at Ron before staring up at the ceiling where Ginny's tirade had gone silent.

"I need some air," he finally mumbled out and stumbled from the room, not completely sure where he was going.

Chapter Two

Ron Weasley had rarely been so irritated at his best mate. But Harry had disappeared two days ago and no one had heard from him since. The threats that Charlie had been growling about what he'd do if he ever caught up with 'the coward that did a runner on my little sister' kept running through his mind.

But Ron did have faith that Harry hadn't really run—it wasn't his style at all. And Hermione agreed with him. She'd simply sighed and told him to be patient; that Harry always had to work through a problem on his own before making a decision.

Ron tenderly touched his eye and winced at the soreness of it. Hermione had been able to reduce the bruising, but the pain was still there. He hadn't even seen Ginny's fist coming until it had been too late to dodge. All he'd done was defend his best mate against her railings and it had earned him a right hook to the eye. At least it hadn't been her signature hex, the Bat-Bogey. The thought made him shudder just a bit.

Ginny had come down a few minutes after Harry had gone, proclaimed him a 'bleeding coward' at the top of her lungs when Ron had informed her how he'd just left and then stormed back upstairs before locking herself in the room. She hadn't joined the family downstairs at all in the past few days. His mother left trays of food outside that were eaten from, but no one had seen Ginny more than a fast breeze in and out of the house as she left for practice each morning and returned each afternoon.

He sank down onto the bench near the Quidditch clearing and stared out vacantly at the trees. It seemed that neither Harry nor Ginny ever got the easy lot in life. Something was always waiting around the corner for them.

"Speak of the devil," he muttered as his black haired friend slowly walked from the tree line. He was tempted to flatten Harry but stopped that train of thought when Harry got close enough for him to really see.

He was still in the same clothes he'd been in two days ago. His face was dark with stubble that was almost a full beard. He looked like he hadn't slept or eaten at all since he'd left.

"Hi," he said as he sank down onto the bench and stared off into the distance. "Bet you hate me right now."

Ron cleared his throat. "I was thinking about it," he said and then shook his head. "But then you showed up here, looking like you'd been run over by a hippogriff. Damn, Harry, you look like shite!"

"Thanks for that," Harry replied dryly, "you're a real mate." He ruffled his hair in frustration. "Does everyone else hate me?"

Ron studied his pale face for a minute before shrugging. "Most of us know what you're about, Harry. We know you wouldn't do a runner on her. Although Charlie..." He trailed off with a wry grin.

"I wasn't running," Harry protested half-heartedly while staring at his hands. "I just..."

“Yeah,” Ron nodded. “I don’t think it hit me until I really thought about it, you know. And I thought... what would it be like to be in your shoes? This isn’t what you wanted, I know that.”

Harry nodded woodenly. “It’s nothing against Ginny, believe me,” he defended and fidgeted in his spot. “It’s just that... I guess I never really thought about marriage, you know; at least not yet. It always seemed like something I’d do... one day.”

“Yeah, it kind of snuck up on you, didn’t it?” Ron chuckled and Harry, surprisingly, cracked what passed for a small smile.

“You could say that,” he said. “So, I probably should be asking Hermione, not you, but what’s the time frame for this? She mentioned something about Ginny turning twenty. Do we have until then?” His face gave a hopeful upturn and it almost broke Ron’s heart.

“No,” he sighed. “The paperwork from Gringotts said ‘the transaction had to be completed before the sixth month before her twenty-first year’.” He adopted a rather official tone when quoting the document and then slumped in defeat. “That’s-”

“This month,” Harry bit out rather curtly. He swiped his smudged glasses off of his face and rubbed harshly at his eyes. “Bloody perfect.”

“At least you’re not seeing anyone, eh?” Ron tried to see the bright side. “That could complicate things.”

Harry gave him an annoyed look and shook his head. “No, I’m not seeing anyone right now. But I heard Ginny is.”

Ron winced. “I forgot about that.”

“Convenient.”

“Be nice,” Ron scolded. “It’s not as if I like seeing her with blokes, you know.”

Harry snorted and narrowed his eyes at Ron. “And you’re alright with me marrying her? That’s a bit hypocritical, isn’t it?”

“No,” Ron snapped, “I’m not alright with it. But it’s like Dad said, if it had to be anyone... Harry, I’m glad it’s you.”

“You do realize I’ll have to shag her,” Harry snapped. Ron’s temper flared and he was about to strike when he realized what Harry was doing. He was deliberately provoking him, possibly hoping to get hit. It was something Ron would do himself. “Yeah,” Harry nodded. “I researched the law too. We have to consummate the bond in three days. You do understand what—”

“I get it,” Ron stated firmly. “I just don’t want that picture in my head.”

They both lapsed into silence and stared out at the distant trees.

“You sound like you’ve made a decision,” Ron finally said in a quiet voice.

Harry shrugged and blew out a long breath, finally replacing his glasses. "I need to talk to Ginny."

"Good luck with that," Ron drawled with a smirk. "She hasn't spoken to anyone civilly for days."

Harry winced and rubbed the back of his neck before glancing at the back of the house with a pitiful expression. "Lovely," he sighed.

"Before you face her wrath..." Ron began.

"What?" Harry turned to look him in the eye.

"Can you tell me why you're doing this?"

"Why I'm going to marry your sister?" Harry asked and then looked away when Ron nodded. "I guess the easy answer is that I don't want to die. And I don't want her to die. But..."

"Because if you're doing it because it's the right thing to do, she'll eat you alive, mate."

"But it is the right thing to do," Harry said and stood abruptly, pacing with his hands on his hips. "I owe your family so much, you know. You've been everything to me. And you know if any of you needed anything... you'd never have to do more than ask."

"That's not—"

"But, it's more than that," he said, sinking back down to the bench and shifting uncomfortably. They sat in silence, Ron sensing that whatever Harry was trying to say was extremely uncomfortable for him.

"I've never really had anyone, you know. I mean no one just for me." He glanced up at Ron who could only nod. "And I, I don't know. Part of me hates this... part of me wants to run screaming away and say damn the consequences. I'm tired of being forced into things that I never asked for. But—"

"But?" Ron prompted softly.

"Part of me wonders, you know. What if we could make it work?" Harry's answer was very soft and Ron felt a well of emotion bubble up in him. He'd rarely stopped to think about how hard and lonely Harry's life had been and was, even now. "What if we could be together and... make it really work, you know?"

"Are you saying you have feelings for my sister?"

Harry shifted again and stood abruptly, shoving his hands in his pockets and taking a step toward the Burrow. "I'm tired of being alone, Ron," he said softly and began walking toward the back door.

Ron watched him go, pondering how alone his friend truly was. And, in reality, Harry had rather isolated himself a bit from their world. He lived in the Muggle world, did things in the Muggle world and even dated Muggle women sometimes. Ron supposed it was mostly to keep away from the press, whom he despised almost more than the Death Eaters, but it also isolated him from contact with his friends.

He decided that maybe, just maybe, this might work if Ginny allowed it. And that was a very large 'if'.

* * *

It hadn't been a very good few days for Ginny either. She knew she was being a bit unbearable right now, but felt she was entirely justified. And the fact that Harry, the slimy weasel, hadn't had the nerve to face her yet didn't help anything. While she understood that the whole situation hadn't started out Harry's fault, his failure to face it was definitely something to hold against him.

So she'd locked her door and refused to let anyone in. She left on her own, apparating out to training every day. This certainly wasn't something to lose her position on the team over. After all, she'd worked her arse off to get the starting Chaser position this past year. She wasn't going to throw it over to brood in some dark room all day.

And so she flew. Hours after practices had ended, she stayed and ran through her Chaser drills all on her own. Gwenog had cornered her and asked what was wrong but Ginny had only shrugged and given some excuse that she knew didn't really make sense.

She was still panting from the exertion of her last run, thrilled that she'd made the difficult shot from such an angle, when her feet touched down. She was startled to hear clapping coming from behind her.

"Very nicely done."

Any elation she felt sank deeply into her stomach when Anthony Goldstein stepped away from the side of the pitch and walked toward her with his usual loping grace. The wind swirling on the pitch ruffled his chestnut brown hair attractively and she cursed the easy smile that brightened his features.

They'd started seeing each other after Anthony had come to a game and waited for her afterwards, complimenting her on the way she played. It had only been about six weeks, and even though Ginny was sure the relationship wasn't going anywhere, she had enjoyed their time together.

"I've missed you the last couple of days," he said as he reached her and leaned in to give her a kiss. Ginny turned her head at the last minute, accepting the kiss on her cheek.

"I've not showered yet," she said quickly, hoping that excused her distant behavior. The truth was swirling in her head and she knew she'd have to do this delicately. But it did have to be done.

Anthony narrowed his eyes a bit and nodded. "I can wait. Let me take you out for a bite, we haven't had any time together."

Ginny debated and then agreed. She hurried through her routine, knowing that it really didn't matter if she looked decent, she was about to broom the bloke, wasn't she?

They made polite, although rather stiff, conversation all through dinner. Ginny told him about the brutal practices and about the last game of their season coming up. Unfortunately, with so many injuries this past year, the Harpies were out of the running for a Championship spot. But their next

game was an important one as they were playing their rivals, the Tutshill Tornadoes. She also encouraged Anthony to talk about his work at the Ministry in the Law Division, pretending to listen while her mind actually raced trying to decide how much to tell him.

She was torn. Should she admit the entire situation and plead for him to understand or should she simply break it off, blame it on lack of chemistry or some such excuse?

"You're rather distracted tonight," Anthony observed as he pushed his dinner plate away from him and placed his hand on the table, waiting for her to place hers into it.

Ginny stared down at his wide hands and couldn't help thinking that they weren't as thin and his fingers weren't as long as Harry's. She shook herself mentally and scowled down at her own picked at meal.

"I have been," she admitted. "Actually, I've been thinking about us, Anthony."

His hand retracted across the table and he narrowed his eyes. "Why does this sound ominous?" Ginny tried to smile the comment away but ended up grimacing instead.

"I like you, Anthony, I really do."

"But—"

She sighed and settled on the truth, or at least a portion of it. "Something's come up and... I'm afraid we're going to have to stop seeing each other." She glanced up, hoping he would take this well.

"I see..." His voice trailed off and he glared off darkly at the other side of the room. "Actually, I don't see," he said and turned back to her. "Is this your way of... saying you've met someone else, or something?"

Ginny sighed internally. "I guess you could say that," she said and shrugged a shoulder. "It's rather more complicated than that but..."

"What's complicated about it?" he asked, his fingers playing with the silver spoon resting on the table. "You've met someone else and you're ditching me."

"It's not like that," she protested and then sighed, rubbing her temples. "I'm obligated... to something and I need to break this off in order to fulfill that obligation."

"You're not making sense, Ginny," he shook his head. "What do you mean 'obligation'? It sounds like you're doing something you don't want to do."

"Well, not really, no," she said.

"Just tell me if you don't want to be with me," he said, glaring darkly at the table. "We're both adults here, Ginny."

"That's not it, at all, Anthony," Ginny soothed, starting to feel the eyes of the other restaurant patrons looking their way. She sighed and realized she was going to have to tell him the complete

truth. "There's a magical contract that I'm bound to," she stated. "And to complete it, I need to be... well, I need to be with someone else."

"Contract?" He studied her for a minute before screwing up his face in confusion. "What kind of contract could you possibly be talking about? The only thing that makes sense is some kind of marriage contract..." His voice trailed off and he glared at her, lowering his voice. "You're engaged?"

Ginny cringed and glared at a woman who seemed to be leaning in closer to eavesdrop a table away. "Sort of," she shrugged.

"I see." Anthony's manner turned ice cold and he stiffened in his seat, straightening his robes and glancing around, possibly hoping to get the attention of the server so that he could leave quickly.

"Don't be like that," she scolded, narrowing her eyes. "It's not as if I knew about it before three days ago. And it's not as if I'm a willing participant, you know."

"Who is it?" Anthony asked softly as his cold attitude disappeared and he slumped a bit in his seat. "Is it someone I know?"

Ginny cringed. Anthony had brought up Harry's position in her family a few times. It wasn't as if he disapproved of Harry, but more that he wasn't sure what Harry's position in the Weasley family actually was. Not many people outside of her family completely understood the way they'd basically adopted Harry.

"I think the answer is rather obvious then," Anthony said. "It's either someone you completely loathe or... Potter."

"Harry didn't know either," Ginny defended softly. "It's not exactly fair to either of us, is it?"

"And you're going through with this?"

"Do I have a choice?" Ginny shot back. "We complete the bonding or we die."

"And what does Saint Potter say about all this?"

Ginny cringed again. "I haven't actually spoken to him about it."

Anthony looked as if he were going to explode but nodded jerkily instead. "I'm sorry," he finally said. "I know this isn't what you want."

"It's not," she affirmed. "But what choice do we have?"

"None, I guess. But I'm still going to look into this. There has to be some way to get out of it. I wasn't in Ravenclaw for nothing, Ginny. And I've got the whole Law library to search through."

Ginny deflated a bit, feeling as if the whole conversation had been worthless. Yes, she'd told him the truth, but Anthony still seemed to be hanging on to some hope that he'd be able to get her out of this mess. She didn't have the heart to tell him that, marriage or no, she felt the relationship had about run its course.

Harry knocked gently on Ginny's door. He'd actually only ever been in her bedroom once before. Ron had asked him to go in and retrieve a shirt of his and Harry, against his better judgment, had done it. Ginny, with her unusually perfect timing, had discovered him exiting and had given him his first ever taste of the Bat-Bogey hex. She'd apologized later, with prompting from her mother, but the memories of a seventeen year old boy were still clear enough for Harry.

And she wasn't nearly as mad at him then as she was sure to be now.

He shivered as he heard her shift around inside.

"Come in, Harry." He hesitated for a second before opening the door and sticking his head part way in. "I promise I won't hex you," she said in a dry voice. "Not until you've had your say at least."

He smiled a bit and held out his wand as a peace offering. At least it made her smile a bit. Harry was taken back by the gaunt appearance of her features. She looked as if she'd had about as much sleep as he had.

"Keep it," she'd said and nodded to a wicker chair in the corner next to her bed. "Have a seat. I guess here is as good as anywhere."

Harry sank into the seat, still keeping on the balls of his feet just in case. "How are you?" he began tentatively.

"I'm..." He was startled when she burst out laughing. "You know, you're the first person to ask me that."

"Really?" Harry chuckled, but even to him it sounded dry. "I'm glad I went with that then. I was going to say I'm sorry, but..."

"Thank you for not saying it," she said and shook her head. "Everyone else is sorry. Everyone wishes it wasn't happening. But that doesn't change the fact that it is."

"I know," he said softly and let himself relax back a bit. This wasn't turning out quite as hard as he'd pictured.

"I mean, I'm still furious about it..."

Maybe he'd spoken too soon. "I know." He cleared his throat. "But it doesn't mean that they understand."

"Exactly," she agreed and they both lapsed into silence with awkward looks.

"Look, I'm just going to be as honest as I can be," he said and ruffled his hair. "We're both in rather the same situation, as it were. We're both bound by something that neither of us expected or knows how to deal with. The way I see it, we have two choices right now; either we go through with this, or we don't." He glanced up to see her biting her bottom lip and staring at her knees. "We both know that it isn't fair but its reality. What do you want to do?"

Her expression of shock took the rest of the words from his mouth. "You're asking me what I want?"

"Well, yeah," he shrugged. "This isn't just my decision, you know. It's up to you. Just because I want to do something..."

"You want to?" she asked in a small voice.

Harry sighed. "I do, Ginny. But I don't want to force you—"

"Why?" she interrupted.

"What?"

"Why do you want to do this?"

"Besides the obvious?" Harry asked as he rubbed the back of his neck and then glanced up at her to see a very defensive pose.

"And your damn nobility better not be a part of it, Potter," she growled.

He looked at her for a minute weighing his thoughts. "It has to be, Ginny. I'm sorry, but it's a part of who I am. Remus always said it was a Potter thing," he noted absently. He stood and made his way over to look out the window. "Do you remember at the end of fourth year? I guess it would have been your—"

"Third," she put in absently as she stared at his back. He could feel her eyes on him. "I hated that year."

"Me too," he smiled wryly. He glanced at her and she quickly lowered her eyes. "You remember what Dumbledore said, that sometimes we have to choose between what's right and what's easy?"

"This isn't right, Harry, and it sure as hell isn't easy."

"No, it isn't right of anyone to force you to do something you don't want to," he said in a defeated tone.

It was fairly clear from the way she was fighting him that she hated the idea of being with him. He'd always rather held a spot in his heart, he'd realized over the past days of reflection, in which he'd hoped she would still think of him. He knew it was silly, thinking of her that way, like a little school girl that still had a crush on him. But he'd been a bit let down when Hermione had told him in his fifth year that Ginny had given up on him. A small part of him, he guessed, always saw her as his—like some sort of claiming rights or something. He knew it was stupid, but he couldn't help but feel that way now. Was it some old claim that magic had put upon the two of them? Was that why she had been so taken with him when they were younger? He shook his head brushing those thoughts away.

"But it isn't the easy choice either," he mumbled, almost to himself. He could hear the bedsprings creak and felt her come closer.

"What do you mean, Harry? Of course it's easier than dying."

He glanced over to see her watching him intently. He smiled slowly and then shook his head. "Never mind."

"Harry—"

"So, I'll do what you want me to do," he said as he turned away and stood by the door. "I really don't want to add to your pressure, but it would be nice to know... get my affairs in order, as it were. I've got Teddy to think about, too."

"Harry, you damn noble git, of course I'm going to go through with it," she growled.

He paused in reaching for the door and considered her answer. "Don't sound too thrilled, Ginny."

"Yeah, well I'm the one losing everything, aren't I?" she snapped, crossing her arms again. "I'm the one that has to give up a boyfriend, and change my name and move—" She trailed off and he could feel the frustration thickening the air between them. "You're too damn noble, Harry," she sighed. "And, while I'm grateful, I still don't like this. I don't want to marry someone just because it will save my life." She turned away from him and stared out the window, her arms wrapping around her sides. "I want to marry someone who's in love with me."

Harry's heart felt like a vice closed on it. "You're right," he said quietly and left. He could hear her cry of frustration as he closed the door and something loud crashed behind him.

"That went well," Ron commented as Harry came down the stairs. The rest of the family was sitting around the living room and Harry stopped, feeling rather like a deer in the headlights with everyone watching him.

"Better than I'd hoped," Harry shrugged. He glanced around and caught Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's eyes. "We've decided to go through with it," he said quietly. "I'll do whatever you need, and pay for everything."

"Harry, that's not—"

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry interrupted. "It was my ancestor that helped start this whole... mess, and I'd not feel right about not helping to take care of things." He glanced back up the stairs and sighed. "I guess I'll come by tomorrow and we can start on getting things ready."

The Weasley matriarch seemed about to protest when Mr. Weasley put his hand on her shoulder. "That sounds good, Harry. Go home, son. You look like you could use a good sleep. We'll worry about the details tomorrow."

Harry smiled tiredly and nodded.

"I'll walk you out," Ron offered. They made it most of the way to the point where Harry liked to Apparate to and from before Ron cleared his throat. "So things are alright?" he asked.

Harry chuckled, although even to him it sounded dry and humorless, and shook his head. "No, Ron, things aren't alright. I'm getting married to a woman who despises me and who thinks her life will be ending by taking my name." He had to swallow the thick lump in his throat. "Things are

definitely not alright.” He closed his eyes and Apparated away before Ron could comment.

In the cold quiet of his flat, Harry finally lay in his bed and succumbed to the emotions that had been threatening for two days. Why did it have to be so hard?

* * *

Ron ended out the day in a similar mood to how it began. The heavy decision had been made, but why did it still feel as if a weight hung over them all. Maybe it was the silence from the room upstairs. They could all hear Ginny moving about but she didn’t come down, even for dinner.

But what mostly haunted Ron were Harry’s words from before about how he was tired of being alone and the hollow, somewhat haunted look he wore right before he left. It made Ron want to run around the room and hug everyone, irrational as it may seem.

That night, lying in bed next to Hermione and feeling the warmth that her body gave off, Ron’s eyes welled with tears and he reached out and gathered her to him.

“Ron?” she asked sleepily. “Is everything alright?”

“Fine,” he managed to say softly as he buried his face in the back of her shoulder. “Thank you,” he whispered and she turned in his grasp.

“For what?”

Ron shrugged and studied the soft features he could just make out in the dark. “For just being here.” She either must have understood or decided that he wasn’t in the mood to elaborate because she settled down into his embrace and her breathing soon deepened.

Chapter Three

Ginny had come down to breakfast the next morning and found that everyone stopped talking when she entered the kitchen. Harry had been sitting in between George and Ron and he was the only one not staring at her as if she was some magical experiment gone wrong.

“Can’t I come down to breakfast without you all making a scene?” she snapped. They quickly all looked away, except for Harry, who smirked at her a bit and then picked up his fork as if nothing had happened.

His attitude, after the way they had parted the day before, perplexed Ginny and she let herself drift toward the table and took her customary seat.

She’d calmed down much during the night and had come to be quite grateful that Harry was so noble. She certainly had to give him credit for saving her life; even if he was saving his own in the process. That didn’t mean she was happy with the situation, just that she’d come to understand that it was going to be necessary to give a little more than she had.

“Of course you’ll be hungry,” her mother fussed and set a plate gently in front of her. “If there’s something else you need just let me know.”

Ginny rolled her eyes down at the plate. She heard Harry’s soft chuckles and, surprisingly, it made her feel a bit lighter. He knew how much she hated being babied and had often teased her about it when it happened. At least someone could see the humor in it. She was tempted to kick him under the table but feared she’d catch Ron or George who would only cause a ruckus.

“Well, since we’re all here,” Mr. Weasley said as he pushed his finished plate away from him. “Maybe, Hermione, you could enlighten us all on the details of the bond that needs to take place?”

Hermione beamed at him and moved her plate away to lift a huge book from where it must have been perched on her lap.

Ginny’s eyes darted around the table where the others seemed to be settling in for instruction time. There was no way she was doing this right here, right now! She glanced over at Harry who was staring at her with a questioning glance. She opened her mouth and shook her head. He gave a small nod and she prayed he understood.

“Hang on,” he said quickly, holding his hand out and touching the edge of the book before Hermione could open it. “Do we really have to do this now... here, with everyone? Shouldn’t this be something, I don’t know, private?” He turned pleading eyes on Mr. Weasley who seemed to be in deep thought about it.

“I agree,” Ginny finally spoke up. “This is about Harry and I, no one else needs to—”

“Now, hang on,” Bill said, leaning his elbows on the table, “each of us has a stake in this, the way I see it.”

“The way you see it?” Ginny roared. “How does this possibly affect you, Bill? I didn’t see your name

on that damned contract.” She ignored her mother’s protests at her swearing and continued. “None of you has any right to be here except Harry and myself.”

“Ginny,” Mr. Weasley tried to sooth, “we’re all your family. We love you both and we only want what’s best for the both of you. Surely you can understand that we are worried that all the terms of this contract be met so that everything turns out alright.”

Ginny wanted to do nothing more than scream at the top of her lungs. She huffed mightily and turned back to Harry who was scowling down at the table. She gave a swift kick at him under the table, hoping to get him to demand what they both wanted. Unfortunately it was Ron who yelped.

“Sorry, Ron, I was aiming for the git next to you,” she snapped, glaring at Harry’s dark head.

“Hey,” Harry protested as his scowl rose to take her in, “I’m on your side. I say this should be done in private.” He turned in his spot to look directly at her father. “Please, let us keep a bit of dignity.”

Ginny bit the inside of her lip, watching as her brothers protested. “Dad—”

“Alright,” he sighed, holding out his hands to still her brother’s protests. “Molly, Hermione, Harry and Ginny... into the sitting room.”

“Oi!” Ron stood up in protest. “I should be there too.”

“Why?” Ginny snapped out. “It’s not your concern.”

Ron, his ears turning bright red, spun to look at Harry, possibly to plead his case as a best friend. But Harry only shook his head, stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets and then shuffled to the doorway, holding it open for her mother and Hermione.

“Ginny,” he said softly, motioning with his head for her to follow.

She watched him for a moment as he continued to hold the door, and then shot a dark look back at her brothers. “I’m going to charm the door and if one of you tries to listen in... so help me...”

“They’ll be fine,” Harry said firmly, placing his hand on the small of her back as she passed through the doorway. She turned back as he didn’t follow and saw him give an immovable look to her brothers. Whatever he was trying to communicate must have been understood, because he quickly closed the door and charmed it with a few quick flicks of his wand. “Let’s get this over with,” he mumbled as strode across the room, standing with his back to the room and seemingly studying the dozens of framed photographs that crowded the thick mantel shelf.

Ginny sank onto the far end of the sofa, her eyes boring into the wall just above Harry’s shoulder. She was grateful that cooler heads had prevailed and that she was being allowed a small piece of her dignity by excluding most of her family members from the private conversation. She took a deep breath and tried to remember her vow to give a little. Repeating it over and over, she gave a small nod to the room in general.

Her father cleared his throat then, “Alright, Hermione, let us know what you’ve found.”

Hermione settled into what Ginny liked to call 'lecture mode' and opened the thick book to a page somewhere near the middle. "The first bonding was recorded—"

"Hermione," Harry interrupted with no little annoyance in his voice, "please just give us the condensed version—scratch that—what applies to us specifically?" Ginny looked down to hide a smirk. It always amused her when Harry asserted himself over Hermione's strong personality. It didn't happen often, but when it did, it made her a bit prouder of Harry.

"Oh," Hermione looked as if Harry had taken away her favorite toy, "alright then. Erm, this particular bond was set so that it needed to take place before the sixth month in the bride's twentieth year."

"Doesn't that mean next year?" Ginny interrupted, a flint of hope skimming across her emotions.

"No, technically, you are in your twentieth year, if you think about it."

"Fine," Ginny said bluntly to avoid a lecture about something she really didn't care to argue about.

"The bonding must be performed by a licensed member of the Wizengamot, preferably the head, but it really doesn't matter. Traditionally, the groom would pay a fee to the family of the bride," Hermione continued over both Harry and Ginny's protests, "but, in this case, because the contract was in itself fulfilling a debt, any remuneration was null and void."

Hermione glanced at the book and her cheeks turned a bit pink. Ginny rolled her eyes guessing at what might be next. She blamed her younger self for reading too many romance novels. "The bond technically has two parts; the actual ceremony and then the, erm... consummation of the bond which must take place within three days of the ceremony."

"Consummation?" her mother asked with a hint of panic in her voice. She reached out and smoothed her shaky hand over the back of Ginny's hair and Ginny fought the urge to pull away from the old childhood gesture.

Hermione's mouth opened and closed for a minute, perhaps trying to think of the best way to phrase her explanation.

"I think we can all understand that point," her father said. He cleared his throat several times and Ginny glanced up to see that Harry's shoulders had tightened even more as he leaned against the heavy brick of the fireplace.

"Alright," Hermione said, her eyes darting between Harry, who seemed a little volatile, and the rest of the Weasleys. "Erm, where was I? Oh, yes. There was once a clause requiring an heir within a year, but it was stricken from the law before your contract was made."

"And what about the permanence?" Ginny's father asked. "Can there be any separation at all?"

"No," Hermione shook her head. "The bond performed is actually the High Bond, sealing both their magic and their life forces together. In fact, they can't even live in separate places without suffering the consequences."

“Not at all?” Mrs. Weasley asked as she dabbed at the corner of her eyes.

Hermione shook her head and gave a sad look at Ginny, who averted her eyes. “The case that they document here says the couple did fine apart until thirty days. On the thirty first...”

“I think we get the picture,” Ginny said.

“And, just to make the experience, you know, completely and utterly humiliating,” Harry’s muffled voice echoed from where he was still facing the wall. “Do both of us... or one of us have to be... erm, well...” He turned to look at Hermione, completely red faced. Ginny was confused for a moment until she thought about what he may be asking, and then her face began to burn almost as much as his. And, in thinking about it, he was right to be asking. After all, he was the one who had been in serious relationships before. Relationships that she knew had gone far beyond hand holding and snogging.

“Harry, I don’t understand what you’re asking,” Hermione said. Ginny’s quick glance around the room showed that her parents must be getting what he was dancing around as they were all avoiding looking at anyone too.

“Hermione,” Harry moaned. “Do both of us have to be... inexperienced?”

“In relationships?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“Hermione,” Arthur hissed. “I believe what Harry’s trying to ask is...” he shifted a bit uncomfortably and Hermione’s eyes grew wide. “Do they both have to be... virgins?” The silence in the room after his hoarse question was heavy.

“OH! No, no, no. Well, only the bride, actually.”

Ginny wanted to crawl under the sofa when all eyes turned on her. “And, erm, what would be the, erm, consequences if she were... erm... not, well... pure?”

Eyes widened, except Harry who determinedly looked down. Hermione, catching what she was meaning, opened her mouth and then closed it.

“Well, the Bond couldn’t be performed,” she said softly. “So... the consequences would then take effect. Remember, this is a very old law,” Hermione explained. “Back then it would have been unthinkable for the bride to be anything but pure.”

“Then I guess we’re all lucky,” Ginny commented dryly. She swore she heard a huge sigh of relief. She caught Harry looking at her with a strange expression on his face; she couldn’t be completely sure, but it seemed a bit like regret. She brushed it off and stood abruptly.

“I’m finished here. If you want to know bust size, the color of my knickers or the dates of my next period you can send me an owl.” She glanced back over at her family and was surprised to see Harry grinning at her cheek as he turned his face away. Instead of commenting, she continued out the door and Apparated to the Harpies Training rooms.

Harry glanced down at his hands, feeling the back of his neck heat quickly. "What about infidelity?" His voice was so soft that he was surprised anyone had heard him.

The Weasley's had scattered quickly after Ginny's departure and Harry was quite grateful. Ron had valiantly tried to question him about the private conversation, but Harry had steadfastly ignored the probes and helped to clean up breakfast. Absently, he noticed that Ginny hadn't even eaten a bite of her food.

"Thinking of cheating on my sister already, are you?" Ron snapped and Harry swore softly before running his hands through his hair.

"I'm not asking for me, Ron," he bit back. "Once I make that commitment... You should know me better than that by now. That's not... I mean," he sighed heavily and raised his eyes to look directly at Hermione. "What if she meets someone later? Can she, erm... well," he trailed off and shrugged a shoulder. Hermione nodded her understanding of his question and held up her hand to stave off Ron's next accusation.

"The law is fairly straight forward, Harry," Hermione said, her voice calm, "even if it is completely antiquated and barbaric."

"Hermione—"

"I'm getting there," she sighed and pushed the dusty tome along the table to where he'd taken a seat. He ignored it. "Most marriages arranged in this way were done for royalty. The man was free to have as many mistresses or lovers as he chose."

"And the woman?" he asked, already feeling as if he knew the answer.

"There's a penalty of death if the woman steps outside her vows of marriage."

Harry glanced up with a defeated look and bit the inside of his lip at her soft words. He wasn't sure how to feel exactly. The weight of the situation seemed to be settling on his shoulders a bit and he was beginning to understand how deeply he was in this time.

"If you cheat on my sister, mate—"

"Shut it, Ron," Harry pleaded with a hint of desperation to his voice. "I just... I just need to know everything, you know." He turned his eyes to Hermione and she nodded. "We just can't... muck around with magic like this."

"I agree, Harry."

Harry felt a bit uncomfortable with Hermione giving him a very inquisitive look. He hated it when she did that; it always made him feel as if she could see straight through him and see things that even he couldn't. He rubbed under his glasses with a forefinger and thumb and stood.

"I've got to go. I'm working nights for the next week." He glanced toward the stairs and followed them up with his eyes to where they disappeared up to the first level. "Tell Ginny... aw, hell. I don't know what to tell her. I guess just tell her we'll figure this out."

"Alright, Harry," Hermione said as she rose and gave him a quick hug. "I'll keep reading to make sure there's nothing else that we need to know."

Harry nodded and gave a short nod to Ron before leaving.

* * *

Ginny was surprised when Harry showed up just before his shift at work. He'd walked into the living room where she was sitting, staring out the window, his hands deep in jeans pockets and looking more unsure of himself than normal. He'd greeted her parents and made his way over to her slowly.

"Do you have a minute we can talk?" he asked and she studied him closely. He looked as if he hadn't slept well, dark smudges were under his eyes and he looked a bit pale.

She shrugged and nodded toward the end of the window seat where she sat.

"Erm, somewhere... private, maybe?" he asked quietly, risking a glance to where her parents were pretending not to listen.

"Sure," she said and swung her legs down, sliding her feet into the sandals she'd abandoned earlier. "Mum, Dad... Harry and I are going for a walk."

"That's fine, dear," her father said with a smile. Molly only beamed at her and she rolled her eyes.

She moved around Harry's side and walked toward the kitchen. Harry took a couple of strides to catch up.

"I thought you had to work tonight," she observed, trying to sound casual as they walked slowly through the back garden and onward toward the Quidditch pitch.

"I did, I do," he stammered. "I just dropped by to talk to you... to give you something."

Ginny raised her face slightly to peek at him from behind her hair and saw he looked very nervous. She couldn't imagine what could be worse than the news they'd already shared together, but something had him worked up.

"I, damn, Ginny this isn't the way I wanted things to happen."

Ginny fought the urge to roll her eyes. Neither of them wanted this and they both knew it; bringing it up again did nothing to make it better. "But it is happening," she stated and Harry looked at her before nodding.

"I know. Listen," he put out a hand and tentatively laid it on her arm, stopping her. He fidgeted and then stilled before ruffling his hair. "I just wanted to give you this." He held out his hand where a small gold circle, topped with a beautiful diamond and emerald setting, lay there in his large palm. "It was my mum's and I... think she would want you to have it." He continued to ramble as she stared, absolutely stunned, at the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen.

"I know we're not doing anything the traditional way here... or actually, I guess you could say we're doing everything completely traditional... in a way. Anyway, I just wanted you to have it so that you

could wear it and..." he shrugged and looked at her, obviously waiting for a response.

Ginny picked up the ring and held it up in the faint light that was left in the day. Harry, seeing her admiration of the ring, beamed and Ginny felt like an absolute prat for what she was about to do.

There was no way she could accept this ring. Yes, they were getting married, but it was anything but an engagement, in her mind. And there was no way she was going to let him... waste... a ring like this one on something less than perfect. And she was definitely not that, she knew. For heaven's sake, she still had a boyfriend... sort of.

"Harry," she sighed and held the ring up, "I can't accept this."

"But... but I thought we'd decided to do this... to get married."

"We did," she confirmed. "We are. But, Harry, this is something very special. I can't wear this. I can't look down every day and see something on my hand that was meant for you to give to the woman you're going to love for the rest of your life. I'm not a hypocrite, Harry. You don't feel that way about me and I don't feel that way about you." She gently took his hand and pressed the ring back into his palm.

Harry looked at it, still shining in the waning light of evening, and then looked at her sadly. "I'm sorry. I thought it was the right thing."

"No, Harry, I'm sorry," she replied wearily. "I wish it could be another way." She took a step away from him, wrapped her arms tightly around herself and stared out at the empty clearing.

"Would you..."

She looked at him over her shoulder. "Would I what?"

He cleared his throat. "If I got something different... a different ring, would you consider wearing it?"

She thought about that for a moment before shrugging. "I might. But it would have to be on my own time, Harry. I won't wear it just to please the next reporter we run into, or my mother, or even you."

"I understand," he said quietly and slipped the ring back into his pocket. He stood there in the darkening evening, his hands deep in his pockets. "I'd better go," he said quietly and Ginny nodded.

"I'm sorry, Harry, really I—"

"I understand," he said gently. "And maybe you're right."

She watched him walk away and felt horrible. Harry had opened himself up to her, offered her a piece of his past—an irreplaceable piece—and she'd taken it and shoved it back in his face, essentially. She knew, somehow, that the look of disappointment and rejection on his face would be haunting her that night.

He should be home sleeping, he knew. But he'd tried for two hours before finally giving it up and Apparating to the small shop hidden deep in Hogsmeade.

Lying in his bed earlier, he'd reviewed yesterday evening when Ginny had given him back the ring. And he realized... he truly had no idea what she wanted from him. He'd really thought giving her a ring was the right thing to do. He was just glad he'd changed his mind at the last minute and hadn't dropped down onto one knee like he'd been planning.

And, yes, he'd told her he understood and that she was right. But did he really understand?

No, he realized. He guessed what she'd said was true. And it was probably a good thing that she wasn't trying to be something that she wasn't. It was always something he'd quietly admired about her. She definitely wasn't a hypocrite.

But that still left him engaged without everything he'd ever imagined when thinking about it. Granted, he hadn't spent long afternoons imagining and planning his wedding like he imagined most girls did. But he'd thought about it; who hadn't? And somehow, he felt a bit cheated at the whole situation.

He paused outside McDonough's Magical Ornaments and glanced around. He'd never even noticed it was there in all his trips to the village as a student. But it was. Thankfully, he hadn't been really noticed while walking through the village and, for that, he was grateful. He really didn't need someone recognizing him and reporting to the press that he was out buying jewelry.

Briefly, he'd considered owling Hermione this morning and asking her what he should do. But he'd dismissed the idea after standing in front of the desk for ten minutes contemplating what he really needed to ask her. In the end, he'd known that getting Ginny a different ring, like he'd suggested, was probably the right thing. He'd take it to her and offer it. And he'd try to steel himself against the tightness that would well in his chest when she didn't put it on. Because he knew she wouldn't.

* * *

The next evening, Harry had come again, this time offering a small black velvet box that had a modest sized, plain diamond set in a platinum band. Ginny had thanked him and tucked the box away in her pocket. Once again, Harry left with hunched shoulders and an almost broken countenance.

She knew she was hurting him, but felt there wasn't much she could do to stop it. She was many things, but a hypocrite wasn't one of them. How could she wear Harry's engagement ring while she still hadn't broken things off with Anthony completely? They'd talked but he still held a bit of hope, saying that he was researching her options. Maybe a part of her felt that this still wasn't real. However, the shiny ring was evidence, if nothing else.

Her mother had glared at her and completely ignored her for the rest of the night. Finally, knowing that if she caught one more sniff of disdain or one more averted glare she'd snap and do bodily harm to her mother, Ginny mumbled good night to her father and held her mother's gaze for a moment before slowly climbing the stairs.

She sat in the mostly dark room staring at the faint light given by the sparkling ring sitting in the

velvet case on her night stand. She'd actually been surprised to see that the ring had some magical properties, recalling that Hermione had complained that Harry avoided any magical place where he might be recognized.

Her hands fidgeted in her lap as she perched on the edge of her bed. She'd actually risen a few times only to sigh and sit back down quickly-chastising herself for silly girlish fantasies that just wouldn't die. And she knew she must be imagining it, but her fingers fairly itched to put the ring on.

'What would it hurt?' her traitorous mind asked over and over again. But, somehow, she'd regained control and shoved those thoughts away knowing that if she put the ring on, if she gave in, that everything would change. And she wasn't sure she was ready to deal with that just yet.

So she lay down and stared at the ring. As the shadows caused by the moon moved across the foot of her bed, she made a decision.

She would close her ties completely with Anthony. Honestly, she knew the relationship hadn't been going anywhere to begin with. And it never would, because she was going to be with Harry now. She was going to be his wife.

That thought made her shiver just a bit, whether from thrill or disbelief, she wasn't quite sure. But she was determined to figure it out. She owed it to Harry, and to herself, to be able to wear Harry's ring honestly. A small bit of relief came over her and she lay down against her pillow, tucking her arm underneath it and closed her eyes to sleep.

Chapter Four

It had been a long week for Harry on overnight shifts. Every morning he'd stop in at the Burrow and have a wonderful Molly Weasley breakfast, trying his best to participate in his own wedding plans. Thankfully, Mrs. Weasley understood the situation enough to know that neither Harry nor Ginny wanted a large wedding. The plans were for a very simple, family-and-a-few-close-friends-only, event right there in the back garden of the Burrow; far less extravagant than Bill and Fleur's wedding had been. And the date was set for two weeks away.

Ginny said very little during his visits, although she was not hostile toward him as before, nor was she indifferently cold. He'd even gotten her to crack a smile or two at his under the breath comments when Fleur would get involved with the plans. He would sneak glances at her finger each morning and evening and was disappointed each time; but at the same time, she'd told him if she wore the ring it would be when she was ready. He only hoped it was before the wedding.

In the evenings he did his best to stop by again and take a chance to spend a minute or two with Ginny by herself if he could. He knew he might be pushing his luck a bit where she was concerned, but he also knew they'd have to work together to make this happen, and being with someone for the rest of your life had to start somewhere. He'd gone to her last Quidditch match and cheered her on with her family, something he'd not been regular about doing over the past year since she'd joined the Harpies.

Harry had been excited about seeing her play again until he and Ron had entered the box and found Anthony Goldstein there talking quietly with Bill while George stood a ways off, his arms crossed menacingly. Harry's first confrontation with Ginny's current boyfriend (he still wasn't sure where Ginny and Anthony stood, seeing as Harry was about to marry her) wasn't pretty. Goldstein had openly threatened him and then almost tripped over himself to get away when Harry stood. Harry hadn't been intending to hurt the man, just to make him understand that Harry hadn't planned this whole thing and that he was sorry. Anthony had stormed out while George and Ron murmured under their breath. Harry caught a bit of it and sunk down in his seat, draining his entire Butterbeer and pulling his cap down low over his face.

"... what's Ginny on about? Why hasn't she given him the broom?..."

"... don't know. I almost wished he'd tried something... see Harry in action..."

The Harpies had won their match, but even with the win it only put them in sixth place in the league; not enough for playoff position. There had been a small party at the Burrow afterwards, but Harry had needed to get to work. He'd made sure that Ginny knew he was there, though, and gave her a quick hug before leaving. It felt a bit awkward, knowing that their relationship had changed into something he didn't quite know how to deal with yet. But they'd hugged before and Harry felt the undeniable need to show her that they could work things out between them. She'd wrapped her arms around him and they'd held on a bit longer than a friendly hug, but then Harry had been left wondering as she pulled back quickly and excused herself from the room.

Harry hadn't brought anything up with Ginny about Anthony, grateful for the tentative peace they'd found between them. But if she hadn't done anything about the other man by that afternoon, Harry

was going to have to do something himself.

Kingsley had come into Harry's office yesterday evening and tipped him off that some reporter had been around asking questions and that there might be a story forthcoming. It had been a wonderful way to start an overnight shift where Harry could spend hours brooding about it. And, to top it off, Ginny hadn't been there when he'd visited before his shift. Mrs. Weasley said she hadn't known where her daughter might be and no one else seemed to know either.

Harry yawned as he trudged through the moist grass toward the Burrow. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his unbuttoned Auror robes and glanced up to see the morning sun shining brightly on the windows of the crooked house. He tried to force himself to relax. It had been a long evening with no calls at all, and that meant plenty of time for him to think about where the next few weeks would be taking him.

His dragon hide boots sounded heavy on the small wooden porch and he scuffed them slowly in tiredness. He'd love to go straight to bed and wake up with no new story on the front page about him. But his life wasn't that easy.

He'd just reached for the doorknob when it jerked inward and he came face to face with a very crimson-faced Anthony Goldstein. The man may have been a bit taller than Harry, but Harry outweighed him by an easy one stone, most of it being muscle. An Auror was duty-bound to keep in shape after all.

"Perfect timing," Goldstein drawled and Harry narrowed his eyes. This really wasn't what he needed and he could feel a headache coming on. From the man's attitude, Harry assumed Ginny had finally ended things with him. "Always waiting in the wings, eh Potter? Always around the corner wanting what someone else has. Chang said that about you back in school. It was the joke of Ravenclaw." He snorted and Harry stood his ground. There was no way some skinny, entry-level Ministry paper pusher was going to push him around—not on his own turf here at the Burrow.

"I don't wait in wings," Harry growled. "And if I see something I want, I go out and get it. You know what's going on here. Neither Ginny nor I asked for this."

"No, but it's fairly convenient, isn't it?" the other man snapped. "Just when she's finally happy, you waltz in and ruin everything. Well, you know what? You can have her Potter," he glared back over his shoulder into the house, not bothering to keep his voice down.

Harry's low simmer of anger was starting to rise now.

"There are plenty more girls out there that I don't have to trick into being with me. Merlin, Potter, you must be pathetic if you have to resort to these means to get someone to want to be with you. You know what... you two deserve each other." He tried to push past Harry, who braced himself. Goldstein attempted to bump him but, finding a rock solid shoulder instead, stumbled a bit to the side before striding toward the Apparition point.

Harry watched him go with a dark expression on his face before shaking his head wearily and entering. He stopped short when he noticed that the kitchen wasn't as empty as he'd hoped it was. Ron was glaring out the doorway and Mrs. Weasley was sitting at the table, her arms wrapped around Ginny's petite form. She seemed to be crying into her mother's shoulder and raised her head

when Harry entered.

No one said a word and time seemed to freeze as he focused in on her and saw the red puffy eyes with fresh tear tracks, the runny nose that she dabbed at with a crumpled tissue... and the dark circle around one eye.

As his eyes widened, fury like Harry had only felt a few times in his life erupted and he spun on his heel, almost falling in his haste to get out the door.

“Goldstein! You Bastard!” he roared and drew his wand. A silent, bright blue streak hit the man and he tripped, falling face first into the dewy grass. Harry Apparated without even thinking about it to just behind the man and, with a tremendous growl, flipped him over and lifted him up off the ground in front of him.

“You think you’re a tough man? Hitting a woman like that?” Harry lowered him and drew his fist back, preparing to deliver all his might behind the punch. His fist flew forward and the crack echoed through the clearing even as Goldstein’s head snapped backward and blood spurted from his nose. “How does it feel to be hit by someone bigger than you? You make me sick! Don’t you ever touch her again, you hear me? You even think about her and I’ll come after you.” Harry’s arm cocked back again but he froze as he heard Ginny screaming.

Anthony took the opportunity while Harry was distracted to regain his feet and attempt to pull his wand. Harry swung out his leg and brought it down swiftly behind his knee and the man went down heavily, his wand flying free.

“Harry! NO!”

Harry stared at Ginny as she raced to him and wrapped her arms around his chest, pushing him away from a moaning Anthony. Ron arrived a moment later, his eyes darting all over the place, his wand trained on the downed man.

“What are you doing?” Ginny screamed as she beat her fists on Harry’s chest. He stared at her in confusion, flinching when she hit him particularly hard. “Why did you hit him?”

Harry swallowed thickly and reached out to pull her to him, effectively stopping the beating by trapping her hands against his chest. “He hit you,” he panted, his eyes darting back over to where the other man lay, rocking side to side, holding his leg and moaning around the blood that oozed out of his broken nose. “I should kill him.” He took another powerful step in that direction and Ginny was pushed backward, even as she dug in her own heels.

“What the bloody hell are you talking about?” she demanded.

Harry stopped again and looked down at her, hating that her eye was even darker and he could see blood in the corner of the white. “Your eye,” he said, feeling extremely stupid. Was he the only one who understood what was happening here? “He hit you.”

They both started when a flash of red shone and a muffled thump sounded behind them. They stared at the spread eagle man lying completely still and then traced their eyes back up to a superior looking Ron.

"Was going for his wand," he shrugged and moved a few paces away to intercept his mother who had just run the whole way, her wand out.

Ginny sighed and relaxed a bit, making Harry realize that she hadn't pulled out of his grasp the entire time. "He didn't hit me, Harry," she said wearily. "I got this at practice yesterday. I wasn't paying attention and I took a quaffle to the face."

Harry blinked a few times, peering at her and then back to the prone form on the ground. "He..."

"Didn't do anything," Ginny said, sighing and shaking her head. She finally pulled away from him and rubbed her forehead, grimacing when she took in the sight of her stunned ex-boyfriend.

"Oh," Harry said and rubbed the back of his neck. "I just thought..."

"We all know what you thought," Ginny snapped. "Sweet Merlin, can this day get any worse?" Harry winced and glanced over to find a rather smug look on Ron's face as he stared at him.

"Nice punch."

"Shut it, Ron," Ginny snapped before Harry could respond. He could see the color coming back to her cheeks and wasn't sure if it was a good sign or not.

"Ginny, I'm sorr—"

"No! You're not sorry," she snapped, spinning around and pointing her wand at him. Harry threw up his hands and backed up a step, ignoring Ron's snort of amusement. "You've been waiting for a chance to do something horrible to him. Admit it."

He could feel his face heat and only looked away. He couldn't deny what they all knew was true.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Weasley fretted. "Hadn't we better get him cleaned up?" She looked over at Harry, who glanced at Ron, who shrugged a shoulder and looked at Ginny.

"Would serve him right if we Obliviated him," Ron growled and Harry chuckled, only to be silenced when Ginny lifted her wand at him again.

"You wouldn't," she hissed and then swung it around on Ron.

Harry noticed his friend's Adam's apple bob a time or two before he stammered out. "N-not me, I'm not qualified. H-Harry'd have to be the one." Harry winced as she swung back around at him and tried to convey his anger by glaring at Ron.

"He probably deserves it," Harry said and took a chance at lowering his hands a few inches. "Nobody talks to you that way." He was surprised when all of the anger drained from Ginny's face and she seemed to consider him for a minute before sighing and letting her shoulders slump in defeat.

"Don't do it, please. Just... clean him up and heal him, if you can, and send him on his way. You may want to apologize too," she smirked when Harry grimaced. "Otherwise he may press charges against you."

Harry dropped his hands completely and took a small step toward her, lifting her head with his finger to examine her bruised eye. “Quaffle, eh?” he asked in a quiet voice. She nodded against the pressure of his hand. “You promise he didn’t lay a hand on you?” He searched her face and realized she was telling the truth. Her eyes were surprisingly bright and clear. “You finished things with him?” She nodded again and Harry let his hand drop before ruffling his hair in annoyance.

She was probably right. They really didn’t need this prat running to the press and mucking up his career at the Ministry, not to mention Ginny’s career.

“Alright,” he finally sighed. “I’ll take care of it. Just... just go inside so I can save a little dignity, yeah?” He finished feeling like a three year old that’d just got caught doing something they shouldn’t, his feet shuffling a bit in the grass.

“Alright, Harry,” she answered in a soft voice and gave one last searching look at him before moving away and tugging her mother to follow. Mrs. Weasley looked as if she couldn’t make up her mind whether to interfere or not. As they got a few steps away, Harry could hear Ginny say something to her and the older woman stared at Harry over her shoulder and then nodded, following her daughter. Strangely, Harry felt as if he’d passed some sort of test and his chest felt unusually tight.

He looked pointedly at Ron and then at the back of the house and Ron laughed.

“Not on, mate. Who’ll be here to protect your back? Been doing it for ten years, I’ll not stop now.”

Harry studied him for a minute; oddly choked that Ron could find the right words right now.

“Let’s get this over with,” he murmured while pulling his wand and casting several healing spells. He didn’t bother to clean the drying blood from the man’s face, however, before Ennervating him.

“Wotcher,” Ron peered down at the man with a sardonic smile. “Mind you watch your step. There’s gnome holes all over out here.”

Anthony glared up at him and then his eyes darted over to see Harry standing in his strikingly red Auror robes. He quickly backed away from the both of them, scrambling on hands and knees. He groped to find his wand, pointing it first at one and then the other.

“Listen,” Harry started. “I’m sorry about hitting you. I just... I just heard what you said and then I... I saw her eye—”

“And you thought I did that?” he sputtered indignantly.

Harry shifted uncomfortably and grimaced. “I jumped to a conclusion; a wrong one I’m told.” He waited for the man to hex him, and thought he may even deserve it, although all of his instincts at the moment he’d seen Ginny’s bruised flesh told him that beating the stuffing out of her former boyfriend was the right thing to do.

Surprisingly, Anthony lowered his wand and stared at him before standing and putting his wand away. Gingerly he touched his nose and seemed to relax a bit when he found it intact.

“What are you planning to do?” Ron’s question startled them both and they looked at him. “Are you

going to hex him, or press charges, or what?"

"I should," Anthony said, although his tone wasn't convincing as he sized up Harry again. "But I won't. I have to admit I've wanted to hit you ever since I found out."

Harry nodded woodenly. He didn't blame the man really. "What stopped you?" he asked in a low voice.

Anthony shrugged one shoulder. "Her," he finally said after a minute of contemplation. "I see the way she looks at you, and the way you look at her."

Not much else could have startled Harry more and he wasn't sure if he was supposed to reply or not.

"Just... just take care of her, alright."

"You have my word," Harry said instantly.

"Sure you don't still want to take a shot?" Ron asked with a wry grin. Harry glared at him and Anthony snorted.

"Nah, don't think I could take another hit back. And what the hell did you kick me like that for; I thought my knee was broken."

"It was," Harry said pointedly. This created an awkward silence and the three men shifted a bit.

"I'm sorry again," Harry finally said. "I just overreacted."

"That may be the sign that there's hope for you," Anthony said with a sad smile before he turned and walked away, a slight limp in his step.

"What the hell did he mean?" Harry asked Ron after they watched the man Apparate away. "And how does Ginny look at me?"

Ron laughed and clapped his friend on the shoulder, turning him toward the house.

"Don't know for sure," Ron said, although Harry didn't quite believe him.

* * *

Ginny sat at the table and traced a faint scar in the wood. She remembered, barely, the argument between Charlie and Bill that had resulted in this particular burn mark on the table. It had been about something said on the train home from school that embarrassed Charlie in front of some girl. Tempers had raged the entire way home and then the fight had broken out at the dinner table. Ginny was still fairly little, but she remembered that both boys had outside chores for a week to make up for it.

She allowed herself to glance up and caught Harry looking at her. Strangely, he blushed and looked away quickly. She contemplated that as she gathered her breakfast things and took them to the sink. Rarely had she seen Harry blush. It made her feel a bit uncomfortable, if the truth were told,

because she wasn't sure what it meant. Did he like her? Or was he just embarrassed that he'd made a fool of himself earlier?

Ginny let these thoughts occupy her mind while she began to clean the kitchen, keeping half an ear in the conversation behind her. Harry was telling Ron about something that had happened a few nights ago while he was working, and Ron was asking about someone at the Ministry. Over it all, she could hear her mother's contented humming in the living room and the click-click of her knitting needles.

"Post is here," Ron called out as two large owls flew in and perched on the back of an empty chair. Ginny didn't bother to turn around; knowing that rarely was anything for her.

"Erm, Ginny?" Harry's voice shook her from her musings and she turned, wiping her soapy hands on the apron she'd put over her clothes. "I forgot to say earlier with all the... mess." He blushed again and Ginny had to fight to keep a smile back. He looked utterly adorable, she thought, in his rumpled robes with his hair on end and a rather showing stubble line darkening his bright pink cheeks. "Kingsley said that there'd been a reporter nosing around at the Ministry and he thought there might be a story soon."

Immediately, any thoughts of how cute Harry might be flew out the window. "How...?" Ginny cleared her throat. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"It's here," Ron said in a dull voice as he unrolled the morning newspaper. After a second of scanning it, Ron laid it down and pushed it across the table to Harry, who glanced up at her.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I'd hoped that we could avoid this for as long as possible."

"It's not your fault," Ginny said softly. "Well, let's get it over with," she sighed and sank into the chair next to him. The both leaned over the paper together.

The photographs used were two separate ones. Ginny's was cropped from a promotional photo taken for the Harpies in the fall. Harry's must have been one from his graduation from the Auror Academy. His face had a more youthful appearance and was a bit thinner.

Harry Potter to Wed

Staff Reporter

Sources unnamed have indicated that The Chosen One, our very own Harry Potter, is to wed in the next few weeks. While Mr. Potter has been keeping this news close to the vest—there has been no official announcement sent to any publication in Britain—the rumors abound in the Ministry where Potter is near the top of the Auror Division.

And whom, do you ask, is Potter marrying? Well, that's the real shock in this whole thing. It seems that Potter is bound to an arranged marriage to none other than the Holyhead Harpies new up and coming Chaser, Ginevra Weasley. Potter has been close to the Weasley family since his early days at Hogwarts but sources say that they've never seen Ginny, as she likes to be called, and Harry close at all.

"I'd always seen that relationship as more of a sibling one," quotes a source who wishes

to remain anonymous, but who claims to be close to both Potter and Weasley.

Apparently, the contract was forged generations ago and is now being fulfilled by the youngest heirs of both families. The rumor is that the Weasley family appealed to the Wizengamot to have the contract nullified but the request was rejected. Can it be that Miss Weasley is reluctant to marry young Mr. Potter?

“Ginny dated a lot in school and after,” quotes another anonymous source. “She’s had quite a few boyfriends.”

And while Mr. Potter guards his private life quite well, he is rumored to have dated several witches in the past.

We approached the Minister for Magic himself, Kingsley Shacklebolt, who has been seen in various social settings with Potter, about his view on the news. Shacklebolt refused to comment and said that it is the Ministry’s policy not to give out personal information or gossip about employees.

Reporters were rebuffed as well by the Harpies management and escorted from the pitch before we were able to even catch a glimpse of Miss Weasley. The couple has been unavailable for comment also.

What does this mean for our beloved hero? Will he be stuck in a marriage that holds no love and no prospect of happiness?

Keep your eyes here for the latest news on all of these questions.

Ginny sighed and glanced up to find Ron staring at her. “Well, it could be worse,” she sighed and stood to finish cleaning the dishes.

“Ginny,” Harry’s soft voice drew her back. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said plainly. And, surprisingly, she was. When Harry had first mentioned an article, the worst had come to mind. But at least no one like Rita Skeeter had written it. There were several veiled accusations there, but nothing blatant like she’d expected. “Really, I am, Harry. It wasn’t exactly flattering for me, but it wasn’t horrible.”

Harry nodded absently and rubbed his jaw line, causing a scratching sound to come from his whiskery face. “It could have been worse,” he agreed.

Ginny nodded and flicked her wand to get the rest of the dishes started washing. “I’m going to go up and lay down for a bit,” she said. The apron was hung on the peg near the back door where it usually went. “I didn’t get in until late.”

Both Ron and Harry, who were poring over the article again, nodded absently. Ginny watched them for a moment and then sighed as she slowly climbed the stairs. She’d just barely reached her doorway when Harry clambered up after her.

“Ginny, wait!” he called. She turned and he stopped half a step from her. She shifted a bit, feeling

the unease of being so close to him, yet feeling a bit of a pull toward him at the same time. “I just... I just wanted to say have a good day,” he smiled sheepishly and glanced down at his feet. “I’ll try and come by later tonight.”

“You have to work again?”

“No, I’ve the next two days off,” he said.

“Oh,” she nodded. “Good, we still need to get the fittings done and iron out the last details.”

“Alright,” he agreed. “I need to spend a bit of time with Teddy also. I’ve been busy lately and...” They stood in silence for a minute, each seemingly studying the other’s face. “I am sorry about the paper.”

“It’s alright. It was bound to happen, yeah? And it’ll be public record soon enough. I’m sure there will be other, horrible reports soon.”

“Yeah,” he nodded with a sheepish smile. “Ginny?”

“Yes?”

“Can I...” he hesitated. “Can I heal your eye for you?”

“My—oh!” Her hand came up and gingerly rested on the darkening bruise she’d received yesterday. “Alright,” she shrugged. “But you don’t have to.”

“I want to,” he said firmly. There was something strange in his expression—something that bordered on determination.

She nodded again and closed her eyes. It was strange, feeling his breath on her forehead and she shivered when his thumb came up and caressed the skin under her eye. She immediately felt it tighten and heat a bit. Her eyes fluttered open when his thumb passed over the skin again. She hadn’t even heard him say anything.

He was so close, just inches away and his eyes, usually a bright green, had darkened a bit and seemed shiny behind his glasses. She could see her own reflection there and swallowed thickly as he leaned in even closer.

His dry lips pressed gently against hers and she stiffened just a bit. His other hand came up and held the side of her face, cradling her head delicately as he moved his lips over hers.

Ginny could feel her heart melt just a bit as she kissed him back, her hands sliding up and resting on his chest.

It wasn’t an overly long kiss, nor did Harry pressure her to open her mouth, but it was the sweetest kiss she could ever remember getting. And as he pulled away, she fought the urge to hold him there longer.

“Goodnight, Ginny,” he said softly, a contented smile on his face.

“Night,” she whispered and watched him retreat down the stairs, grateful that the wall was still behind her, because she wasn’t sure she could stand on her own.

Chapter Five

When Hermione came in an hour later, Ginny was curled up in her wicker chair, holding her pillow and glancing through an old photo album from Hogwarts. She'd deliberately stopped on a page that featured several photos of a jubilant Harry just after a Quidditch game. She could see the gold badge on his chest proclaiming him Quidditch Captain; it was his sixth year.

"How are you holding up?" Hermione asked as she perched on the edge of the bed. "Ron told me about the mess before."

Ginny sighed and closed the album, sliding it gently to the floor. "I'm alright, I guess. I actually broke up with Anthony the other day, but then he showed up here this morning. I don't really know what he thought he'd accomplish, I told him the truth about everything."

"And how do you feel about breaking up with him?" Hermione asked. Ginny fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"Honestly, we've only been seeing each other for just over a month," she shook her head. "He might have thought it was going somewhere, but it never does."

Hermione was quiet for a moment before peering at her intently. "Do you think there might be a reason behind that?"

Ginny growled in frustration and pulled her hair out of the pony tail it was in and ran her fingers roughly through it. "I really don't want to talk about it right now," she finally conceded, knowing that Hermione probably could guess every one of her darkest secrets.

"But it's rather reassuring that Harry defended you, isn't it?"

Ginny shrugged and laid her head on the side of the chair. "Is it? Isn't that what Harry does; rescue everyone? Honestly, he didn't do anything out of the ordinary for him if you think about it."

"And what about your brothers," Hermione asked with a small smile, "what was the first thing they did when they saw your eye?"

Letting her fingers trail over the healed flesh that was still a bit tender, Ginny thought about the question. "Nothing," she answered truthfully. "But they knew I was at practice and Quidditch is a rough game. If they jumped at every bruise I've come home with their arses would never sit in a chair."

"That's the point, isn't it then?" Hermione said knowingly. "Harry didn't hesitate to defend you. Has he ever done that before?"

"Not that I can remember, specifically... so violently. Unless you count coming down to pull me from the Chamber."

"That's not the same thing," Hermione shook her head. "Do you remember when you and Dean broke up?" Ginny nodded. "You had that screaming row in the Common Room and Dean called you

that horrible name.” She grimaced right along with Ginny at the memory. “Who was it that chased Dean out of the portrait hole? It was Ron, not Harry.”

Ginny nodded. “Yeah, Harry didn’t react openly to it. But he did react; he just doesn’t think I know about it.”

“What did he do?” Hermione sat up straighter at hearing there was something Ginny knew that she didn’t.

Ginny let a rather evil grin spread over her face. “I can’t prove it, but at the next practice Dean couldn’t sit right on his broom. I caught Harry laughing about it later, although he tried to pass it off as something else. Then, later that year, Fred mentioned something in one of his letters. He asked if Harry had found a good use for the Extreme Itching Powder that he’d ordered from them.”

“He didn’t,” Hermione gasped.

“I think he did. He’s subtle like that.”

“Harry? Subtle?” Hermione laughed. “Not likely.”

Ginny shook her head. “If you knew half the things that I knew,” she laughed. “I caught him one time coming back down from Ron’s room—that’s when he was living here before he got his flat. He acted completely casual and I passed it off until the next morning when Ron started screaming about spiders in his underwear drawer. Poor George had to run for his life.”

“I remember that day,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “Ron swore George did it; it was the twin’s calling card after all. George even took credit for it.”

Ginny nodded. “I think he thought he was covering for me. That was the first time George smiled after...” She trailed away thinking of that dark time in their family when Fred had not returned from the Final Battle.

“I know,” Hermione said and wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes. “That’s why Ron never retaliated. Are you saying that Harry did that?”

“He did wink at me at breakfast that morning,” Ginny shrugged.

“Well, I have to say I’m surprised.”

“That he could do it, or that you didn’t know about it?”

“Both,” Hermione said.

“Well, you are a veritable Harry Potter encyclopedia,” Ginny said with a smirk. They both trailed off and Ginny picked at a loose thread on her jeans. “Tell me about Harry.”

Hermione contemplated her for a minute. “You know about him.”

“Not enough,” Ginny said. “He’s much more open around you.”

"You'd be surprised," Hermione said and leaned on her side on the bed. "I think he shares more with you than you realize." She sighed. "Well, you know about his childhood, or at least as much as he tells anyone. At best he was neglected. He won't say if he was abused, but I know his cousin hit him quite a bit. I think that's why he wasn't okay with anyone touching him for so long."

"He seems to have gotten over that," Ginny observed, thinking back to the many casual touches she'd shared with Harry over the years. Although, she had to admit that, now that she really reviewed it, there were times where she remembered Harry pulling away from someone when they'd reach out to grasp his shoulder or shake his hand. She'd also seen the discomfort on his face in the earlier years when both Hermione and Molly would hug him. In fact she'd rarely seen him initiate any contact first; it seemed he preferred to respond.

"Somewhat," Hermione agreed.

"What about women?" Ginny asked. "I know he's dated a bit."

Hermione nodded and narrowed her eyes at Ginny who pretended not to notice. "He has, although he's very quiet about it and nothing has ever really lasted."

"There was that one; I don't remember her name, while he was at the Academy."

Hermione's eyes rolled. "You do too remember her name," she scolded. "It was Leslie, and, yes they were at the Academy together. Harry refused to date for the longest time after the Final Battle." She glanced off toward the ceiling and scowled at it. "I wondered, at the time, why that was, but Harry just said he was too focused on training and had enough to deal with. But then one day he brought Leslie to dinner at our flat."

"And that one didn't end well," Ginny said, remembering the horrid stories the press printed and the accusations that Leslie had made about Harry.

"No, it didn't," Hermione agreed with a sad tone. "But it wasn't all Harry's fault. I think that, in the beginning, Leslie was thrilled to be with the Boy-Who-Lived. I saw it that first night we met her. She was all over him, you know." Ginny grimaced but didn't say anything. "And then a few months later Harry said she was dropping out of the Academy. It was strange because Kingsley had been telling me that she was one of the best recruits that they'd seen, besides Harry."

"What happened? I mean, we all read the stories, but they were rubbish."

Hermione gave another sad smile. "Mostly, yes. But the interviews she gave after they broke up could have been twisted a bit."

"She still shouldn't have spoken with them," Ginny huffed. "If it had been her... nope, not going there. She shoved those thoughts right back in their dark corner."

"I agree, but she did. And Harry was livid. He came over demanding to know if he could take some legal action or something."

"Was what she said true?"

Hermione looked as if she was choosing her words carefully. "Harry was rather focused on his training, so the part about him being inattentive and obsessed is a bit true, but I think it was over dramatized."

"And the rest?" Ginny didn't know why she was asking these things: the years of torturing herself over Harry must have become a bad habit.

"I don't know if he cheated on her, honestly I didn't ask, and I don't really want to know. But, if I had to guess, I'd say he's not capable of that. I think the guilt would eat him alive. And as for her being pregnant, that is a complete lie. And if she actually was and miscarried, like she claimed, it wasn't Harry's baby." Hermione flushed a bit and traced her finger along the lines in the pattern of Ginny's bedspread. "When Harry first brought her to meet us, he asked me for contraceptive advice. He wanted something that was completely effective. I recommended the same potion that you take."

Ginny nodded her understanding. When she'd signed with the Harpies, Gwenog had taken her aside and pointed out the clause in her contract that she wasn't to get pregnant for the term of the agreement: two years. She recommended a strong potion that was taken once a year and was virtually foolproof.

"What about others?" Ginny asked.

Hermione sat up and gave her a scrutinizing look. "Ginny, why are you doing this? Why do you want to know this?"

"I'm a sadist, alright," Ginny growled and then smiled wryly. "I know it won't change anything. It's just, he's... experienced, Hermione. And I'm not."

Her friend studied her and then nodded. "He's been with woman, Ginny. Mostly Muggle women, I think, that he meets when he's not at work. I know he and Ron have gone to pubs before. Actually, he and George go out quite a bit as well. That one experience with Leslie scared him off witches, if you ask me. He doesn't talk about it, really. You've never been close?"

Ginny flushed. She'd never talked to anyone about her relationships, really. "I was with Jeremy."

"The Hufflepuff?"

"Yeah, seventh year and just after. We fooled around a bit, but I never let it get too far."

"Why was that?"

Ginny groaned and pressed her hand against her head where a headache was beginning to form. "I don't know, really. I guess that I just never felt right about it. Do you think it could have something to do with the arranged marriage thing?" Her eyes brightened as the idea popped into her head. "Like some kind of subconscious thing my magic was doing to warn me?"

"It's possible," Hermione frowned. "I'll have to look into it. In this case, if it were true it was a good thing."

Ginny only nodded. She was rethinking all of the situations she'd been in over the years where she and someone had been about to get carried away and then some stray thought would pop into her head and any desires she had went right out the door.

"It's not as if any of my relationships, save the one with Jeremy, lasted long anyway," Ginny said dryly.

"And why is that?"

"Hermione," Ginny groaned and slunk further down in the chair. "I thought I said—"

"At least be honest with yourself about it," Hermione scolded.

Ginny thought about that for a minute before closing her eyes and, slowly, allowing the shadows to fade from the thoughts she always kept hidden. When she spoke her voice was low and soft.

"Because none of them measured up." Her hands fidgeted in front of her, picking at her nails and pushing back the rough cuticles.

"And who was the measuring stick?" Hermione asked. Ginny knew she already knew the answer.

"You know who it was."

"Admit it, then."

"It was Harry. It's always been Harry." Ginny rested her head on her arms and pulled her knees up to her chest. "Every time I meet someone I think 'it will be different this time'. But it never is. I can't help but notice that they butter their toast different than he does, and they don't drink their tea with honey and lemon the way he does."

"And they don't make you feel the way he does," Hermione finished with a knowing look full of sympathy. "Why didn't you ever talk to him about this?"

"Because he never looked at me as more than Ron's little sister for the longest time, and just when I thought I might have a chance, he started treating me as his own sister—another one of his mates that he could joke around with and share a laugh with, but seldom more."

"He never treated you as a sister; more of a friend, really. I think you chose to see what you wanted," Hermione shook her head. "All of us see something different, Ginny."

Ginny's head lifted. "What do you mean?"

"That's how you expected Harry to see you, so that's how you portrayed it to yourself. But Harry watches you, Ginny. When he makes a joke, you're the first person he watches to see if you'll laugh. And when you do, his smile gets wider. When he walks into the back door, his eyes automatically scan to find you, and his shoulders relax a bit when he does."

Ginny shook her head. "I think you're the one seeing things."

Hermione sighed and sat up straight, pressing her hand over the blankets to remove the wrinkles

she'd caused. "Ginny, you and Harry are entering something huge here. And I think you both need to take the time to be completely honest, with yourselves and with each other." She stood and walked over to the door. "I have to go into the office for awhile. I'll be back later if you want to talk then."

Ginny only nodded absently, still staring off at the distant wall. She knew it would be a long day. And she really didn't need any further distraction at practice this afternoon. Harry would have a fit if she showed up with another bruise.

* * *

Madam Malkin hadn't been too hard to convince to close down her shop for a few hours while Harry and Ginny were fitted for their wedding robes. She'd fussed a bit at the beginning of the appointment, but was now in full swing, measuring and pinning while Harry and Ginny both stood on platforms draped in fine fabrics.

Mrs. Weasley had still tried to deny all of Harry's requests to cover all the costs of the Wedding until Harry threatened to deposit large amounts of gold into their Gringott's account. Bill, who'd been sitting at the table at the time of the argument, had watched Harry thoughtfully and vowed his help if needed. Mrs. Weasley fussed for a few minutes more, and then made Harry promise no outlandish and expensive things to which he'd agreed with a smile. Ginny hadn't said a word during the discussion, which was strange for her, although as the wedding grew closer, she'd grown a bit more distant.

Her attitude perplexed and frustrated Harry. There were times, especially when they were alone together, that he felt something there between them. When she'd touch him, brush his hand or sit by him on the sofa, their knees touching, that he prayed she felt it too. And then she'd pull away again, a strange and unidentified look in her eyes.

She looked utterly bored today though, draped in white silk, her arms held out almost straight.

Harry, who was being measured for the third time by Madam Malkin's ancient spinster sister, rolled his eyes and managed to get a small smirk out of his fiancé. He sighed heavily and shifted his weight again.

"Young man, if you don't stand still I'm going to end up sticking you," the woman threatened in her shaky voice. Harry didn't feel the need to point out that with her rheumatic hands and tremor she'd already pricked him several times.

"Patience, Harry," Ginny cooed and fluttered her eyelashes at him. Harry snorted and then jumped as he got a sharp pain in his thigh.

"Told you not to move."

Harry rolled his eyes again and set his jaw, drawing on all his stamina not to hex the old woman.

"Ginny, dear, now that you're about finished, I'm going to slip down to your brother's shop and make sure he's got those things I told him to order in. You and Harry finish up here and meet me there and we'll all have a bite at the Leaky Cauldron, alright?" Mrs. Weasley was gone before Ginny

could even answer and Harry sniggered again only to be stuck in the calf.

“What things?” Harry asked and Ginny shrugged, receiving her own shock at a pin stick.

“I have no idea,” she confessed. “I think she may just be saying that to be able to be gone when you pay for all of this stuff. If she can’t see the total, she can deny that it really happened, to herself anyway.”

“Ginny—”

“It’s alright, Harry, really it is.”

Harry searched her face and knew that she wasn’t lying. It might not be entirely alright, but Ginny was working through it. For him it was enough that when he’d come to the Burrow that day Ginny had been wearing the modest engagement ring he’d given her. And, in typical Ginny fashion, she hadn’t said a thing about it. Harry took her cue and didn’t either. He turned back around and vowed to stand completely still so that the old hag—er, woman—could finish.

Fifteen minutes later he was waiting for Ginny to have a few last measurements. He tucked the receipt for the garments into his pocket and confirmed that Madam Malkin would arrange for the clothing to be picked up in two days, once the alterations were completed. He drifted over closer to Ginny and watched with amusement as she valiantly tried not to move.

The small bell over the door sounded and Harry turned around, expecting that Mrs. Weasley may have come to see what was taking them so long. An aristocratic face surrounded by long white-blond hair greeted him.

“Young man,” Madam Malkin called out, her voice pinched and tight, “I wonder if you noted the closed sign on the door?”

Malfoy raised an eyebrow and took in the darker interior of the shop. “Looks as if you’re just about finished to me.” His face pulled into the characteristic ‘Malfoy’ smirk that Harry had seen so many times at Hogwarts. “Potter.”

“Malfoy,” Harry returned the cold, formal greeting.

Malfoy’s eyes scanned the shop and then rested on Ginny before he sneered at Harry. “And the little woman.”

Harry drew himself up to his full height and moved to a more defensive posture. “Did you need something?”

Malfoy looked him up and down before sniffing. “Not from you. I read about your little... situation in the papers.” Draco wandered toward a rack displaying robes in fine silks and satins, his fingers trailing along the expensive fabric. Harry wanted to wipe the smugness off of his face. He glanced up at Ginny to find a face full of barely concealed anger as she stood still. “Irony isn’t it, that you’re stuck with her?”

“What does that mean?” Harry asked, his tone going low.

“Nothing,” Draco protested, holding his empty hands up in supplication, “nothing at all.” His eyes traveled up and down Ginny’s slender form before he turned to a fuming Harry. “At least Patil had a few... assets, Potter. This one...” he leered at Ginny again. “What a shame. Even you may deserve a bit more than that.”

“Malfoy,” Harry warned and the man seemed surprised that Harry hadn’t drawn his wand.

“What?” Malfoy drawled, turning back to face Harry completely. “It’s not like you can deny it. She’s missing... most of what a man desires. And that hair and those... spots on her face.” He shrugged dismissively. “I guess it all comes down to taste.”

Harry, surprisingly, smiled widely. “I guess it does,” he admitted. “I think she’s lovely, especially right now... with her wand drawn on you.”

Malfoy paled and glanced behind him to find Ginny had indeed retrieved her wand and had it pointed at his back. He quickly straightened his robes and stalked to the door.

“My congratulations to the happy couple,” he laughed sardonically. He glanced over to where Madam Malkin was standing behind the counter. “It’s a shame that one has to pay so much for substandard goods and services nowadays.” The bell above the door sounded again as he slipped outside, ignoring the huff of the older woman.

Harry watched him go and then turned with a grin to Ginny. It slipped however when he saw her shoulders slump and she turned her face from him.

“Ginny—”

“Just give me a minute to get changed, Harry,” she said dully. “I’ll be right out.” She turned and walked away before he could answer.

“Alright, I’ll wait right here,” he called out, knowing that she couldn’t hear him anymore.

They had walked only a few steps away from the front of the store in silence before Ginny turned to him.

“Did you mean it?”

“What?” Harry asked, completely bewildered as to what she was asking.

“That you think I’m...” she said, her voice low and her tone somewhere in between disbelief and awe.

“Lovely? I do,” he confirmed easily and took a chance to slip his arm around her shoulders. For the first time in days she didn’t pull away but moved closer. “I’ve always thought that, Ginny. I remember seeing you at the Burrow that first summer and thinking how pretty you were.”

She snorted and Harry wondered if she was crying; he couldn’t tell from where he looked down on her face. “Please, I was skinny and had stringy red hair and too many freckles. Like now.”

He was sure she hadn’t meant for him to hear the last part but he squeezed her shoulder anyway.

Sometimes her ability to doubt her self worth surprised him. Ginny had always seemed like such a strong personality to him. Although, through the years, he'd seen it time and again; one minute she'd be fine, joking and laughing, and then some comment would be made and she'd retreat into a kind of shell for a few minutes. That was something he was determined to stop happening as much as possible. "I never thought that. Besides, I was skinny and had this horrible mop of hair. Still do, actually. And knobby knees, did I mention that one."

She went silent but he could tell she was still mulling things over. "What about that other thing he said? Were you dating Parvati?"

Harry took a moment to think about the best way to approach the subject. He knew that their pasts were something they'd have to deal with to move on. Ginny had dated a few boys in school and a few men after Hogwarts. And Harry had had a few relationships, but only one had been anywhere near serious. "Parvati? No. I dated Padma a few months back," he explained.

"Oh," she nodded. "Was it... serious?"

"I thought it might be," he shrugged. "We only dated for a few months before it ended."

"And you were alright with that?"

"Not at the time," he said and glanced down to find a mask of indifference that he thought was probably false on her face. "But she chose work over us so... At the time I was upset, thinking I was missing out on something. But then, well, a few months went by and here we are."

Ginny raised her face and studied him for a minute before nodding. "If you had the chance..."

He stopped and turned her to face him fully. "I don't, Ginny. You can't turn back time. And even if I could, I wouldn't, because I'd miss out on what I have right now."

Ginny's eyes darted away and he was surprised to see tears pool there. "What you have is an emotional wreck being forced on you."

"What I have," Harry said firmly, "is a chance with a wonderful witch who is an amazing friend, a beautiful woman and one hell of a Quidditch player." He swiped his thumb across her cheek removing the single tear that had fallen.

"Everyone wonders 'what if', don't they? But it doesn't get us anywhere. And the way I see it, the 'what if' should be what we're looking forward to, not back over our shoulders at." He reached down and brushed his hand across her fingers, finding the ring and giving it a small tap: just a small acknowledgement that he'd seen it and was happy about it.

Ginny nodded and leaned her forehead against his chest. "I don't know what I did to get someone as nice as you," she mumbled and it made Harry laugh.

"Well, you're stuck with me now." She snorted out a laugh and pulled away. Harry offered his arm to her and she looked at it for a moment before twining hers through and they went to meet her mother.

Chapter Six

“Nervous?”

Harry turned around from where he was staring out the window that overlooked the backyard of the Burrow. In the orchard just on the edge of the Quidditch pitch, a simple arch, decorated with green vines and a few pale white and yellow flowers, was set up in front of a dozen or two chairs. Guests were already starting to fill up the few seats. Ron stood in the doorway, his dress robes draped over his shoulders but not done up.

“This is the right thing, right?” Harry asked as he turned back to the window.

“You’re asking the wrong bloke,” Ron shook his head and came to stand next to his best friend. “I’m all for both of you living rather than dying a horrible death.”

“But... will we be happy, can we be?”

Ron was quiet for a few minutes before he nodded. “I think you can be; whether you are is up to the both of you.”

“How is Ginny?” he asked.

“Solid as a rock,” Ron retorted. “Or at least that’s what Hermione’s telling me. Don’t know if I believe it or not. Ginny always could make us believe anything she wanted us to.”

Harry smiled sadly at the window pane and sighed heavily, spinning on his heel and leaning against the window.

“This isn’t how I pictured this day happening.”

“I bet not. What would you do different, besides the bride?”

Harry shook his head instantly. “The bride’s not the problem,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean?” Ron asked, turning to face him. “You mean you... like Ginny?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably and rubbed the back of his neck. “Of course I like her.”

“You know what I mean, just answer the question, Harry.”

Harry sat heavily on the end of Ron’s old bed, making it squeak heavily, and shrugged while wearing a sheepish look. “I mean, I’ve always liked her, a bit anyway.”

“Since when?” Ron asked.

Raising his face to appraise his friend, Harry told the truth. “Sixth year, I think. I saw her a lot that year, you know. We spent time together on the Quidditch team and she was around a lot.”

“And you never said anything?”

Harry shrugged one shoulder. "It's not like I was in love with her, Ron. I just, you know, sort of fancied her I think. But she was with Dean. And then I was going to say something but..."

"Dumbledore died," Ron nodded.

"Yeah," Harry stood and ran a hand through his hair and then swore, stalking over to the mirror to try and fix what damage he'd done. "And then the world went to hell."

"Why not say something later?"

Harry sighed, giving up on making his hair lay flat and turned back around. "I don't know, honestly. She seemed happy. She was dating that Hufflepuff bloke and... I guess I just let time get away from me. I got lost in training and then in the job."

"Well," Ron said slowly, as if trying to take it all in, "what would you change then?"

Harry looked directly at his friend. "I'd want to be her choice. I would have wanted us to fall in love, take our time knowing that this thing between us is going to work. Mostly, I just want her to be happy, you know."

"Me too, Harry," Ron said and came forward to clap his friend on the shoulder. "Now, let's go and get you married."

Harry took a deep breath and nodded jerkily. The emotions swirling through him were almost too intense to deal with. There was nervousness and even a bit of nausea. But the overwhelming sense was a fear that he'd messed up both of their lives somehow, or that the bonding wouldn't work and they'd have gone through all of this for nothing.

He was glad Ron was there to guide him as he felt distracted and wasn't positive he would have made it there on his own.

In the kitchen, Mr. Weasley smiled at what must have been a rather grim face Harry wore and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Relax, son," he said. "After all, it is a wedding, not a funeral."

Harry swallowed thickly and nodded. "I'm sorry, sir," he managed to choke out through a thick throat and Arthur waved him off.

"We don't blame you, Harry. And, if you think about it, this is a blessing. After all, we could be marrying her off to someone we don't like."

Both Ron and Mr. Weasley laughed although Harry grimaced. He took a deep breath and nodded toward the door. "Best get on with it, I guess."

Mr. Weasley placed both hands on his shoulders and looked deep into his eyes. "Harry, I admire the way you've handled yourself these past weeks. I know this can't have been easy, for either of you. Everything you've known in your lives is being turned upside down. But, I'd like to give you a bit of advice, if I may. I wish it were your father here giving it, Harry. And I don't want you to feel like

I'm trying to take his place..."

"No," Harry broke in, "I don't. It's fine."

A slow smile spread across the aging face of the Weasley patriarch. "I wish there was some thing I could tell you to make this whole situation right, Harry. The only thing I can tell you is what I told Bill and what Molly's father told me." Harry nodded and glanced at Ron who stood completely still, his face riveted on his father.

"Love is something that grows between two people, Harry. It's something that you have to work at everyday. Every morning I wake up and look at my wife, Harry, and I love her a little more." He shook his head a bit. "I'm not sure if I'm saying this right."

"You're saying that it'll take time," Harry supplied and Mr. Weasley smiled, seemingly grateful that Harry understood.

"Exactly that. My little girl has always been a fighter, Harry. But she's still a little girl at times, as most women are. She'll yell, and scream, and fight, and cry-but in the end, if the two of you can work things out and truly fall in love, then you'll have the best partner a man could ask for."

The soft spoken words were like a shot of courage straight into Harry's heart and he nodded firmly. "Thank you, sir. It means... the world to me."

"Now, you'd best get out there before Molly comes down and sees you still here." He gave a quick wink and let the two men walk out into the warm May air.

Harry did his best to smile at the small group assembled in front of the arch as he and Ron took their places. There were faces he'd known for as many years as he'd been in the Wizarding world.

Andromeda Tonks sat in the front row, Harry's godson sitting comfortably on her lap. He waved his pudgy hand at Harry and his hair flashed black making Harry's heart soar.

Hagrid stood in the very back and sniffled into a large polka-dotted handkerchief. Ron bumped Harry's shoulder in amusement as the large man blew his nose and startled the crowd in front of him with the trumpet-sounding blast. Harry smiled down at his shoes and clasped his hands in front of his robes.

Soft music began to play and Harry looked over to see a single cello playing off to one side. He wasn't sure what the piece was but he'd heard it before. Aunt Petunia used to play classical music records in the summer when the windows would be open and the neighbors could hear how cultured they were. The low notes of the song lulled him and made him relax a bit.

When Ginny exited the Burrow, both of her parents at her sides, Harry promptly forgot how to breathe. She looked like an angel in her white robes, her hair piled high in curls on the back of her head.

"You alright?" Ron whispered and Harry smiled and nodded.

"You remember earlier... when I asked if it was worth it?" He turned and gave his friend a look that

portrayed confidence. "Well, it is." Ron grinned and they both turned back to watch Ginny approach.

* * *

"Is it always like this?" Ginny asked as she pressed a hand to her fluttering stomach and glanced up to where her mother was fluffing the last of her curls.

Molly Weasley smiled serenely and patted her daughter's shoulder. "Not always, Ginny-girl. But I remember being quite nervous. I couldn't even button my robes by myself; my mum had to do it for me."

Ginny studied her mother's reflection in the mirror. "You weren't sure?"

"I loved your father, don't misunderstand me," her mother corrected. "But the thought of promising forever made me a bit unsteady. I must have asked my mother a hundred times if there was a way to know for sure."

"Is there?" Ginny asked, "Because if there is, someone should have mentioned that to me weeks ago."

Molly chuckled and gently turned Ginny's head so that their eyes met in the mirror. "There is no true way," she shook her head. "If I could have done anything to make this easier for you I would have. I can only tell you that in a few weeks you'll wake up and realize that you're going to be alright."

"Am I?" Ginny asked, her tears filling her eyes. "I just don't know."

"Harry's a wonderful man, Ginny," Molly smiled through her own tears. "He'll take care of you if you let him, and if you let yourself feel all those things you've been burying for so many years I think you'll both be alright." Ginny's eyes widened, and Molly smiled sadly at her.

"One day you'll have a daughter and then you'll understand that you can see the world in her eyes," she explained. "You may have thought it was a secret, love, but a mother always knows."

"It doesn't matter," Ginny looked away and blinked so that she could force her tears not to smudge the makeup she'd allowed Molly to help her put on earlier. "He doesn't feel that way about me and he won't ever."

"Don't push him away, Ginny," Molly scolded softly. "I've seen the way the two of you are together."

"What do you mean?"

"It's only been in the past week that I've really seen it change," Molly explained as she sat on the edge of the bed. "He reaches for you now. I've never seen him seek out someone else's touch before."

Ginny forced herself to remember all the times this past week that she and Harry had held hands or

hugged. "He's only doing what he feels is required of him."

"That may be," Molly said as she took Ginny's hand and tugged her to a standing position. "But what starts out as awkward becomes habit if we keep it up long enough. I promise, one day the both of you won't remember how it felt to stand here today."

Her father's soft knock at the door forced her to nod and swallow her fears. Regardless of any doubts she had, Ginny knew it was time. She took a deep breath and willed a strong expression on her face.

"Hello pumpkin," her father greeted and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. "You've never looked lovelier. Everyone's ready and waiting for the most important person."

Ginny chuckled. "It's not just about me, Dad." Her heart filled with courage at his admiring smile. She'd always been a bit of a daddy's girl.

"You watch Harry's face when you come down that aisle; that'll tell you who it's all about." She wanted to deny it but he winked and took her arm to lace it through his. "Let me prove it to you."

Her legs felt wobbly and she was glad that she had her parents on both sides of her as she exited the Burrow and they walked toward the ceremony. She forced her eyes to search out Harry's face when they got close enough. She watched him freeze and then a slow smile spread over his face. He leaned over to Ron and said something that made them both smile wider.

"I told you," her father whispered and patted her arm. "He's quite taken with you, if I'm not mistaken."

She swallowed again, praying it would be true. They continued to walk and her parents placed each of her hands in Harry's at the top of the aisle.

"Take care of her, Harry," her father said softly.

"I will," he said confidently and caressed her hands softly.

The bonding was a bit of a blur to her. She remembered promising her magic and her life to Harry, and she must have said the right things at the right time because Harry's eyes never left hers. Everything was swirling in her head so fast that she was afraid she'd pass out. Memories of moments together over the years interchanged with prayers that the bond would hold and that they would both wake up tomorrow. Her hopes and dreams of a future whirled, causing a bit of a rush in her ears. Her eyes widened as Harry leaned toward her and she supposed that she'd missed almost everything. His lips were soft and warm on hers but she was grateful when he didn't kiss her any longer than necessary.

As they pulled apart, he kept her held to him. "Are you alright?" His breath against her ear made her shiver.

She could only nod and hold tight to his shoulders, knowing that he was the only thing holding her upright. "I'll be fine," she managed to stammer out.

Harry pulled back and looked deep into her eyes. He must have seen some hint of truth because he nodded and brushed his lips against hers one last time before taking her arm and making their way back down the aisle.

* * *

The small reception was rather stiff, Harry thought. He and Ginny greeted each guest and thanked them for coming. Mrs. Weasley outdid herself with a huge feast which Harry forced himself to have second helpings of. He noticed that Ginny wasn't eating much of anything at all.

Teddy had climbed onto his lap halfway through the meal and had helped himself to a few bites of Harry's food. The only true smile he'd seen on Ginny's face had been when the toddler had reached his arms out to her and she'd taken him on her lap, disregarding Fleur's scrunched up nose and comment that the boy would ruin her Wedding robes. It made Harry's heart clench when he saw the interaction between Ginny and Teddy. The boy's hair changed to a vibrant crimson and visions of what their children might look like in the future made his head spin a bit.

Once Teddy had moved on to entertain the rest of the Weasley brothers, her mask was back in place. Toward Harry she had been distant during and after the ceremony, only meeting his eyes a few times, even though she wore a smile most of the time.

The evening wore on and Harry felt himself getting anxious-not necessarily for their leaving, but more because of all the eyes watching him.

"Hermione, why are they all watching me?" he finally whispered harshly to her.

"Oh," Hermione flushed slightly and glanced around to find several of Ginny's brothers eyeing Harry suspiciously. "Harry, they all know that the bond isn't completed yet."

"What?" he hissed. "What do you mean it's not—"

"The consummation," Hermione hissed under her breath and Harry felt extremely stupid. Yes, he'd thought about it, but he and Ginny had hastily chosen not to take a honeymoon away from England. Harry had been willing to take her anywhere in the world, but Ginny had been adamant that they shouldn't make a big deal out of it. But, with all the requirements of the wedding, the act of sealing the bond had been pushed back in his mind.

"What? They're just waiting for us to..." He glared at Hermione who shrugged through an awkward moment of silence.

"Try not to let it bother you, Harry." She winced when his gaze heated. "Just... just try not to think about it at any rate."

"Do they think we're enjoying this? My wife won't even stand next to me for more than a minute or two, Hermione. What's going on with that? Has she told you anything?"

"She's just nervous, Harry," Hermione said. Although he noticed that she seemed to be avoiding his gaze a bit. "Just give her a bit of time." Harry sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Look, here she comes,” Hermione nodded to where Ginny had reemerged from the Burrow no longer wearing her Wedding robes. “Go to her and suggest that you take her to your place. But don’t push, Harry.”

He opened his mouth to protest that he wouldn’t push her, but Hermione just crossed her arms and he knew it wouldn’t be worth a fight right now. Noticing that Ginny seemed to be trying to finally catch his eye, he quickly said a goodbye to Hermione and made his way to his new wife.

“Can we please get out of here?” she whispered to him once he’d reached her. “If I see one more person looking at me as if I’m going to explode, I’m just going to...” she trailed off, realizing what she was going to say.

“Explode?” Harry asked with a small smile.

To his surprise, Ginny cracked one of the first genuine smiles he’d seen all day. “Yeah, I guess so,” she chuckled a bit.

Harry nodded and swept his gaze over the backyard to see almost everyone very conspicuously turn away. He knew they’d all been watching the couple.

Ginny moved in close to him and laid her forehead against his chest. “Please get me out of here, Harry,” she whispered.

Harry wrapped his arms around her waist and caught Ron’s eye in the waning light, giving him a quick nod that he hoped his friend understood. He closed his eyes and willed himself to see the living room in his flat—erm, their flat, now.

He opened his eyes when he felt Ginny lift her head.

“I didn’t even bring a bag,” she muttered and glanced around. She’d been to his flat a few times over the years for social gatherings, and once for a surprise birthday party for Ron. She seemed to be scanning it for something and he was just about to ask her what she thought when she leaned in again and shuddered against him.

At a loss for what to do, he wrapped his arms back around her and gently led her to the sofa where she curled up against him and cried.

“I’m sorry,” she finally choked out after he had held her for a few minutes. “It’s just... this isn’t how I expected it to be and...”

“It’s alright,” Harry soothed and then ruffled his hair. “Look, it’s been a long day, yeah? Why don’t I show you to your room and we can call it a night. I’m sure neither of us has slept lately.”

“My room?” she asked and rubbed at her eyes as she lifted her face to look at him.

Harry nodded, feeling his face heat a bit. “Ron and I thought you might like a place of your own, you know. He and I moved most of your room earlier today. I think Hermione packed the last of your things and sent the bag over.”

“But I thought...”

“Ginny, I don’t want to make this hard on either of us,” Harry continued, looking off away from her. “Let’s just... let’s just get some sleep and we’ll talk in the morning, alright?”

He glanced over at her, sensing she was looking at him. Her mouth opened to say something else and then she nodded, seemingly resigned to his suggestion.

“Alright, Harry,” she said. Slowly, she stood and looked at him.

“Oh, right,” Harry said as he stood and quickly moved down the hallway. “I put you in the extra room,” he said, pointing toward the room right next to his. “I think we got everything. Let me know if there’s something that you need. Erm, there’s clean towels in the bathroom and-”

“Harry,” she interrupted with a small smile, “I’m not a guest.”

“Right,” he nodded, feeling extremely foolish. He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly and leaned against the door jamb.

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

She flushed and looked down. “Good night.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said and backed out into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind him. He leaned his forehead against the wall and banged it a couple of times. Somehow, in the space of twenty-four hours, they’d regressed to the polite awkwardness that Harry had hoped was past them days ago.

He tugged at his robes in frustration and went into his own bedroom. His eyes settled on the queen-sized bed in the center of the room and he sighed. With a quick flick of his wand, the dozen red roses and champagne chilling next to the bed disappeared. This self-consciousness between them would not help in the upcoming days. They only had three days to fulfill the bond and they’d already used up most of one of them.

Chapter Seven

Harry didn't sleep well that night, tossing and turning until he finally got up, took a hot shower and decided to fix a large breakfast. Once the eggs, bacon and toast were done, he placed it all on a tray and made his way to Ginny's door. The small pink rosebud he'd place in a thin vase swayed as the tray levitated next to him.

Harry took a deep breath, hoping that Ginny would be a bit more at ease today and gave a light knock.

"Come in, Harry."

He took another deep breath and opened the door slowly, motioning the floating tray to follow him in.

"I, erm, I thought you might be hungry," he ventured. Ginny was fully dressed, her hands quickly plaiting her hair as she sat on the edge of the already made bed. "I didn't know if you'd like to eat in here or..."

"I think I'll join you out there," she suggested, finishing with her hair and standing. "If that's alright?"

"Yeah," Harry stammered. "That's fine. I just didn't want to push you... or anything."

"Its fine, Harry," she said and gently took the tray from the air, carrying it out and down the hall.

Harry gave a quick look around the room, taking in all of the things that Ginny liked: her Quidditch posters hung on the walls and her aqua and blue print bedspread, before following her out.

Breakfast was awkward as they ate in almost complete silence. When they finished, Harry reached across the table to gently take Ginny's hand but she pulled it away as if burned by his touch.

"I'll do these dishes." She stood quickly and began gathering the remnants of breakfast.

Harry sighed. "Ginny, don't." She stopped and Harry recognized a bit of anger building in her face. "Just... just come and sit down with me. The dishes can wait."

She fidgeted a bit in place before nodding. "Alright."

Harry stood and led the way to the sofa, sitting against one cushion and patting the one next to himself.

* * *

Ginny watched Harry sit down and indicate where she should sit. Her heart raced as she sank into the sofa, just a bit further from him than he'd indicated.

"Ginny," he started as he reached for her hand again. "Did I do something wrong? Did I scare you in some way?"

She sighed, hating that she was hurting him. But, truthfully, she wasn't sure how to act. The only thing she could think about was the fact that they were going to have to have sex very soon. She'd been mentally preparing herself the whole day yesterday for it to happen. And when everyone seemed to be watching them, the pressure built and she couldn't take it anymore. And Harry had been wonderful last night, not forcing her to do anything she hadn't wanted to do, and even giving her the other room instead of intending for her to join him.

"You didn't do anything, Harry," she assured him and forced herself to stop trembling and squeeze his hand a bit. "I'm sorry I'm so jumpy. I guess it's just nerves."

Harry sighed and nodded. "We have two days," he said quietly, his face heating a bit. "I think it's just best if we try to get past this... strangeness, at first."

She smiled around the lump in her throat. "I think that's a good idea."

"We could try watching a film," he suggested. "Or we could go someplace if you want."

"A film might be nice," she offered, hoping that he would allow her to move a bit further from him so that she could catch her breath. Maybe if they just spent some time together, she could work up to being close to him without constantly thinking that every move, every touch, was leading somewhere she wasn't ready to go yet.

The film was nice but Harry had taken her hand again and had tugged her closer to him during it. Ginny had stiffly complied, only to scurry away, claiming tiredness, as soon as it was over.

Instead of napping, however, she cried again and wrapped her arms around her knees as she curled up on the bed.

* * *

Harry was close to pulling his hair out. It had been another long day with Harry trying every thing he could do to get closer to Ginny. Every thing he tried, however, seemed to drive a larger wedge between them. And, he realized, with another glance at his watch, they only had half a day left.

This morning he'd even hinted that they could start by kissing and see where it led. He'd hoped that once he kissed her he could gently lead her a bit further and then maybe, with a bit of luck, they could let nature and lust take its course and complete the bonding. The two kisses they'd previously shared had held promise for Harry, at least the one before the wedding had. During the ceremony, Ginny seemed rather stiff and he assumed that it was the fact that everyone was watching them. But Ginny had pulled away after only a couple of kisses and run to her bedroom.

So, Harry was left to contemplate that she simply wasn't attracted to him physically. "Merlin," he sighed, "I must repulse her." His anguished observation was voiced to the silent room.

"Bloody hell," he muttered as he checked his watch for the hundredth time it seemed.

Didn't she understand? If they didn't complete things then the whole marriage, all the things they'd been doing for weeks to prepare, all the mental anguish they'd undertaken in trying to decide whether or not to marry, would be completely wasted.

Making up his mind, Harry strode down the hallway and knocked rather loudly, he winced, on Ginny's door.

"Ginny?"

He waited for a minute, hearing her moving around before she answered the door.

"Ginny, we really need to talk." He didn't allow her to protest as he took her hand and led her toward the sofa. "I know this isn't the ideal situation," he said, looking down at his knees as they both sat. "But we really need to decide. Right now. If we're not going to do this then there are things... people that we need to contact..."

Harry," she said softly, reaching out and placing a soft, and slightly shaking, touch on his knee. "I understand. I'm sorry that I've made this so hard. I'm sorry. My dragging my feet isn't getting us anywhere is it?" She sighed deeply and rubbed her face. "Let's get on with it."

Harry's mouth opened and closed. Whatever he'd been prepared for her to say, it wasn't that. He winced, hating that she was giving in to him at the same time he was grateful that their lives were being spared.

"You'll—"

"Harry, we both know what has to happen," she said softly, staring down at her bare feet. "I've just never done this before and..."

"It's alright," Harry said, hating himself just a bit more. "I'll..." he sighed and swallowed thickly. "I'll be as gentle as I can."

He watched her swallow thickly and she nodded.

Knowing that there wasn't much time left, Harry stood and reached out to take her hand.

Ginny was extremely nervous as they both sat on the edge of the bed together. She felt somewhat bare, even with her jeans and t-shirt on. Her toes skimmed the hardwood floors in Harry's room and she glanced around to see that he did keep it rather tidy.

Harry cleared his throat and opened his mouth only to close it again. "Ginny, I know this isn't exactly how you want it to be. If there's anything I can do to make you more comfortable..."

She shrugged and glanced down at her painted toenails. Hermione had insisted on the pale pink color even over Ginny's protests.

Harry ruffled his hair and moved about the room conjuring candles even as a soft music filled the air and the heavy scent of wax floated around them. He quickly stripped off his shirt and tossed it toward the corner where his other laundry lay. Ginny's mouth went dry as she eyed his well toned form. She'd really not taken the time over the past few years to allow herself to notice how much Harry had changed from the skinny waif on Platform 9 ¾. But he had changed. His shoulders were much broader than they once were. And while he was still thin, his chest was muscled and well defined. She couldn't help but feel her face heat at the sight of his waist narrowing down into the

tops of his jeans, the corded muscles of his stomach disappearing beneath the rough fabric. His chest hair was sparse but a dark trail of it near his navel led downward.

He sat softly on the bed next to her and then turned, letting his fingers graze through her hair gently. A hysterical type of pressure built in her throat and she had to swallow it away. She couldn't stop the shiver that ran through her, even as her mind screamed at her not to laugh. This was Harry, after all. And only a few short weeks ago, they'd only looked at each other as distant friends, if anything at all.

His breath on her neck caused her to shift and her heart to pound. But no matter what he did, the way his soft lips nipped at her neck, the way his wet tongue traced her ear, she couldn't bring herself to do more than lay a hand on his leg.

"Just relax, Ginny," he whispered into her ear and she wanted to laugh again. Relax was one thing she couldn't do right now. He continued to kiss her neck and caress her arm and hand even as his other hand reached under the edge of her shirt. The touch startled her and she pulled away, turning to protest. He caught her lips with his instead and she was lost in his experienced kiss.

The kiss was nice, she had to admit it; better than anything she'd ever experienced. He was gentle yet possessive all the same. She opened her mouth a bit when his tongue ran across her lips and his head tilted to the side as he shifted on the bed and sealed his lips over hers. The lightheadedness made her close her eyes tightly and she finally brought her hands up to rest on his shoulders, appreciating the smooth skin there.

They continued to kiss and Ginny was finally allowing herself to get lost and relax when Harry gave a small nudge and she fell back along the bed. His weight was on her a second later, although it wasn't too much. She almost panicked but he kissed her again. When they broke apart again, she pushed on his shoulders a bit and he sat back on his knees, a frustrated sigh on his lips.

"If you keep pushing away—"

"I know," she snapped and rubbed her eyes harshly. "It just feels too fast."

"Well, you've not left us much option, have you?" Harry asked curtly. "We only have an hour left."

Ginny wanted to snap back at him, but it was her fault, and she knew it. Instead, she sat up and quickly removed her shirt and then reached behind herself to unclasp her bra. Her eyes never left his as she undid the hook. She knew she wasn't much to look at, but now he had no other options. They were together, forever.

"Gin," he breathed and Harry's hand moved out and he reached down to help her undo the button on her own jeans.

The feelings inside her battled for dominance. She was so prepared to hate this... this intimacy with a man she had not chosen for herself. Yet she felt as if her body was betraying her because she keened and moved toward his touch.

She continued to sob even as shudders rocked her body. Harry, she finally noticed, was sitting on the edge of the bed, hunched over with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. She fought

the urge to roll away and leave to her room, catching sight of the muggle alarm clock that Harry kept next to his bed. They only had about forty more minutes until the consequences hit and she didn't even want to think about that.

"I'm alright," she managed to whisper and reached out to rest her fingertips on his back. He flinched at her touch and finally nodded jerkily. He swiped at his face quickly and swung his legs back onto the bed. He wouldn't quite meet her gaze as he knelt between her legs.

"It's going to hurt," he said in a soft voice. "I'm sorry, I wish..." he trailed off and ran his hand through his hair. A grim expression settled on his features and Ginny had to blink away fresh tears. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Making love to her husband for the first time should be joyful and under no deadline.

She closed her eyes tightly and swallowed the lump that rose in her throat. She hated being such an emotional wreck and knew it was completely uncharacteristic of her, although she couldn't find the strength to do anything but be there right now.

"Relax, Gin," he said softly. "It'll hurt more if you don't."

She tried, she really did.

She hated the fact that this was how it was going to be. She closed her eyes and willed herself to float to a place where all she could feel was his touch; pretending that he loved her.

She came back completely when Harry removed his weight from her and lay on her side, pulling her to him and allowing her to curl into his warmth.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered over and over as he smoothed the hair on her head and held her even tighter, laying soft kisses on her forehead and closed eyes.

Ginny finally allowed herself to cry fully and accepted the comfort he gave-for a moment anyway. And then it hit her how awful she was being to him. She'd ignored him and pushed him away for the entire time they'd been married, been openly hostile toward him before the wedding and now had ruined what should have been the most special thing in their lives.

Panic hit her hard and she pushed away from him, scooting to the far side of the bed and curling away from him. She was crying even harder now as she lay in the chill of the room, the candlelight casting long shadows on the walls.

"Ginny, please don't do this. Talk to me, please." He tried one last time, placing his hand on her shoulder and gently pulling her toward him.

"Just leave me alone." She finally managed to tell him and curled even further away. She couldn't believe he still wanted to talk to her let alone touch her.

Chapter Eight

Hermione answered the door to the flat she shared with Ron, finding a highly agitated and ruffled Harry Potter. His hair was even more unkempt than usual. There were dark circles under his eyes, dark stubble on his face, and his clothes were rumpled as if he'd slept in them for days. His usually bright eyes darted all over the place and he wrung his hands over and over while shifting back and forth.

"You look dreadful, Harry," she greeted him with a smirk and pulled him inside. "Come in and I'll get you some tea."

"No thanks," he said quickly. "I just... I have a question and I don't know anyone else..."

"Alright, Harry," she soothed. She'd rarely seen him in such a state and it made her scared for what might have happened to set him on such an edge.

He sat only for a moment on the edge of the sofa before standing and pacing like a caged animal. He seemed to be debating something internally as his face contorted several different ways before he would start the debate over again.

"Did something happen, Harry? Is Ginny alright?"

A snort of almost hysterical laughter made her start and Harry rubbed his face harshly before flinging himself down across the sofa and covering his face.

"I need to know something..."

"I'll try my best," Hermione responded, although she was completely bewildered. "Is it about the bond?"

Harry nodded without removing his hands and groaned loudly. "I need to know... what would happen to Ginny if..." he trailed off and stared across the room at nothing in particular. "If I die?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes perceptively, praying that she wasn't understanding him correctly. "Harry—"

"I just need to know," he snapped and finally focused on her for the first time. She could see the unusual brightness to his eyes and was shocked to see him blink back tears. "Could she... would she be alright? Would she be able to, you know, go on and marry someone else? Someone she chooses?"

"Harry," Hermione started in her calmest voice, despite the rage and disbelief that were tearing through her. "Are you asking me what I think you're asking me?"

"Hermione—" He stood again and the pacing resumed, along with the hand wringing. "What does the law say?"

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. The answer was fairly simple, however the reason Harry was asking scared her more than almost anything.

“Ginny would be a widow, Harry,” she answered softly and honestly. “She’d be free to marry again if a situation arose that allowed her to. However, being a widow in the Wizarding world has its own connotations, not to mention being the widow of the Chosen One.”

“So she’d be free,” Harry said, rubbing his stubbled chin.

“Yes,” Hermione answered. “But that’s not an option, Harry. You’re not going to die anytime soon.” She hoped the firmness in her tone put the idea right out of his head.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” he muttered and Hermione knew he hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

“Harry, sit down and talk to me. What brought all this on? I thought you two were trying to work things out? Has Ginny said something to upset you?”

Harry laughed again and Hermione was forcibly reminded of Sirius’ reckless and crazed laughter. She stared at him as the laughter dissipated into a convulsion of sorts that greatly resembled a sob.

“This is killing me,” he admitted. “She’s... it’s killing me, Hermione.”

For a moment it felt as if a Dementor had entered the room. Any hope that she’d felt that Harry and Ginny could work out their differences and make their marriage work was sucked from her at the sight of his hollow eyes and the despair that settled around him.

“I need to... find some way,” his hands waved frantically in front of him. “It’s the only way, Hermione; she’s got to be away from me.”

“Harry, I think you need to sit down, you’re becoming hysterical—”

But if he heard, he didn’t give any indication. “I’ve ruined everything. Everything we were trying to prevent. I’ve only made it worse... best if I just go...”

“Harry,” Hermione warned as she tugged on the sleeve of his rumpled shirt, trying to get him to sit on the sofa again. She’d try to slip a bit of calming draught into his tea if he’d ever drink it. “You know the two of you can’t live apart; that’s part of the bond.”

He didn’t even seem to listen as he continued muttering to himself. “... going to kill me anyway. Maybe I should tell them... get it over with.”

“HARRY!” Hermione yelled, grabbing his shoulders and shaking them a bit to wake him from the stupor he was sinking into. “What are you talking about? Think about Teddy, you can’t leave him all alone again. You can’t do this to me; you can’t do this to Ginny...”

At the name, he broke down completely and Hermione almost collapsed as his full weight fell onto her. She struggled to pull him onto the sofa and held him as close as he would allow.

“You don’t understand...” he kept saying over and over and she finally laid her hand on his cheek.

“What don’t I understand, Harry? What’s happened?”

He pushed away from her violently then and huddled on the far edge of the couch.

"What don't I understand?" she repeated in a raised voice. "You have to tell me if—"

"I RAPED HER!" He screamed and pressed his hands over his face, his whole body shaking and shuddering. "Are you happy now that you know, Hermione? I raped my wife. We needed to... for the bond... and she didn't want to... so I just... made her."

"Oh my," Hermione whispered and covered her mouth where bile rose unchecked into her throat. The thought that Harry would ever force himself on someone was ludicrous she knew, but there was still the fact that he believed he'd done it. But, she still shook her head, knowing that it couldn't possibly be true.

"And now she... won't talk to me at all... won't even look at me..." his words were punctuated by dry sobs that had so much sorrow in them that they made her heart ache. "What I did was... horrible, worse than a damned Death Eater. It was unforgivable. I've betrayed everyone who ever loved me, everyone I've ever known. And I don't know what to do, Hermione. But I have to let her go... I have to make her free."

They sat in silence for a moment before Harry swiped angrily at his eyes and stood, glancing nervously at a stunned Hermione.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I'll go. Just forget... everything."

"Harry," she called out, standing shakily. "Don't go! We need to talk about this." He kept moving toward the door so she drew her wand and sealed it the second before he opened it.

"Open the door, Hermione," he said in a calm, cold voice.

"No, Harry, not until we've had a minute to talk about this. I need to know what happened."

"You know," he sighed, his back still toward her, "I just told you."

"Harry, I don't believe you're truly capable of doing something like that and you know it also." She took a chance and approached him, holding out her hand to reach for him.

"I did it," he said plainly. "Apparently neither of us knows what I'm capable of."

"You're blowing this out of proportion. You've got to be." She shook her head and he finally turned to face her. She was surprised to see a bit of doubt in his expression and prayed that she was making some headway to convincing him that he was wrong.

"You weren't there, Hermione," he shook his head sadly and his eyes glazed over. "You didn't see her face, hear her cry."

"Harry," she shook her head, fighting back the tears that were pooling in her eyes. "Please come and sit down. You need to talk about this."

"What's to talk about?" he asked in a monotone voice. Although he did turn and take a step toward the sofa, followed by another and then another. "I forced myself on her, Hermione."

"I need to know the details, Harry," she shook her head and sank down onto the floral printed cushion and indicating that he should also. He sighed heavily and folded himself as far away from her as he could. "Tell me from the beginning and we'll sort this out."

Harry shook his head slowly and stared off into the distance, his eyes glazing over. When he spoke, his voice was low and held very little emotion.

"I wanted it to be different. I wanted her to... I don't know, enjoy it, I suppose. I know it wasn't the best circumstance. And I would have waited if we could have. I would have waited forever, Hermione."

She wiped at her tears again and nodded, even though she wasn't sure he could see her. She was beginning to see just how much Ginny meant to Harry, even if he wouldn't yet admit it to himself. His concern over the entire situation signaled that his feelings were much deeper than he'd ever taken time to consider.

"But it was the last day, and she'd been avoiding the subject the whole time. I asked her several times, even suggested... well, that maybe we could start slow and work up to it, you know." He let a small smile quirk his lips before it faded and the mask of emotional distress settled again. "But she didn't respond. And I was getting worried. If we didn't... soon, well, everything we'd done this for would be for nothing."

"Did you try and tell her how you felt?"

He glared at her for a second before nodding jerkily. "She listened and agreed. But then... Hermione, it was just so awkward. I had the hardest time..." he flushed and Hermione nodded to show she understood what he was getting at. "But I started kissing her and, well..."

"It's alright, Harry, you can tell me whatever you need to. I promise I won't say a word."

He didn't answer but stared out again. "I tried to make it alright for her, you know, touching and kissing her. But then we had to... and I didn't want to hurt her. Oh, Hermione, I didn't want to hurt her." His eyes closed and Hermione could tell even thinking about it was cutting him to the core. "But we had to. And then it was over and she just lay there... and cried. I tried to hold her, to kiss her some more, but she pushed me away."

"She hasn't spoken to me since," he said as he swiped at his face again, angrily wiping away any emotion. "And I don't blame her. And..." His hands returned to his hair and an anguished expression took over. "I'm such a pervert, because I can't stop thinking about her, the way she felt under me. The way her skin felt and tasted. And what it might have been like if she... wanted it too." His voice trailed off and he finally shook away the thoughts.

Hermione sighed and wiped away her own tears. "Harry, it doesn't sound like rape to me." She ignored his snort of protest. "Did she tell you no?" She waited for him to shake his head. "Did she fight you off?"

"No, Hermione, she just laid there. But it still doesn't make it right. I shouldn't have done it."

"I know how hard this is for you, Harry. I can't imagine going through what either you or Ginny is

going through. But I don't think you raped her. I think you both did what you had to do." He didn't respond and she continued.

"Promise me something, Harry?"

He shrugged and she reached forward to grab his face, turning it toward her and forcing him to look into her eyes. "Promise me that you'll stay here, and you won't do anything rash while I go somewhere."

"Where are you going?"

She bit the inside of her lip, knowing that he would fight her when she told him. "I need to go and talk to Ginny—"

"No! She's gone through enough."

"Harry," she warned as she pulled out her wand and pointed it right at him. "I need to talk to Ginny about this. The two of you just need to communicate. You're going to stay here and take a nap. You haven't slept in ages have you?" she continued when he glanced away and shrugged. "It doesn't look like you've been eating either. And if you don't stay here the entire time I'm gone, I'll hunt you down and stun you, Harry. Don't think I won't do it."

He looked as if he wanted to protest, but his shoulders slumped in resignation and he nodded once.

"Alright," he sighed. "But don't hurt her. And don't tell her..."

"I can be discreet, Harry. You, of all people, should know that by now."

* * *

Ginny finished washing the few dishes that were dirty by hand and lay them on a towel to dry next to the sink. The flat was neat, but had a lived in feel to it: a book that Harry had been reading lay open across the back of the sofa, the Daily Prophet lay untouched on the kitchen table. A rumpled blanket lay on the end of the sofa, and she wondered if that's where Harry had been sleeping. She hadn't been out of her room when he was here other than quick trips to the loo since it happened.

And he had been wonderful, in a strange sort of way. He'd made sure every meal for her had been laid out on a serving tray near her door; there was even a fresh flower every time in a small vase. Once or twice there were small gifts and notes telling her that he was gone flying or running to the grocers.

But none of that really mattered, because Ginny couldn't bring herself to care. And she knew it was horrible. She could only relive the numb feeling that had settled over her over and over again.

The door rattled a bit and she panicked, grabbing the old comfortable jumper she'd taken off while washing up the kitchen and pulling it over the tank top she wore. There had been no note from Harry this morning, and no flower; just a simple plate of eggs and toast and a glass of pumpkin juice with no ice, just as she liked it.

But it wasn't Harry who entered; it was Hermione.

"Ginny," she greeted her, rather coldly, Ginny thought.

"Hermione."

"I see you've decided to come out of your exile."

Ginny rolled her eyes and tidied a few more things on the counter. Hermione had no idea what Ginny had been through these past days, and Ginny wasn't about to put up with any self-righteous attitude.

"So, Harry went running to you, did he?"

Surprisingly, Hermione sighed and sank down onto the sofa, holding her head in her hands.

"No, he didn't come running to me. He did come, but he only had a question. Do you know what this is doing to him?"

"Doing to him? Hermione—"

"I actually didn't come here to argue with you, Ginny. I need to talk to you. You and Harry need to talk, but as that's apparently not an option right now..." she sighed and rubbed her face again. Ginny could feel some of her anger melt away when she saw how concerned her friend actually was about the situation.

"I need to know what happened the night you and Harry... Erm, well the night you two consummated the marriage."

"Hermione," Ginny warned. It wasn't her favorite subject. In fact, it was the one thing that had caused this wave of depression to come over her. "That's private. I don't know what Harry told you..."

"Not much," Hermione admitted. "Only that he believes he raped you."

There wasn't much that Hermione could have said that would have left Ginny speechless. This was one thing. Harry thought... how could he have thought that? She had given her consent, even if she hadn't participated much in the actual act. It wasn't as if she had any experience in physical relationships. She sank slowly onto the sofa, on the far end from where her friend sat.

"He believes...? No, Hermione," she shook her head vehemently and dropped it onto her knees, which she'd brought up under her on the sofa. "It wasn't... rape. I consented." Hermione nodded her understanding and motioned for her to continue.

Ginny took a moment to gather her thoughts and sighed, knowing it would just be best if she told Hermione everything that happened.

"The whole time up to the Wedding, and then immediately after, all I could think about was how much I was losing, how much this whole arranged marriage was costing me. I knew, logically, that it would be an adjustment for Harry. But I guess I was too angry to really think about how he felt

about it.”

“And then it was all over and he brought me here. And he was wonderful, Hermione. He really made me feel welcome. He and Ron had moved my things into the extra bedroom and he told me to stay wherever I was comfortable. You have no idea how much pressure that took off my shoulders that first night.”

She let her eyes slip out of focus as she continued. “A girl always dreams of her Wedding night, you know. It should be candles and romance and... the man she dreams of.”

“And you didn’t get any of that,” Hermione said softly.

Ginny smiled wryly. “I had the candles and the romance; Harry offered me anything I wanted. He really made it easy, although I was a stubborn git and dug my heels in the entire time. I just... I guess the reality of it was starting to sink in and I just...” She sighed heavily and rubbed her forehead. “I’m ashamed of my behavior now, but it only got worse. Every time Harry would suggest anything that would put us closer than touching hands... I begged off. I could tell he was worried about it. And I was too. I know what would have happened if we hadn’t met the requirements.”

“Then why wait so long?”

She shrugged. “Weasley pride, I guess. I just... if we took that final step, if we were finally together... then it was real. I would have had to accept it.”

“I think I understand, a bit,” Hermione admitted.

“And then Harry had finally had it, and I really don’t blame him. I was a prat. I’d made this so difficult that we couldn’t even look each other in the eye without both of us feeling so hurt and angry. But he was right, we needed to get on with things or everything we’d worked for would be ruined. And I agreed.”

“We moved into his room; Harry insisted that it should be there. I think he didn’t want my room to be... contaminated, or whatever.”

“He wanted it to be a place where you could go to be on your own,” Hermione nodded.

“He’s not really been in there since I’ve been here,” Ginny confirmed. “And he did give me the candles, and the soft music. But it’s so hard to relax when you don’t know what to expect. And I was so jumpy, hoping that things would work out right. Mum gave me the talk years ago,” she rolled her eyes here, “and I knew it was supposed to hurt for the girl. And Harry’s... well, he’s been with girls before.”

Hermione nodded at her to keep going.

Ginny continued on and told her as much of the night as she could remember; specifically what she was feeling and how tender Harry was in reality.

“And I don’t remember how, but I woke up in my own bed the next morning,” Ginny finished telling Hermione everything and swiped angrily at the tears leaking down her face.

Hermione let out a deep breath and rubbed her own temples.

“He didn’t rape me,” Ginny said in a small voice. “He was wonderful, actually.”

“Then why—”

“It’s me,” Ginny shrugged, looking away from her friend. “I’ve been nothing but a... a bitch to him. And he still made everything as wonderful as he could. And since then he’s given me my space and made sure I was taken care of. He even brought me flowers every day... except today.”

“He thinks you hate him,” Hermione said plainly. “Ginny, you have to talk to him before he does something rash. He’s going insane right now because he believes he hurt you so badly that you’ll never be able to look at him again.”

Ginny nodded distractedly. “How do I fix this, Hermione? I just wish...”

“I know.” Hermione leaned forward and placed her hand on Ginny’s in a supportive way. “You just wish you’d been able to take your time and get to that point on your own without being forced.”

She nodded and wiped her nose with a conjured handkerchief. “Maybe if we’d been able to wait... the shock wouldn’t have been so bad.”

“But it happened,” Hermione answered practically. “And now you both have to deal with this. As I see it, you have a few choices. You can both stay like you are which will do no one any good and force Harry to do something none of us wants-”

“What are you-”

Hermione held up her hands. “I can’t say much more, Ginny; he came to me in confidence.”

“What would he do?” A hint of panic was returning and Ginny hated this feeling.

“He found the only loophole in the law,” Hermione said plainly. “If you were a widow, you could marry again without being controlled by the bond.”

“And he would...” Ginny’s disbelief soon turned to anger. “He would actually consider...”

“That’s how much he cares for you, Ginny,” Hermione explained. “He can’t even admit it to himself, let alone you.”

“No,” she shook her head. “He’s just being noble and doing the right thing. He’d never do anything to hurt our family so he’s just doing what’s expected of him.”

Hermione nodded. “I’m sure that’s part of it; he is Harry, after all. But it’s more than that, Ginny. He genuinely cares for you. I think he could really come to love you deeply given the opportunity and the time.”

“I’m not so sure,” she continued to doubt. “He’ll always see me as someone he was forced to be with. If we ever get to the point where we’re fully together, how do I know it’s me he sees when he closes his eyes? I don’t want to be—can’t be—just another woman to him.”

Hermione thought about that for a moment before nodding. “You were worried about that on that first night, weren’t you? How you compared with the others he’s been with?”

Ginny felt her face heat, but she nodded. “How could I not be?”

“I think he saw only you,” Hermione suggested. “He sounds like he was very attentive, Ginny. And it was your name he called out, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t answer, but let her mind drift back to the way he held her and whispered her name as he moved above her.

“Believe me—and I’m not just saying this to hurt you, Ginny—but it could have been so much worse. Harry took his time; he made sure you were ready for him. If he hadn’t prepared you, the pain would have been much worse. I’ve heard all sorts of stories of girls who were really traumatized by their first time. Harry sounds like he was gentle as he could be, despite being forced by the circumstances.”

“I know,” Ginny lay her head against her knees and rocked a bit. “And that’s what makes my behavior so much worse. He was so wonderful and I’ve been... so horrible.”

“But that can end. You can turn this around, Ginny.”

“How?”

Hermione sighed and scooted even closer, gathering Ginny into her side. “Do you really want this to work?”

“I do,” Ginny sniffled. “I don’t want to be stuck in a loveless marriage, hating each other and watching as he finds someone else to make him happy, knowing I can’t ever do the same. He may not have been the one I chose, but now I have to try.”

“You may not have chosen him, but you have the choice to let him into your heart now.” Ginny nodded and Hermione continued. “You have to make the effort, Ginny. I’m not saying the two of you jump into a normal marriage situation, despite what you’ve been forced into.”

They both turned around as the front door opened slowly and Harry’s messy head of hair peeked around.

Chapter Nine

“Harry, I thought you agreed to stay at our flat until I came back?” Hermione sighed.

Ginny started at seeing how horrible he looked. He didn’t look as if he’d slept at all. He definitely hadn’t shaved or been taking care of himself, if his gaunt face beneath the dark beard was any indication. She instantly wondered if she looked the same.

Harry flushed slightly and stared at her before dropping his eyes to the ground and closing the door quietly behind him. “You were taking so long and... it’s almost dinner time... and I didn’t want her to...” He shrugged as he said this all in a mumble to the floor.

A wave of something, she knew there was gratitude in there but it was mixed with something else entirely, washed over Ginny for this horribly stupid, wonderful man. He’d been worried that she wouldn’t eat if he didn’t provide for her so he’d come home to make sure there would be a tray near her door—just as there had been every meal since they’d been married.

“I wouldn’t have let her starve, you know,” Hermione teased and moved from her spot on the sofa. Harry flushed and glanced at Ginny again. “Come over and sit down, Harry. Ginny and I were just talking about a way to make this work.”

Ginny was amused to see a flash of absolute panic come over his features as Hermione indicated for him to sit next to her on the cushion. Then it hit her that he might actually do it and she broke his gaze.

“You, erm, want me to?” His question was directed at her and she met his piercing eyes, nodding almost imperceptibly. He seemed to consider it before he moved to sit slowly next to her, taking care not to touch her in any way. They sat in the awkward moment, each not completely looking at the other, but feeling drawn all the same.

“I don’t need you to wait on me, Harry,” Ginny said softly. “I can get out of bed and make my own food.”

“I won’t let you wait on me,” Harry replied back and she finally looked up at him, seeing the determination on his face. “I watched my aunt do everything for my uncle for too many years and I don’t want that kind of marriage. And I... I wanted to do something nice for you.” He looked down and immediately Ginny was reminded of a dog waiting to be kicked by his master.

Ginny contemplated that for a minute. Was this the type of marriage she wanted? One where Harry had to walk on eggshells around her, and went out of his way to do anything nice to receive a tiny bit of gratitude from her. She shuddered internally thinking that that was what Hermione had been telling her a few days before the wedding. She’d hinted that Harry had been treated that way his whole life. Those damned relatives he’d lived with during his early years had instilled that reaction in him. Well, not anymore, Ginny vowed with a return of a determination she hadn’t felt in a long while.

“I was just talking to Ginny about how the two of you can make this work,” Hermione continued in a slow and deliberate voice.

Harry's head snapped around so hard that Ginny swore she heard his neck crack, and he stared at her with wide eyes.

She swallowed audibly, knowing that it was time to put her heart on the line this time. "I don't hate you, Harry," she said softly, allowing her eyes to meet his finally. "You didn't... you didn't rape me."

"Yes—"

"No," she vehemently shook her head. "You didn't." She managed to give him what she hoped was a reassuring smile and he seemed to relax a bit. "I don't blame you for anything."

Harry looked as if he were going to argue, but then shut his mouth and nodded jerkily once. Ginny wasn't sure if he was convinced or just giving in for the moment; the latter, she thought as she watched the tight expression on his face.

"Now that that is out of the way," Hermione muttered and shook her head. "Like I was telling Ginny, Harry—you both need to commit to making this marriage be what you both want it to be."

Harry hadn't taken his eyes from Ginny's yet and she took a deep breath as she reached for his hand and laced their fingers together. He looked down and blinked owlishly at their hands before he finally let one side of his mouth quirk upward in some semblance of happiness. She was still wearing her wedding rings and she could feel him brush his fingers against them.

"How do we do that, Hermione?" Ginny heard herself say, feeling braver than she had in a long time sitting there with her hand in Harry's. "It's not like we'll ever be able to be normal."

"Normal," Hermione continued, "is what you make of it. You may already be married, but that doesn't change how you feel, or don't feel, about each other. You can both make this work if you take the time to get to know each other. Now that the conditions of the bond have been met, take the time to really court each other."

Ginny swore she saw Harry blush as he stared at their hands. She gave him a quick squeeze and he glanced up at her before looking over at Hermione.

"Harry, what did you do when you liked a woman?" He only shrugged and she continued, in full lecture-mode now. "You had to make her notice you, right. Then you had to ask her out and spend time together. You can make this work like any other relationship you've both been in. Go on dates, do all the things that you weren't allowed to before. Do you both think that's reasonable?"

Harry shrugged one shoulder and looked over to her. Ginny bit her bottom lip and nodded while meeting his gaze. "I think that's reasonable."

"And don't rush into anything. You've got forever to be together now," Hermione continued. "If I were you, I'd stay in separate rooms and act like you're not living together, even though you are. It'll take a lot of work, but you can make this into what you want it to be. You can help yourselves to fall in love with each other."

Ginny looked down at their hands, wanting so much for it to be true. She'd always had feelings for

Harry, even though she'd forced them to mellow into a more friend-like relationship over the years. Now that they had been bonded together, could they really turn it around into something positive? She hoped so. And she was committed to make it work. It had to work.

Harry looked at her with a more hopeful expression, although there was something more to it.

"I think I'll let you two talk," Hermione said. "Don't hesitate to ask for help, either of you."

And they had talked. Ginny had swallowed her pride and explained all of her feelings for the night they'd had sex. She explained her hopes and dreams of being married and why she'd been so distant, echoing her earlier discussion with Hermione, although being careful with her words. She didn't want to push him away now that they'd reached someplace they could possibly build from.

And Harry had listened, really listened, and they'd both agreed to begin dating as if they weren't married.

Harry had even suggested that they make dinner together that night, and they'd awkwardly moved around the small kitchen while preparing a simple pasta dish and a green salad. There were several times when they bumped into each other and Harry had an annoying habit of apologizing for everything under the sun.

But the tension seemed to lift a bit as they sat down together at the table and began to eat. For a few minutes, things seemed to be normal, or at least as normal as Ginny could hope for in this situation.

"How long until you have to be back at the pitch?" Harry asked in between bites.

"I still have two weeks off," Ginny said and then groaned. "But I've been horribly lazy this week and Gwenog will have my tail when I get back."

Harry glanced up at her shyly. "I can help you if you want," he offered. She almost refused him strictly out of habit, but bit her lip at his hopeful look.

"That would be nice," she said instead and he rewarded her with a brilliant smile. They began talking about her team and what made her choose to play Quidditch professionally. Ginny could say it was one of the nicest conversations she'd ever had with Harry. He really was attractive and genuinely interested in the things she did, and that made her a bit more comfortable with their plan to begin courting.

"I'll make breakfast in the morning," she offered when they'd finished cleaning the kitchen and now stood awkwardly in the hallway between their two rooms. "As long as you don't expect it too early," she teased. She had been repeating her mother's advice on her wedding day to herself all day. 'That which starts out as awkward, becomes habit if we keep doing it long enough.'

"We wouldn't want to wake you too early," Harry bantered quietly back and then his face sobered. "That would be nice, though." Neither seemed to know what to do and Ginny finally huffed, going up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

"Goodnight, Harry," she whispered and disappeared into her bedroom.

Harry made good on his promise to help her train. The next day after they'd cleaned up breakfast, Harry held out her broom and then shyly offered his elbow for her to hold onto. He Apparated them to a deserted clearing where she'd never been before.

"Where are we?" she asked, looking around to appreciate the distant trees and the sound of the shore in the distance.

"Just a place I come sometimes when I want to fly," he shrugged. "I miss flying. I tried playing in the smaller Quidditch leagues, but someone always recognizes me." She knew how much his fame bothered him. "One of the Aurors I trained under told me about this place. Sometimes there's an older bloke who's here, but we only ever wave to each other and fly alone."

"Sounds a bit lonely," Ginny offered as they both mounted their brooms.

"Sometimes," he agreed. "But most times it's just what I need. The Ministry can get to be too much at times."

"That's why you spend so much time in the Muggle world," Ginny speculated and he nodded.

"It's easier most of the time. I rarely have to worry about someone recognizing me. And I can just be me, you know."

"I do," she confirmed and kicked off.

They chased each other for several laps and then Ginny began her Chaser drills. Harry held back, watching her through one round, and then joined her on the second. She had to correct him on a few of the moves, but he picked them up rather quickly.

"You could have been a Chaser, Harry," she complimented him once they'd landed, both breathing hard.

He only shrugged. "I always liked Seeking."

"When was the last time you played, I mean really played?"

"Sixth year," he answered, staring at the bright blue sky, "the year I was Captain."

"That's a shame," she said thoughtfully. "I think you might have had a career professionally."

"You think?" he asked, an awed expression on his face.

"You never thought about it?" She sank down to the long grass and Harry followed, sitting beside her and stretching his legs out like she did. She was amazed at how natural talking to him felt again. There were still awkward moments, but she was determined to blaze through those.

"Maybe once or twice," he admitted. "But never seriously. I guess," he sighed and ran a hand through his hair, "I guess I just always wanted to be an Auror."

"You're a good one," Ginny complimented.

"And you're a good Quidditch player," he shot back, making her blush slightly.

"Yes, well, I think it's mostly the drive to prove everyone wrong that made me work so hard at it."

"What do you mean?"

"Mum did a nut when I told her what I was going to do. She thinks I'm wasting my N.E.W.T.'s playing a game when I could be doing something useful... like learning to cook or clean or something." They both smiled.

"I think it's brilliant that you play," he said firmly. "I know I'm proud of you every time I see a game. You fly like, I don't know, like you were born to do it." Ginny smiled again and went silent, staring out at the bright blue sky. Somehow, it pleased her very much that Harry approved of her career. "Do you ever think about what you'll do when you can't play anymore?"

Ginny lay back and took in a deep breath, loving the fresh grass scent around her. "I don't know, really. I guess I'll think about it when it comes along. I want to play for a couple of years at least."

"What about a family?" Harry asked shyly, as he rolled on his side and propped his head on his bent arm.

Suddenly, the reality of their situation hit her and she chuckled. "I guess that is something people who are dating ask, isn't it?" Harry smiled wryly and nodded. "In a few years," she finally answered. "I'd like to have a couple of kids, I guess. I know I don't want a huge family like Mum and Dad had. There was never enough to go around and someone was always left out." She turned and looked at his thoughtful expression. "What about you?"

"I just want a family," he said quietly and she was struck by the loneliness that entered his tone. "I don't care how big or how small; although I would like more than one. No one should have to be alone."

Surprising even herself, she reached for his free hand and wove their fingers together as she had the night before. She wanted very much to confirm to him that he would never be alone again, but that familiar catch in her heart that held back any strong feelings for Harry whispered that it was too fast still. They sat together in silence for a minute before she grinned mischievously.

"Teach me the Wronksi Feint?"

His face split in a huge grin. "Think you can keep up with me, eh?"

"Anytime, Potter," she growled and he grinned even wider.

"Alright, Potter," he bantered back. She was taken aback by the name until she realized it truly was hers now. They both smiled and mounted their brooms to ride again.

* * *

"Where do you go every morning?" Ginny asked as they sat down to breakfast again. She'd noticed

that he was up and moving even before she got up to shower every day.

“Oh,” Harry finished the bite he had in his mouth. “I go to a Muggle gymnasium. I can work out there and get my training in. I could go to the Auror academy I guess,” he shrugged, “but there’s always someone else around. And I was going to buy all my own equipment and put it here at the flat, but Hermione told me it was a waste of money and that I’d become even more of a hermit if I did. So...”

“Oh,” she nodded. “Would you take me sometime?”

“To the gym? Sure, I guess if you want to go. It’s nothing spectacular, you know.” She noticed he was rather reluctant to share bits of his life with her, probably out of habit, but he always did if she responded with enthusiasm. “You’d have to get up earlier than you do now, mind.”

Ginny set her jaw and raised an eyebrow in challenge. “I’ll have you know that I can get up early. During the season we have practices starting at seven some days. It’s only on my time off that I’m a lazy witch.”

Harry grinned at her and stuffed the last part of his toast in his mouth. “What do you want to do today?” he asked as he started clearing the table.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Why don’t you show me something you do when you disappear into your Muggle world?”

“Hmm,” Harry mused as they both started washing the dishes. She knew it was rather silly of them both to do all the housework by hand when they had magic to help. But it was something that they did together, and having something to do with their hands made standing shoulder to shoulder less awkward. “How about we walk through London and I’ll show you all the sights? Then tonight we’ll get dinner and rent a video. We can watch it right here at the flat. I’ll even show you microwave popcorn.”

Ginny tossed a handful of bubbles at him and they both laughed when they settled on his cheek. “I’ll have you know I’m not completely ignorant of Muggle ways. I’m not as uncultured as Ron.”

Harry wiped the bubbles away and nodded knowingly. “You should have seen the first time I made it for him. I didn’t think he’d leave for a week. He ate the entire bag for himself and then tried to make another one.”

Ginny scrunched her nose at the thought of Ron in the kitchen pressing buttons on the microwave, and then getting impatient when it wouldn’t work right. “What happened?”

Harry laughed. “Let’s just say that the smell of burnt popcorn takes forever to clear out.”

“Yuck,” Ginny commiserated and handed over the last soapy dish for him to rinse. “I like the idea, only I get to pick the video. I don’t want to watch some silly one with war and blood and stuff.”

“So what do we watch,” Harry asked with a raised eyebrow, “a romance?”

Ginny grinned at his grimace. “That might be nice.”

"We'll see," was all he promised.

In the end, it was a lovely day together. Harry had taken her to Piccadilly Circus where they'd had a good time ducking in and out of shops and watching the people go by. Then they'd taken a bus down to St. James' Park and spent the afternoon lounging in the shade of the trees and staring at Buckingham Palace. And the best part was that he'd held her hand, shyly, almost all of the day.

There was one particular store that had fascinated Ginny, much to Harry's amusement. The front windows were packed full of shelves of small, dainty spun-glass ornaments. She'd felt like a little girl again, pressing her face against the window and pointing out the intricate details in each figurine to Harry. He'd just smiled at her and nodded along to her excited observations.

They sat near a small fountain and watched a group of street performers acting out some scene. Harry had leaned in and whispered to her that it was something called Hamlet, by William Shakespeare. She'd heard of him, of course; who hadn't? It was interesting to watch the actors, all dressed in casual Muggle clothing, using such formal language and performing right there on the sidewalk for everyone to see. When the scene ended, the small audience had clapped and Harry had slipped a few pound coins into her hand, and then nodded toward a small box where others were dropping coins and notes. She'd glanced at him once to confirm before eagerly darting across the pavement and placing hers inside the box.

That evening, after returning to the flat carrying boxes of Chinese takeaway direct from Harry's favorite restaurant in Chinatown, they settled next to each other on the sofa and watched a romantic comedy movie that Ginny had thought sounded nice from the back of the box. She was surprised to wake hours later still on the sofa and cuddled in Harry's arms while he snored softly. She stiffened immediately and then relaxed, hoping not to wake him.

Was this a taste of what life could be for them? The day had been wonderful, although there had been a few awkward moments. If she really thought about it, what Hermione had said was true. Even though she and Harry were married, it was essentially as if they'd just started dating. The newness of a relationship always took time to get over. Yet this... something... between them continued to take her by surprise. Maybe it was the fact that she'd actually known Harry for almost ten years, but this intimate knowledge of his day to day life was new.

Harry shifted just a bit, and she watched his face settle back down into a rather contented slumber. She took a moment to objectively study him and liked what she saw. He was as handsome as ever, a point she'd never bothered to debate, knowing that deep down she still had a soft spot for him. But his features had sharpened with age and the boyish roundness of his face had been traded for a defined jaw-line and high cheekbones. His nose had a small bump in it that she vaguely remembered noticing in sixth year, almost as if it had been broken somewhere along the line. His ever-present glasses lay along the back cushion of the sofa, and Ginny could see small lines around his eyes at the corners. She'd never been this close to him and aware enough to appreciate these small things about him.

Harry was an amazing man, she had to admit. And, if the past two days were any indication, their life together could be wonderful. They'd reached some sort of unspoken agreement not to mention their first few days as a married couple and that was fine with Ginny. She knew they'd both need to deal with it eventually, but they had a long way to go until they were ready to be intimate again.

And she was fairly sure Harry was alright with that.

Deciding that sleeping there with him on the sofa wasn't too forward, she snuggled back down, enjoying the warmth of his arm around her back.

Chapter Ten

Harry sat in the long grass and watched as Ginny flew several more laps around the field. They had come to the clearing several times during the week and he had enjoyed the time that they had spent together. Somehow, when they flew, the problems they had—this thing between them—disappeared for a few minutes and they could just be.

He squinted up into the light and watched as Ginny rolled tightly around her broom, landing near him.

“You need to show that one to Gwenog,” he complimented the move she’d been perfecting and then smiled as she blushed.

“It’s not quite ready yet. And I’m not sure it’ll work during a real game. A lot depends on timing.”

“Trust me, it’ll work,” Harry assured her. Very tentatively, he felt her hand slide into his and gave it a squeeze. Ginny’s persistence in offering him these touches gave him some small hope, but he was still unsure about them.

“Ginny?”

“Yeah?”

He looked down at their hands, fingers intertwined together and palms touching. “What does this mean?” His question was whispered, and for a minute he wondered if she’d heard; the way her hand stiffened slightly confirmed that she had though. “What does it mean when you hold my hand?”

She sighed and stared out at the clearing after a long gaze at their hands.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” he sighed, loosening his grip just a bit.

“No,” she shook her head and firmed her own hand in his, pulling them back together. “I’m just trying to gather my thoughts. I... I want to answer you-need to, really. But I’m sure I’m going to mess it up.”

“Just tell me what you’re thinking,” Harry suggested with a shrug.

“To be perfectly honest,” she answered softly, “I’m not sure yet.”

He nodded when he felt her look at him. Despite their conversation the other day after Hermione had left, there were still so many things that they were unsure on; so many things that lay between them, unexplored and, frankly, a bit frightening.

“I can’t say I’m sure, because I don’t know what you want it to mean. Right now, to me, it means that I accept you, Harry. That you’re my friend and... more. It means that I want to try to build something between us—something that will be more than just living in the same house and sharing meals together.”

Harry chanced a small glance and found her flushed face studying him. He knew this was costing her to be the first to admit something and knew, somehow, that he would need to reciprocate.

“You know how I was when I was younger,” she said again with a humorless chuckle. “Couldn’t walk or talk around you at all.”

“But it got better,” Harry protested with a smile.

“Yeah, it did,” she admitted, giving his hand a small squeeze. “But it took me a long time to talk myself into doing that much, Harry. That crush... it was confusing for me. It was the strongest emotion I’d ever felt, but it wasn’t completely a comfortable one. And, this... well, this is different. This can’t be about a crush, or about a friendship. It has to be different.”

She shook her head and pulled a handful of grass, and then tossed it away from herself. “I’m not explaining myself very well.”

“I think I understand,” he said softly.

“This has to be real. This is all or nothing, Harry. When I reach for you, I’m trying to reassure you that I’m not going anywhere—and maybe reassure myself of the same thing.”

She finally allowed her eyes to meet his. “Is that enough?”

Harry’s heart clenched. It wasn’t a declaration of anything overwhelming. But then again, he didn’t expect her to change overnight—goodness knows he hadn’t. He paused to gather his thoughts, leaning forward with his elbows propped up on his knees, taking care to not let go of her hand.

“Before Hogwarts, I never liked it when people would touch me. I wasn’t sure what it meant.” He’d never admitted any of this to anyone aloud, and couldn’t bring himself to look at her while he did. “Someone touching me usually meant being hit by my cousin, or sometimes my Uncle Vernon. Aunt Petunia never hit me, but it was different when she touched me. I knew she didn’t like it. It was... cold, and over with fast-like she couldn’t bear to longer than she had to. And that was alright, because I didn’t remember anything different.”

“And then I went away to school. Ron and Hermione were there. And, I guess I got used to them touching me. I knew what it meant after a while. But I wasn’t sure about anyone else.”

“And then, when girls would touch me... That confused me even more. I didn’t have anything to compare it to, no frame of reference.” He shook his head as he felt his skin heat. “I didn’t know what those kinds of touches meant. I thought... I convinced myself that sex meant love, you know. And then when it didn’t... well, I’m still not sure I know what it all means.”

“What do you want this to mean?” Ginny asked him softly, reaching out with her other hand to caress their intertwined ones.

He shrugged and looked off across the clearing. His throat was thick with emotion and he had to clear it several times before answering. “I want it to mean that you’re not leaving. That you’re going to try, just like I’m going to try.”

“I am,” she said and he turned to look at her. There was no deception in her face. It was honest and open and full of something that he couldn’t quite define.

“Then it’s enough.”

* * *

Two more days of spending time together had been good for the young couple. And the Weasley’s invitation to a Saturday evening dinner was a welcome break, as they’d both realized time away was a good thing.

Harry was very nervous about making an appearance at the Burrow. Their wedding had been nice, but the extreme tension in the air had lent a negative touch to just about everything they did. Harry knew the Weasley brothers did not approve of the marriage, at least the circumstances, if not the groom, and Ginny’s parents weren’t far behind that. He knew they liked him, but as to a love-match for their daughter they were unsure.

He intended to prove to them that he could be worthy of her and that he could earn her love. He’d realized the past few days that time spent with Ginny made him feel like a different person—like the person he was supposed to be.

Since they’d decided to work things out between them, Harry had been increasingly happier. There were still awkward moments; moments when they seemed to run out of things to say and sat in silence. And then there were moments of extreme tenderness and comfort where she allowed him to hold her hand, or they cuddled together. He still hadn’t worked up the nerve to do more than kiss her cheek; and surprisingly he was alright with that. He never wanted to see the anguish on her face like it had been when they’d had sex. And he’d decided to wait forever if needed to be intimate with her again; he’d let her set the pace of their relationship and he’d be perfectly happy.

Although it was a bit strange. He hadn’t been this self conscious around a woman in years. But this was more than just a woman—this was his wife, the person he was going to be with forever, the mother of his future children and his partner in life. This had to be special; this had to be right.

“Nervous?” Ginny asked as she helped him straighten his collar and smooth out the jacket he’d put on. He looked down at her, feeling a wave of affection at her grooming him. It was the type of familiarity that he craved, and would hopefully have on a daily basis if they ever achieved their goal.

“A bit,” he nodded and settled his hands on her shoulders, moving her hair off of them to lay behind her.

“It’s the same Burrow you’ve been visiting for years, Harry,” she smiled up at him and he was thrilled when she didn’t move away, but let her hands rest on his chest.

“No, it’s not,” he smiled wryly. “That was always the Burrow where Ron and the Weasleys lived. Now it’s the Burrow that’s home to your family. I can’t explain it, but that makes it different.”

She looked at him thoughtfully before nodding. “I guess I see what you mean. And it will be strange going back there, I suppose. But they all love you, Harry. They understand that this wasn’t your

idea, that you aren't to blame for it." She moved away to gather her summer cloak and Harry felt a bit of loss at her departure.

He flushed and looked away from her quickly. "But they don't know what I did to you," he said in a low voice. "And they'll kill me if they ever find out."

"Harry." Her sharp tone made him look at her and he almost gasped at the sight. She really was lovely, with her fiery red hair cascading over her shoulders and her hands set on her hips. "We've talked about that. You did nothing wrong. And if you don't stop talking like that I'm going to..."

"You're going to what?" he challenged, although it was with a bit of humor at her red faced anger.

"I don't know," she admitted with a shrug and then moved back to him and circled her arms around his waist, settling her head on his chest. Harry reciprocated the hug, placing a gentle kiss on the crown of her head. His eyes closed softly at the familiarity and comfort that the touch gave him. "But I hate that you still think about it."

"I can't not think about it, Gin," he said softly. She stiffened in his arms and he wasn't sure if it was in response to what he'd said or that he'd shortened her name down. He vaguely remembered calling her that when they'd been intimate. Maybe it bothered her; he'd have to ask later. "I hurt you, and I'll never get that out of my head."

She gave him a squeeze and then looked up at him. "One day I hope to banish that image completely, you know." She grinned at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Promise?" he responded, half-playfully, then mentally kicked himself when her face darkened and she pulled away.

"I can't promise—"

"I know, Ginny," he sighed. "And I don't expect... Damn, why does this have to be so hard?"

They looked at each other for a moment before Ginny held out her hand to him, a blazingly determined look on her face. "It doesn't." They Apparated in silence to the backyard of the Burrow and she held his hand the entire time.

* * *

The Burrow was warm tonight, and not just in temperature, Hermione thought. She'd always loved the feeling of walking in the back door of the Weasley's home; it felt like nothing she'd ever felt before. Her parent's house was nice, but it lacked the friendly clutter that made her feel more comfortable than anywhere else. It was the people, Hermione knew, that made it feel that way; people that she loved dearly.

She couldn't help the contented smile that stretched her face as she watched Arthur and Percy talk in low tones in the corner, heard Molly's tutting over Bill's still-long hair, and saw the subtle teasing going on between all of the siblings as they mingled about. It was a chaos that she had learned, over the years, to fit herself into.

Ginny and Harry had arrived the last of all the families and she'd been surprised to see the smiles and more relaxed way they interacted with each other.

"Things seem... better," Hermione observed once she'd managed to get Ginny alone for the first time that evening.

Ginny looked at her friend for a moment before nodding. "They are. We're," she sighed, "we're working on things."

Hermione nodded and watched as the younger woman's eyes darted over to where Harry was sipping from a Butterbeer bottle. He'd joined a group of the Weasley men who were watching as Ron trounced Charlie in a game of chess. As if feeling her glance, Harry looked up and Hermione was surprised when his cheeks darkened a bit and he glanced away.

It had been similar the entire night; the two would drift apart only to catch each other's eyes and blush. Then, fairly soon, they'd drift together again and Hermione would see them touch in some soft way: a hand hold, a caress of the back, a soft peck on the cheek.

It was a glorious thing to behold. She only prayed it was genuine and they weren't acting for the sake of the family; although she doubted that Harry could act that well.

She nudged Ginny with her foot and nodded her head toward Harry, who was blushing from something George had said to him. Surprisingly, Harry's coloring seemed to have rubbed off on his wife also.

"That's good," Hermione said, trying to contain her happiness. "I really want things to work out for the two of you, Ginny. I think, and have always thought truthfully, that the two of you could be good for each other."

Ginny nodded absently and snuck another look across the room. "I feel like I'm going crazy, Hermione." She rubbed her forehead and turned toward her friend. "This is the strangest thing ever. It's the most important relationship of my life, yet it's the most awkward one."

"I can only imagine."

"But at the same time..." Ginny sighed again and glanced at Harry who was now having what seemed a rather serious conversation with Mr. Weasley. "I can't even describe it, Hermione. He's... desperately affectionate, but not annoyingly so, you know. And he's beginning to open up. I'm seeing things about him I never would have imagined."

"See, you're already good for him," Hermione complimented while patting her arm in a motherly fashion. "I have to say, I haven't seen him so... smitten, well, ever really."

"He's not..." Ginny started to protest but then faded out. "I guess we both are a bit," she finally admitted with a giggle. "It's strange; I haven't felt like this about anyone in a long time."

"And how do you feel?"

Ginny glanced at her. "I'm not entirely sure. It's not love, at least not yet. But if things keep going

like they are, and we don't have any major problems... I can see things developing that far. But," she interrupted Hermione's comment before it came, "it's going to be a long road."

"Ginny, why do you fight it so hard?" she asked softly and saw a wrinkle crease the other woman's brow. "You've loved him for years."

"I can't, Hermione. I can't jump back into those old feelings, because everything is different. This isn't about some school crush—this is forever." Hermione nodded, understanding what she was saying. "This needs to be done right from the very beginning."

"And the other issue we talked about?" Hermione said as gently as she could.

Ginny shot another glance at Harry who returned it with a shy smile and his lifted hand a bit in a wave. "I don't see that happening for quite some time." She looked down at her hands. "I think we were both traumatized enough for a while."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "I can understand that, I guess. But don't rule it out completely, Ginny. Just let your instincts guide you. The two of you have always seemed to do well when you've relied on that; at least Harry has, anyway."

Ginny nodded thoughtfully and raised a hand to smooth her hair. Hermione was surprised by the self-conscious gesture, until she saw Harry trying to be casual about making his way across the room.

* * *

Harry could feel his face heat and he cursed George silently. No, actually he cursed all of Ginny's brothers, he decided. They were all horrible wankers who lived to tease him to no end. And the fact that they could now make him light up like a Christmas tree hadn't slipped their notice.

He drained the rest of his butterbeer and glanced over to find Ginny and Hermione deep in conversation, although that didn't stop his wife from catching his eye and blushing fantastically herself. He thought it was amazing that the bright red cheeks he'd seen on her when she was eleven were returning now. It gave him hope that she was beginning to feel about him the way he was about her.

"Stop making cows eyes at my sister, mate," Ron growled with a smile as he finally slid his chess piece into place and announced a check mate. "It's completely unbecoming for a man like you, Harry. For Merlin's sake, you're the top Auror at the Ministry. What would your mates at work think about you if they could see you now?"

"Sod off," Harry growled under his breath and punched Ron in the arm.

"I remember the faces you would make when you and Hermione first got together, Ron," Bill teased. Harry laughed as Ron's ears turned bright red.

"You should have seen him in school," George piped up. "Kept dancing around each other and pretending that they didn't have a clue when, secretly, they were head over arse for each other."

“Alright, that’s enough,” Ron growled and pushed his chair away from the table. “We were talking about Harry.”

Harry opened his mouth to respond when Charlie spoke up. “But you’re more fun to take the mickey out of, Ronniekins. Harry’s new to this embarrassment thing. Give him a few months and he’ll understand that all’s fair once you’re family.” He winked at Harry who was surprised.

Charlie was usually a fairly easy going bloke, but he’d taken a rather harsh position on the arranged marriage thing, and had been quite distant toward Harry up until now. Harry wasn’t sure what the difference was, but he wasn’t about to question it now.

“Alright lads,” Mr. Weasley came up and clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Let’s leave poor Harry alone. Red’s not his natural color and if you keep up, that blush will travel to his hair and he’ll be worthy of being called a Weasley in no time.” They all chuckled as Harry blushed again. “Can I have a quick word, Harry?”

Harry nodded awkwardly and looked over to where Ginny was still talking with Hermione. They exchanged smiles and he followed her father to a quieter corner of the room where he could still see Ginny sitting on the sofa.

“Did you need something, sir?” Harry asked awkwardly. It had been years since he’d felt this uncomfortable around Mr. Weasley, and he knew that part of it was what he and Ginny had talked about before coming to the Burrow. They weren’t just the Weasley’s now; they were his in-laws, his family.

“No, no, Harry. Relax, son,” Mr. Weasley smiled. “I just wanted to make sure that you and Ginny are doing well.” He must have felt a bit uncomfortable because he took off his glasses and polished them on the sleeve of his robes. “I know how strange it can be living with someone after you get married and... well, the two of you have a rather unique situation.”

Harry nodded and looked down at the floor, praying that he could stop his face from heating again. “We’re working on it, sir. I can’t say it’s been easy, but...” He trailed off and Mr. Weasley nodded.

“I understand. Listen, Harry, I’ve never been really good with this sort of thing.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “All of the boys came out of it almost purple. And Ron assured me that you didn’t need the... erm, information... so I didn’t bother before the wedding.” Harry was confused about what he was referring to until something clicked. “But I just wanted you to know that if you have any questions or... need advice.”

Harry cleared his throat and glanced back over to where Ginny seemed to be watching him. “Mr. Weasley, Ron was right. I’ve, erm, I’ve been with women before.” He could feel his face heat spectacularly and cursed himself. “But, I... well, with Ginny it’s different. Somehow, it’s like all those other times... well, they don’t matter anymore, they don’t exist.”

Mr. Weasley studied him and nodded. “I can’t say that I completely understand, Harry, as I’ve only ever, well, been with one woman. Molly and I were married young. But Bill has told me something similar before, about Fleur. And maybe you’d feel more comfortable going to him if you had a question. I just want to make sure that you... that you’re both happy.”

Harry sighed softly and glanced over to see Ginny's face in a fairly intense look. "Mr. Weasley, I'll be completely honest. Things didn't... well, they didn't go so well the first time. And... it's been a rough road back to where we are right now. But we were able to talk about it and I think one day we'll be back to the spot where we would be if things were... normal. I mean, if we'd been given the time—" Harry huffed in frustration. Honestly, he'd never seen himself admitting these things to anyone. Knowing that Hermione knew was humiliating enough to him. Maybe it was the fact that Harry didn't have a father and this was a conversation that he always imagined a father would have with his son. "We've decided to act like we're courting. We thought it might be easier... for right now."

"I understand," Mr. Weasley said as he laid a heavy hand on Harry's shoulder. "And I think it's a grand idea." Harry allowed himself to relax just a bit. He glanced up and found Ginny watching him intently. He raised his hand just a bit and she smiled.

"Kingsley asked how you were doing the other day," Mr. Weasley continued and Harry was grateful that the sensitive subject seemed to be past them. "When do you go back?"

"Erm, next week actually," Harry said. Strangely, he wasn't anxious to get back to work at all. Every other time he'd had a day or two off he'd been rather restless to get another case in his hands. He supposed that he was just so content spending time with Ginny that time had passed without him thinking about his job once.

"Well, I'll let you get back to things, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "I just wanted to say one more thing. I know things are hard right now, Harry, but I can tell that you have her best interests at heart."

"I do," he nodded.

"I can see it in the way the both of you smile, in the way that you speak to each other. There's a respect there that not every couple has. And not every couple needs it-but in my opinion, it's what separates the good from the best."

"I think I understand, sir."

"And, it's about time you stopped calling me that, Harry. If you can't manage 'dad', then at least call me Arthur."

Harry grinned wryly. "It will take some time. I've always called you Mr. Weasley."

"Yes, but we just treated you like family then... Harry you really are family now." He walked away before Harry could comment, leaving him standing there for a minute feeling a bit dumbstruck. He really was, and it was just hitting him. By marrying Ginny he'd gained five brothers and a set of parents, not to mention the various wives and girlfriends and even Bill and Fleur's little girl, Victoire, his niece. And with his godson, Teddy, Harry was starting to feel a bit of his past heal.

Slowly, a smile spread across his face. It might not have been in the way he'd pictured himself acquiring his fondest dreams, but they had come true. Or at least they were on their way, he thought, as he decided that he needed to talk to Ginny; to hold her hand and feel her warmth next to him.

Later that night, as Hermione lay in bed next to Ron she almost had to stifle a laugh.

“What’s with you?” Ron asked in a sleepy voice as he rolled more toward her and lifted his arm so that she could cuddle into him.

“I was just thinking about Ginny and Harry tonight.”

“And that made you laugh?” Ron asked and she swore she could see his incredulous look even in the dark.

“Yes,” she answered and laid her hand on his chest. “They’re both quite taken with the other, aren’t they? Didn’t you notice the looks and the touches all night long?”

“Rather made me nauseous,” Ron commented and then flinched when she slapped at him. “No, I know what you mean. Although they should be that way, right? In fact, both George and Charlie commented that they were surprised they weren’t all over each other. You remember how Bill and Fleur were. Newlyweds are always like that.”

“But they’re not newlyweds, Ron,” Hermione explained.

“What do you—”

“If you think about it, they aren’t,” she continued. “They’re newly married, but it’s rather like they’ve just started dating, actually. They have to learn all about each other: likes and dislikes, habits, details that you don’t normally share when you first start seeing someone. Add to that the immense pressure that they have to succeed in this or they’ll both be miserable. And the fact that they’re living together.”

“Wouldn’t that make it easier?” Ron asked.

“It may,” she shrugged. “Or it may cause things to take much longer.”

“How would that be?” Ron asked and shifted a bit. She could tell that he was really thinking about this. “Wouldn’t things be easier that way? I know I like it much better now that we’re living together. It won’t be that much of a change when we do get married.”

“But, Ron, they never got that chance. They’ve been put on this incredible time table, where everything has been rushed and there have been no regards given to how they feel about this. Think about how you would feel if you were told you had to marry... Parvati, for example. You know her, yes; you lived in the same house for almost seven years. And while you may have thought about her, even in that way, now you have to grasp the concept of building a life together. The merging of two individuals into a cohesive marriage unit is a lot of work.”

“I’ve never thought about Parvati in that way—” Ron protested and she poked his side.

“I was just using her as an example. And for Harry it’s even worse. He’s with someone who he has feelings for, no matter that they might be friendship or something deeper-and she’s from a family

that he respects like no other. Ginny worked so hard to squash that awful crush she had on him for years. And just when she feels like she's free from it, free to do what she wants in life, it's forced back on her. Not to mention the whole intimacy thing."

Ron sat up abruptly and Hermione squeaked as she fell back to the bed. "What 'intimacy thing'?"

She rolled her eyes up to the black ceiling. "Ron, don't overreact. You know what was required by the bond as much as I do."

"Just because I know about it doesn't mean I like to think about it."

"I understand that, Ron, but you need to be an adult about things. Your sister is married... to your best friend. And they've had sex. And they will have sex again, I'm sure."

"Hermione," Ron moaned as he flopped back to the bed. "Can we please not talk about this?"

"When are you going to face it?" she asked, smiling at his groan of almost-pain. "When Ginny comes to the Burrow pregnant? You and your brothers need to be realistic about this. Ginny's not a little girl anymore."

"Arghh," Ron groaned again. "They're probably doing it right now."

'Not likely,' Hermione thought to herself, although she kept the comment quiet. "They might be," she said and moved to straddle his hips. "But that's something you'll just have to get over, Ron. They're both adults; married adults at that."

Ron sighed deeply and his hands came up to caress her hips. "I know, I know," he moaned. "But that doesn't mean I like to think about it... or see evidence of it."

"When has Harry ever been less than discreet, Ron?" she said. He went silent and then sighed again.

"You're right. But I just want to go on the record... if I ever see or hear anything—"

She covered his mouth with her finger and then kissed the end of his nose. "You'll forget you ever saw it or heard it and move on with life."

"No," he shook his head and kissed her finger. "I'll ask you to Oblivate me and be done with it."

Hermione laughed and kissed him. "Deal," she agreed.

Chapter Eleven

The summer seemed to pass quickly once Ginny returned to training with the Harpies and Harry returned to the Auror division. Their days off were spent mostly in the Muggle world; long evenings at the flat together, often eating out or catching a film at a small theater a few blocks from their home. They had come to a comfortable place between them and were happy as they were right now, although Harry had still not kissed her and Ginny wondered about that.

She knew she had some real issues with intimacy between them. She'd spent long hours circling the pitch after practice was over, floating on her broom and reviewing her feelings. It was one evening after one of these longer than usual practice sessions that she finally was able to work them out.

Harry had already begun on dinner when she made it back to the flat, absently laying her broom on the sofa and trailing bits of her practice gear all about. It was a bad habit of hers that seemed to amuse Harry somewhat. He'd never said much but she'd find all her gear placed nicely in her bedroom every time.

"Can I help?" she offered after shedding the last shin-guard.

"Sure," Harry smiled. "I was just about to get some garlic bread ready." She stiffened slightly when he brushed her back lightly on his way to the other side of the kitchen. Mentally, she kicked herself and shook her head. It was time to be beyond these reactions, she repeated to herself.

"Harry?"

"Yeah," was his mumbled return from behind the refrigerator door. She waited until he reappeared, carrying the ingredients for the bread.

"I—" She trailed off and wondered how to introduce the subject. She wasn't usually the one to initiate their conversations, but maybe it was time. They certainly couldn't progress with Ginny still throwing up emotional walls at every turn.

"Do we need to sit down for this?" Harry asked, wearing a half-teasing, half-terrified look.

"No," Ginny forced herself to laugh. "Well, maybe."

Harry studied her for a minute before gathering the food supplies in his arms and moving to the small dining room table. Out of habit, he pulled one of the chairs out for her and she took it with a murmured 'thank you'. Together, they worked to make the rest of their dinner.

"I've just been thinking a lot about us lately," she finally volunteered. Harry kept his face down, watching as he sliced the bread. She could see his grip on the knife falter slightly before he recovered it and continued.

"And?"

"And, I feel that I need to apologize," she said plainly. Harry stopped cutting and she had to hold up her hands to stop him from interrupting. "No, I do. I haven't been as open as you in this relationship

and... I think I've figured it out... well, at least I hope I have."

Harry cleared his throat and nodded, his hands automatically continuing on the task before him. "Figured what out, exactly?"

"Why I pull away from you," she said softly. Now that the bread was sliced, she began spreading the butter and garlic mixture on each piece. "Why I don't always talk to you like I should."

Harry only brushed his hands on a dishtowel and watched her closely.

"I... I never really thought of myself as the type to be afraid, you know. I've always been a bit fearless. It's gotten me in trouble no few times too." She smiled wryly down at her hands which were still going through their motions. "But, I'm terrified of some things."

She chanced a momentary look up and found him studying her intently. Strangely, it didn't make her uncomfortable, but made her aware of how closely he was actually listening.

"I don't mean to pull away from you," she said softly. "I just can't stop the thoughts from coming—what does he mean with this touch, why is he reaching for me now, does he expect this to lead somewhere. They just swirl and swirl in my head until I'm so dizzy and terrified that I don't feel like I can do anything but pull away."

Her voice faded out as Harry reached across and took her hand, holding it tightly.

"Ginny—"

"Let me finish, please," she begged, feeling the beginnings of an emotional breakdown coming on, but she swallowed it back harshly. Harry nodded but didn't let go of her hand.

"This thing between us scares me, Harry. I've never let anyone close to me; not really. And now you... you're here and you're just... wonderful. And I don't want to mess this up. I can't have it break down like the other relationships I've had, because this means something." Thankfully, the tears were gone now, pushed away by her fervent wish to get this out in the open between them.

"Do you think the Chamber could have something to do with that?" Harry asked softly.

The idea wasn't new to Ginny, but she'd never admitted much of her feelings about it to anyone. Bill was the only one whom she'd talked openly with about it, and even then she'd held back. "I think it has a lot to do with it. Afterwards, I just felt so... used and stupid."

"You weren't," Harry denied in a soft but fierce whisper. "He used you, it wasn't you at all."

"But it was, Harry," she denied with an accepting smile. "I was the one who let him in. And, I'm over that... I really am. I've forgiven myself because I was only a little girl then. But over the years I've made choices based on how it made me feel. I didn't let anyone get close because they might hurt me again."

"I'm so sorry, Gin," he whispered fervently. "I wish I had... done something, anything."

"It's not your fault, Harry," she assured him and gave his hand a squeeze. "I was the one who

sabotaged all those relationships. I was the one who was never emotionally available to anyone.

“But that’s not how I want to be with you.” Now that she’d admitted it, she wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry at his relief.

“I...” He swallowed thickly and blinked his suspiciously bright eyes behind his glasses. Ginny was shocked to see him display this much emotion. She’d never seen him cry before. “I don’t want that either,” he finally said quietly.

Her face heated as she contemplated what she wanted to tell him next. “I’ve always been attracted to you, Harry—always. And I... well, I just want things to work.”

“So am I... attracted to you, I mean,” Harry stammered and then they both blushed. “And I want this to work.”

They sat in silence for a minute, the weight of the conversation hanging in the air. “Good,” she finally allowed and gave his hand another squeeze. “We should get this in the oven.” She gestured down at the prepared bread and Harry gave her a questioning look. It did feel rather an abrupt subject change now that she thought about it.

“Okay,” he said with a smile and stood, opening his arms to her. Ginny smiled as she allowed herself to be pulled in, wrapping her arms around him in the now-familiar gesture. It felt right to be in Harry’s arms, she thought.

“I hope you know that I would never push you into anything, Gin,” he whispered softly into her hair. “I want us both to be ready...”

“I know,” she confirmed with a nod into his chest. When she did pull back, he was giving her a very intense look and she wondered if he might kiss her. But the moment was broken when the timer on the oven went off and Harry pulled away reluctantly.

Ginny wasn’t sure if she was disappointed or not. She supposed he was a little insecure even now, but hoped he would gather the nerve soon. The attraction, they’d both admitted, was mutual and the tension was definitely there.

She thought he’d been close one afternoon as they lounged in the sun on the roof of their flat. The tenant before them had had a bit of a green thumb and there was an abandoned green house that Ginny had insisted they fix up and fill with plants. She’d always done fairly well in Herbology and informed Harry that some potion ingredients just needed to be fresh.

Harry had been lounging in a chair, reading the latest version of Quidditch Weekly when Ginny had come out of the greenhouse wiping soil off of her hands. She stopped dead when she noticed he’d removed his shirt and was only wearing the loose fitting shorts he sometimes wore to the gym. The tension had been building between them as they spent more and more time together.

Ginny had to physically shake herself from admiring his lean body and the way his chest flexed when he turned a page.

“Anything good in there?” she’d managed to choke out after clearing her throat and catching her

breath.

“Not much,” he responded distractedly. “A good article about the new Nimbus they’ve been working on. They think they’ve worked out the way it used to drag a bit on the upstart.”

“Hmm,” Ginny said. “The twigs were a bit long.”

They’d both spoken at exactly the same time, and said the same thing. Ginny’s cheeks spread into a huge smile when he peeked around his magazine at her, wearing his own grin.

“There’s another in here about how the Harpies are fixed to finish in the bottom five this year.”

Ginny huffed and tossed down her dragon hide gloves only to scowl as he smirked around the paper again at her. She pretended to fume with her back to him as he laughed, and a wicked idea entered her mind.

“Show me where they said that,” she demanded, coming over to stand behind him. He laughed and pointed to the article. She pretended to read over his shoulder while allowing her hands to slip down to his chest.

“That’s horrible,” she mumbled and moved her fingers around a bit. She could feel him tremble and his breathing became harsher. “Well, it’s absolutely rubbish,” she commented, still pretending to read, and rubbed her hands across his warm chest again. “With the drills we’ve been running, the league won’t know what hit them.” She gave him a quick pat and then moved away, feeling his eyes on her the entire time.

Harry cleared his throat behind her and shifted in his chair. She smiled and slid her foot out of her sandal to rub along the back of his calf. She swore she heard him whimper and glanced back over her shoulder to smirk at him.

“Alright, Harry?”

“Fine,” he squeaked out and then cleared his throat, lifting the magazine again. Ginny almost laughed out loud when she noticed it was upside down.

“You’re looking a bit peaked, Harry,” she said in a soft voice as she walked back over to him. He grimaced again and bit his lip, not noticing that she had pulled her wand. “In fact, I think you need to cool down a bit.” Before he could respond, or even comprehend, she shot a stream of water at him and backed quickly away.

Harry growled at her and tossed the soggy magazine away, stalking toward her as he pushed his wet hair out of his face. Ginny squealed and ran laughing toward the stairs, but he caught her before she reached them and pulled her against his wet chest.

“You think you’re funny, do you?” he growled, although he was smiling widely at her. Ginny squirmed in his hands as he tickled her sides. “How would you like it if I soaked you, eh? In fact, I think that’s a pretty good idea.”

“Harry, you wouldn’t,” she warned, struggling against him again. “I’m wearing a white t-shirt. You

can't do that!"

"Can't I?" he asked and grinned down at her. Instantly, they both froze and the sexual tension rose as they breathed heavily, their faces only an inch or two apart. She wanted so much for him to just lean forward and kiss her—the deep possessive kiss she'd been dreaming about for weeks.

But in the last second, he backed away, let her down and proceeded to drench her with his wand. They both ran back to their flat, laughing and teasing but with Ginny feeling more than a bit disappointed.

* * *

They did their best to stay out of the way of the press, but did find themselves gracing a few front pages, much to their displeasure. News of their arranged marriage had sparked quite the controversy, and it seemed that everyone wanted to know how they were doing.

The first article Ginny had incinerated after reading the account of how she had been 'frigid' toward Harry when they had been spotted in Diagon Alley one morning. The report had mentioned that they had held hands a few times but had never embraced or even kissed. The gossip tabloids had gone crazy over this, bemoaning the fact that the Chosen One was stuck in a 'loveless marriage with a shrew who couldn't even appreciate someone as amazing as Harry Potter'. It had been earlier in the summer and the articles had kept coming, even though she and Harry had been much more demonstrative of their feelings lately.

Harry had tried to comfort her but, finding himself at a loss, finally shrugged and let her stew in her anger. It had faded quickly and she'd gone on with her day. That was one thing he'd learned: yes, she had a horrid temper, but the fires faded quickly. If he stayed out of the way long enough he could avoid being in the line of fire. She just needed some time and space.

The team had been wonderful about her coming back though. Gwenog had issued a rather terse statement that the personal lives of players on the Harpies were just that, personal, and that the press should go somewhere different if they wanted to speculate on anything. Ginny had been appreciative of her mentor and things had settled down after a few days back. Privately, Gwenog had taken her aside and reminded her of the terms of her two year contract and that she wasn't to get pregnant. Ginny just agreed and rolled her eyes. That wasn't likely to happen anytime soon.

But now she was packing to spend two weeks away at Training Camp and she was teetering on tearfulness again. She stuffed her pajamas into her bag violently and glared at them to will away the tears. She wasn't sure why she was so emotional this summer, only having the upheaval of her life to blame for it.

Harry had been brooding quietly since she'd told him about the camp. He'd been very supportive of her position in Quidditch and had even taken time off of work to see their first game, which had been an exhibition match against a new team. They'd won it spectacularly and she and Harry had celebrated with ice cream and an evening spent cuddling on the couch while talking.

"Do you need anything else?"

She turned and found him leaning against the doorjamb of her room, his hands stuffed deep in his

faded Muggle jeans and his thin t-shirt stretching over his chest in a way that made him completely appealing.

“I think I’ve got everything,” she shrugged and forced herself to turn away. She took the next pile and pushed it into the bag. “It’s only two weeks,” she said out loud, repeating it again in her mind. It had become a sort of mantra ever since she’d remembered about the camp and told him.

“Two weeks,” he repeated. He sounded so defeated about it that she had to turn to him. She buried her face in his chest and held him, hiding the few tears that had sprung to life. “Why does it feel like it’ll be longer?”

“I don’t know,” she answered his whispered question as they clung to each other. They stayed like that until Ginny pulled away, knowing that she was going to be late. “You won’t be able to contact me unless it’s an emergency.”

“I know.” He roughly ruffled his hair and shuffled his bare feet.

“Two weeks,” she repeated quietly and slung her bag over her shoulder. Harry stepped forward and used his thumbs to brush away the evidence of her tears and then leaned forward and kissed her forehead, his lips lingering so long that Ginny closed her eyes and clutched his arms.

“Be good.”

She snorted and grinned up at him. “You’re taking all the fun out of this, you know, Potter.”

“And when have you ever obeyed anyone, Potter?”

Her smile grew wider at his comment. This was a sort of game they played often now, referring to their last names. It was one of the rare times they acknowledged that they were actually married, and it warmed her heart. It was rather like an affirmation; his way of saying that he was proud she carried his name.

“I don’t remember ever obeying anyone,” she smirked and he chuckled.

“Be careful, Gin,” he murmured, before pulling her close again.

“Of course,” she said into his shoulder. “I’m not going to muck up an entire season by getting hurt now. You’ll be there at our first game?”

“I’ll be screaming the loudest,” he said into her hair and she didn’t doubt he would.

* * *

Hermione smirked as she brought another round of lemonade out onto the back porch of her parents’ house. Ron was lying in the shade of the large elm tree and pointing to a spot near the eaves where Harry was dangling from a ladder, trying to paint. She almost laughed at the sight of his clothes splattered with white paint here and there.

“Almost got it,” Ron called out encouragingly, and then laughed when Harry gave a rude hand gesture over his shoulder.

“Oh, leave him alone, Ron,” Hermione scolded as she brought a glass of icy lemonade to her fiancé. “The work is good for him. If I had to watch him pace around our flat one more time I was going to hex him myself.”

“But what I don’t understand, is why he’s pacing at our flat anyway,” Ron said after he had drained his glass. “He’s got his own flat to pace in.”

“Ron,” Hermione warned and then rolled her eyes, “he’s just missing Ginny.”

“She’s only been gone six days, Hermione. He’s going to do himself in at this rate before the two weeks is over.”

“Maybe,” she shrugged and internally grinned. “I think it’s sweet.” She ignored his look of disgust and sipped at her drink. She’d been more than a little amused when Harry had shown up only two days after Ginny had left, carrying take away and obviously looking for a distraction. Since then, he’d shown up often after work, offering to help with dinner. Ron had laughed and called him pathetic, but Hermione could see the loneliness in his eyes and had never turned him away, despite Ron’s minor grumblings. And when he’d heard Ron was going to be helping to repaint her parents’ house, Harry had gladly volunteered all of his time. He’d even offered to do other chores for Mrs. Granger who had patted his cheek and smiled knowingly when Hermione had explained that Harry’s wife was away for work.

“Are you daft?” Ron asked her with a raised eyebrow. “How would you like it if I mooned over you every time you were away from me?”

“It’s different for them, Ron,” Hermione explained patiently. “The bond they’ve taken... the book said that it ties them together in ways that the normal wedding ceremony doesn’t. When they’re apart, they’ll feel it more clearly.”

“You mean, like they can feel what the other feels? That’s strange.”

“Not entirely,” Hermione said. “I don’t think Harry can actually feel Ginny or anything. I just think it makes him more aware of his own feelings and how connected he is with her. I’m sure Ginny is feeling a lot of the same, wherever she is.”

“You said once that they weren’t in love yet,” Ron suggested in a quiet voice as he watched Harry climb back down the ladder. “Do you think they are now?”

“Neither of them has said anything to me,” Hermione said. “But if they aren’t, I think they might be close. We’ll have to watch them closely when they are together and maybe we’ll see something. They’re both very private, aren’t they?”

Ron seemed to consider it before shrugging. “As long as they make each other happy.”

“Think about how miserable Harry’s been these past few days. I think he and Ginny are quite happy together.” Ron considered this before giving her a quick kiss and going over to join Harry.

* * *

Harry didn't remember ever being this nervous before a Quidditch match he wasn't actually playing in. He filed into the box seats that were reserved for the Weasley family, and shook hands with everyone. He did his best to smile around the tightness in his throat; the press was sure to be lurking around somewhere and he'd hate to have to deal with another horrid story when Ginny got home.

He wasn't sure if he was more nervous about watching her play the first real game with the name Potter stitched on her Quidditch robes, or if it was seeing her after being apart for two weeks.

The fourteen days had been miserable. He'd wandered around the flat, finding himself drawn to her room and the few things she'd left lying around. And, he'd never admit it to anyone, but he'd even slept in her bed a night or two, holding her pillow and drinking in long breaths of her flowery scent. He knew it was ridiculous, but it was necessary.

Only a few short months ago, Harry had thought his life was complete; he'd been happy going along his merry way dating a girl here and there and enjoying being single. And then came the life changing day when he'd found out about the arranged marriage. He'd come home bemoaning his fate and grumbling about how much his life was going to change. And it had, but he couldn't imagine not having Ginny there now. He'd gotten used to seeing her underthings drying over the towel rack in the bathroom, seeing her toothbrush in the cup next to his, and nicking his socks back when she stole them from his room.

How could someone you'd thought you'd never have these kinds of feelings for work their way so thoroughly into your life that you were beside yourself when they were gone?

He sighed and then flushed when Hermione smiled at him and Ron rolled his eyes, muttering something about lovesick fools.

Did he love Ginny? Is that what this feeling in his chest was? He'd never been in love before. He'd had crushes and lusted after women, but he knew he'd never felt anything this deep-this life changing-before. Ginny was like coming in from the cold to a warm, favorite jumper, just waiting to be put on. She made him feel better just by being there.

He glanced over to see Ron thread his fingers through Hermione's and she smiled at him. Mrs. Weasley was chiding her husband a row back for already finishing his Butterbeer, while fussing at a loose thread in his jumper. Bill and Fleur had their heads together as he pointed out something opposite them and Fleur used her omnioculars to focus on it. They were really the only married couples that he knew (Ron and Hermione weren't married but they were close enough in his eyes) and, without them knowing it, they'd set the examples of how couples acted and what marriage was all about.

And then suddenly, he knew. He was in love. The simple thought made his chest tighten, but in a much more pleasant way than he'd ever felt before. The only problem was he wasn't sure if Ginny returned his feelings. She was affectionate around him, hugging and touching him often. She'd admitted to being attracted to him, even. She seemed comfortable enough around him to let down those emotional walls that he could see she wore. But was it enough?

His musings were broken when the announcer began introducing the teams, and Harry leapt to his

feet with the rest of the crowd and cheered as the players took their racing lap around the field.

There she was: red hair plaited thickly behind her, and her black robes proudly proclaiming the name Potter for all the world to see. Harry felt a swell of pride in his chest as Charlie leaned forward and clapped him on the shoulder, pointing to Ginny as she gave a small wave.

Harry raised his hand and beamed at her, ignoring the flashing camera bulbs that were only a few rows away.

He spent the next four hours in a daze, watching Ginny weave in and out of the other players, gasping as bludgers became near-missiles, and cheering when she would make a great pass or score. He swore loudly, only to be outdone by George and Ron, when she was fouled twice; and cheered even louder when she made both of her penalty shots.

His heart began racing when he noticed the snitch just as the Harpies Seeker, Megan Smith, dove for it. The thrill of flying after the small target was almost tangible and it made him, irrationally for just a second, consider quitting the Auror Division to play Quidditch.

And then it was over; Smith pumped her fist in triumph and Ginny and her teammates met in the middle of the field, hugging and cheering along with the crowd. Harry's eyes never strayed from his wife as the Weasleys clapped his shoulders, shook his hand, and flashbulbs burst. He felt he must have the silliest expression ever as Ginny mounted her broom and flew up to the side of the box. She was greeted with cheers and hugs all around.

The strangest thing happened then. It was as if the world around them moved in slow motion, like Harry had seen in several films he had watched over the years. And the noise of the crowd, the announcer echoing the score of 310 to 70, and the raunchy chorus of the song Ron and George were belting out, faded from his ears. All he could see was her, standing in front of him in grass-stained Quidditch robes, her hair flying free from its plait.

"Hi," she murmured.

"Hi," he answered, feeling incredibly thick that he didn't have something much more suave and cool to say. He opened his mouth again and completely forgot what he was going to say when she reached for his hand. "Sod it," he hissed and pulled her to him.

Had he thought about it before, he would have realized that they were kissing surrounded by her family, and the press, and hundreds of prying eyes. But, then again, it didn't matter, because she was kissing him back, her hands clutching at his shoulders.

Distantly, he could hear wolf-whistles and laughter. But even breathing didn't matter when her tongue pushed into his mouth and she reached up to run her fingers through his hair. Vaguely, he could hear clearing of throats and then a strong hand tapping him on the shoulder. He waved his hand distractedly at whoever it was and tilted his head to the side, bringing his other hand up to hold Ginny's head.

"Children," Bill warned, moving so that his large shadow was in front of them, "we're giving quite the show."

Finally, Ginny pulled back with a giggle and Harry felt his world spin before crashing backward, taking Ginny with him.

“Ouch,” he moaned as his head collided with the hard floor of the box, and Ginny’s forehead collided with his nose, pressing his glasses into his face. More laughter filled the box and he opened his eyes to find Ginny grinning down at him while rubbing her own head.

“Hi,” she said shyly and he laughed, holding her even tighter to him. “I know I missed you, but this is a bit silly.”

Harry laughed again, feeling that he was a bit hysterical. “I missed you too,” he finally admitted, bringing his hand up to move a bit of hair away from her face and to touch the red spot above her eyebrow. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll be alright,” she moaned. “How about you?” She fixed his glasses, making him wince as they scraped his sore nose. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She leaned forward and placed a feather light kiss to the end of his nose. Harry grinned stupidly up at her. “Where else does it hurt?” Her smile echoed his own.

“Right here,” he pointed to his cheek, where the rim from his glasses had pressed in. Ginny leaned forward and kissed the spot. “And here,” he touched his forehead and she kissed it. “Here,” he said, cheekily touching his lips.

“I think I can fix that for you,” she whispered before kissing him again.

“Blimey, they’re at it again.”

Harry snorted and broke away with a laugh. Ginny covered her own laughter by pressing her face into his chest.

“Yeah,” Ron’s voice drawled, “you’d think they were newlyweds or something.”

Harry froze and waited for Ginny to respond. No one in her family ever spoke about their marriage aloud in their presence, and he wasn’t sure how Ginny would take it.

“Sod off,” she growled as she lifted her head, proceeding to thoroughly kiss him again.

“They do have good breath control, you have to admit.”

“Hold on, Harry,” Ginny whispered as she broke their kiss and wrapped her arms tighter around him. The tight squeeze of Apparition had them wrapped in each other’s arms on their sofa at home. “I love you,” Harry whispered before kissing her again. This time, however, she went limp in his arms. “Ginny?”

“What?”

Harry sat up a bit as she pulled back from him. “What?”

“What did you... what did you say?” she asked, her hands coming up to rub her face roughly.

Harry swallowed, realizing that he’d just told her his secret. He’d look like an absolute prat if he

denied it now—scratch that, he'd be an absolute prat if he did it. But he didn't want to push her.

"I, erm... Ginny, these past two weeks have been hell," he said as he pushed his hands through his hair. "You're all I've thought about, and all I wanted to do was to see you again. You have no idea how many times I wanted to march into that camp and just... just hold you, or something." He knew he was rambling a bit but just stared at his wedding ring, spinning it around and around his finger. Anything was better than seeing the revulsion that he was sure she felt at how pathetic he was being. "Ask Ron and Hermione how nutters I was. I was at their flat all the time, just to have something to do. I couldn't stay here without you here."

"And today, while I was waiting for the game to start... I realized," he chanced a glance up and saw her staring at him with wide eyes, "I'm in love with you, Ginny. And I think I have been for awhile now."

"That's what I thought you said," she whispered and looked down at her own ring.

"I won't rush you," he stammered. "You don't have to say it... I know—"

"Harry, just shut up a second so I can talk?" His mouth snapped closed and he stared at her with wide eyes.

"Hell doesn't even begin to describe how I felt away from you," she said softly. "I trained twelve or more hours a day just to keep from lying in my bed and missing you horribly. All I thought about was seeing you today. And I didn't even care if we won or not, just that I could look up and see you there, and know that you were... that you were there to see me."

"You don't have to say it, Gi—"

"I do!" she cried. "I need to say how I feel." She looked up and he wasn't sure whether the smile on her face could be believed. "I'm in love with you, Harry." She let out a breath and rolled her eyes. "Why did it take me so much to say it... so stupid..."

"Please..." Harry leaned forward and kissed her gently, his hand coming up to caress her cheek. "Don't just say it... you have to mean it."

"I do," she assured him, holding his face so she could kiss him again. "I've never said it to someone before, besides my family."

"Me either," he said and kissed her nose. "I've had it said to me, but... it wasn't real, I know that." He kissed her jaw-line next and then moved onto the soft spot just below her ear.

Ginny pulled back and narrowed her eyes at him. "Who said it?"

"It doesn't matter," he dismissed, "because it wasn't real; it wasn't you." His thumb came up and brushed over her bottom lip before he kissed the spot again.

Chapter Twelve

Ginny laughed as she watched Harry hit Ron in the back of the head, with a snowball and then run to hide behind the broom shed. She heard his howl of protest when he was then hit by a barrage of flying snow missiles. She and Hermione had offered to come in out of the snow and cold to help Molly get the Christmas Eve dinner on the table while the boys played outside. The children, even Teddy Lupin, Harry's godson, were romping out in the fluffy flakes that continued to fall, squealing and laughing.

"So?"

Ginny looked up to see that Hermione had taken a stack of plates and was now circling the dining room table while Ginny lay out the flatware.

"So, what?" she looked down, straightening a fork before moving on to the next setting.

Hermione huffed and set down a plate a little harder than necessary. "You know what, Ginny. How are things? We've barely seen you all fall."

"I've been busy with Quidditch," she shrugged, and bit her lip to keep from smiling.

Hermione snorted and shook her head. "And it was Quidditch you were playing when that photographer caught you and Harry in the alleyway beside Quality Quidditch supplies then?"

Ginny flushed and grimaced at the thought of the rather revealing photo that had graced the front pages of the tabloids. They'd been kissing rather passionately with Harry pressing her up against the wall. All might have been well if Harry's hand hadn't moved up the inside front of her blouse, seen plainly by the camera. Molly Weasley's howler had shaken dust from the ceiling as she raved about being discreet in public.

Harry had buried his face in his arms, but Ginny had only laughed and dashed off a quick reply that she was a married woman and could carry on however she wanted, and it wasn't anybody's business but her own. She'd then stated what she'd do to the reporter if she ever caught him.

"There was a new Firebolt out," she explained with a shrug and a cheeky smile, "Harry got a bit excited is all."

Hermione snorted, and then they both giggled. "So things have... progressed."

Ginny finished with the flatware and sank into a chair, watching as Hermione placed the last of the plates. "Progressed, yes..." she sighed.

"But..."

"But," Ginny continued reluctantly and then groaned. "I'm a bloody mess, Hermione. Women aren't supposed to be one big mass of hormones walking around. We're supposed to be the calm, rational ones, while they walk around at attention all day. I swear, some days I don't have a pair of dry knickers. And it's so completely... utterly... bloody frustrating."

“Ah,” Hermione said as she sat next to Ginny after a cursory glance to make sure they were completely alone. “So you two haven’t...”

“Not yet,” Ginny said and reached out to straighten a glass. “But I’m not sure how much more I can wait. And I can’t imagine how he’s making it through. I mean... I know how, obviously. I can’t take a shower anymore without it being cold because he’s been in there forever.”

She giggled when Hermione flushed and cleared her throat.

“But I’m tired of waiting. And I’m not sure if it’s the bond thing... pushing us so hard, or if it’s just... nature.”

“Have the two of you discussed this, Ginny? You know how rough the first time went. Maybe Harry’s just worried that you’ll have another bad experience. Have you given him any hints as to what you’re thinking?”

“You mean besides putting my hand down his trousers?” She grinned at the gobsmacked expression on her future sister-in-law’s face.

“Wow, he is dense then,” she muttered and Ginny almost choked on her laughter.

“You have no idea,” Ginny finally said after calming down. She glanced around the kitchen again and then leaned in, lowering her voice. “The other night we were snogging on the sofa. And it was getting a bit intense, you know. His shirt was off and I’m not sure where mine was at all. And he’s rubbing against me and moaning my name and... oh, it was wonderful and I thought, really thought, that that would be it. But then I tried to help him out a little, you know, ease the pressure... and he jumps up, knocks me to the floor and runs into his bedroom. And it’s not like I don’t know what he’s doing, right, because I can hear through the wall.” She sighed and rubbed her eyes.

“He was... oh,” Hermione said, finally understanding what Ginny was alluding to.

“And I don’t think he realizes how... mad this is driving me.”

“Ginny,” Hermione sighed. “You have to tell him. He’s probably not going to do anything on his own because of last time.”

“So, I should just jump him?” she asked with a sly grin.

Hermione grinned wryly. “That might work. Or you could just sit down and tell him how you feel. Explain to him that you feel you’re ready, and that when he’s ready you’ll both—”

“Be ready. Yeah.” She chewed the inside of her lip before nodding. “I’m kind of hoping he tries something tonight, you know.”

“Merry Christmas to you?”

Ginny sniggered and stood to see her brothers and husband walking toward the house. “Only if there’s something big and thick in my stocking.”

“You’re horrible.”

“And you wish you could be too.”

Hermione only laughed.

* * *

The snow was still falling when they bundled up to leave. Harry made sure to tuck the ends of her scarf in tight, and gave her a kiss on the end of the nose before donning his own winter gear.

“You know you could just Apparate from here,” Ron suggested as he gnawed on a turkey leg he’d nicked from the cold larder. “I do it all the time.”

“The walk would do you some good, you know.” Harry made a quick jab to his stomach and Ron flinched away, taking a huge bite of turkey in the process.

“I’m a growing boy,” Ron mumbled around his mouthful. Ginny grimaced and looked away.

“Yeah, growing round the middle,” Harry pointed out.

“Just giving Hermione more of me to love,” Ron said as he patted his stomach.

Ginny snorted. “I’ll be sure to tell her that then.” Ron paled, causing she and Harry to laugh.

“You’ll be back tomorrow?”

“Sometime,” Harry nodded absently. He wouldn’t catch her eye and Ginny wondered what he was up to. They’d always held Christmas morning at the Burrow since they were all out of school. Those who could travel came if they were able. “We’ve got to come and give Teddy his present.”

“I’m glad you talked Andromeda into staying here tonight. I worry about her in that big house,” Ginny said as she took Harry’s arm.

“More like your Mum did, love,” Harry said. “I think she thinks if I suggest it she’s got to do the opposite.”

“It’s the Black streak coming out in her,” Ginny nodded with a smile. “And you did hold your wand on her the first time you met her.”

Harry rolled his eyes and Ron laughed. “You would have too,” he complained. “And it’s been years since then. Can we not bring it up again?”

“Take your bickering home,” Ron grumbled as he took another bite. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“It’s not bickering, Ron,” Ginny snapped cheekily. “It’s foreplay.”

“Arrgh, Ginny!”

Harry laughed loudly. “You should recognize it by now, Ron. You and Hermione drove us all mad with it for seven years before you figured it out.”

“Take her home, Harry,” Ron complained as he stared distastefully at his half-eaten food.

“Gladly,” Harry said and gave her a warm smile. “Shall we, my love.”

“We shall,” she agreed and they tramped out the door.

“That was a lovely present, Gin,” Harry laughed once they’d reached the clearing they always Apparated to and from. “He’s been asking for it lately and I’ve not been up to par in dishing it out.”

“I aim to please,” she grinned back.

“Hold on,” he said and Apparated them both home.

Ginny was stunned when she opened her eyes and found that the entire flat was bathed in pale fairy lights from their Christmas tree, except for the ceiling, which looked to be a black sky twinkling with bright stars. Low shadows flickered on the walls from the dozens of candles lining the edges of the room.

“Harry! How... when...”

He smiled down at her and helped her to un-wrap her scarf and then removed her mittens and cloak as she continued to stare dumbly at the room. “You like it?”

“I-I don’t know what to say.”

“I had a little help,” he admitted. “Kreacher wanted to give me a Christmas present and asked what I would like. I told him I just needed a little help tonight.”

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, turning to take in the glowing tree that they’d decorated together. Their first Christmas tree.

“It is,” Harry agreed and she turned to see that his eyes hadn’t moved from her at all. “I love you, Ginny,” he said quietly and then brushed his fingers over her jaw. “And I wanted this Christmas, our first Christmas, to be perfect for you.”

“Oh, Harry,” she answered and lay her forehead against his chest. Her throat felt thick and she blinked several times to clear the tears from her eyes. Harry had tried so hard to give her everything she’d always pictured a Christmas to be. They’d traipsed through the woods hunting for the right tree, instead of conjuring one. They’d taken walks in the falling snow and sipped hot chocolate by the fire. As a little girl watching the fairy lights on her family Christmas tree, she’d dreamed of doing all of these things when she got married. “It has been, I promise.”

“It’s not over,” he said and leaned down to kiss her. He tasted of cinnamon and treacle and she felt herself melt in his arms, while still keeping the determination that she wasn’t going to let him push her away tonight.

“Harry,” she whispered once they’d broken apart, “I’m ready.” She opened her eyes and prayed that he’d understand what she meant. By the feral look in his eye, she was fairly certain he had followed her thoughts.

"Thank Merlin," he said as he swept her up into his arms and moved toward his bedroom. "Because I don't think I could have waited any longer."

Ginny laughed as she wrapped her arms around his neck. His bedroom was lit entirely by candles and the bed was covered in rose petals.

"Rather sure of yourself, weren't you?" she teased as he set her down and flushed.

"No," he stammered. "Bloody Kreacher. I just mentioned something romantic and..." He ruffled his hair awkwardly. "I'm actually surprised it's this nice. I mean, I really expected..."

"Pots and pans and cleaning supplies?" she asked playfully. "Things that would turn on a house elf?"

"Eww, Ginny!" he groaned and she laughed, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"It's great," she assured him. "Bloody brilliant actually." He froze as she kissed his chin and then slid her tongue down his jaw to nuzzle his ear.

"Gin," he mumbled into her hair. "I want this to be perfect for you. Not like... before..."

"Harry," she warned and gave his bum a squeeze which made him rock against her. "Before was my fault. It's going to be perfect tonight because it's you... and it's me. It's us together, like we should be. And this time it's not because of some bloody deadline, but because we love each other."

She didn't expect the fierceness in his expression and was overwhelmed when he kissed her so thoroughly. "Gin, make love with me?"

* * *

Harry let himself pull away and he moved to her side, holding her tightly to him.

"That's how it's supposed to be," he said, and she was surprised to hear the awe in his voice.

"What do you mean?" she asked, brushing the hair away from his sweaty forehead. She'd always assumed that sex was sex, and that it was a fairly universal experience, at least for men.

"When you love someone," he explained. "It's... better. That's not even the right word," he said shaking his head. "It's like every part of you can feel it, and it just builds and builds and all you want to do is to take that love and give it back to the one you're with. It's never been like that before for me." He sighed in contentment and Ginny couldn't help the grin that spread over her features.

It had been brilliant. And she couldn't wait to do it again.

* * *

The early morning gray light lit the ceiling, and Harry blinked away the sleepiness in his eyes. He licked his dry lips and tried to move his arm only to find a heavy weight against his side. He grinned once he realized what, or actually who, it was next to him. He'd only woken to a woman in his bed a few times and it was never this satisfying. Knowing that it was his Ginny, that she was going to be

here forever, and that she was actually happy about that, meant everything to him. With a start, he realized it was Christmas morning.

A perfect Christmas morning, in his opinion. This one even beat his first Christmas at Hogwarts, where he'd received his first real presents and been in the company of people who wanted to be with him.

He wasn't sure whether to wake her and make a big production of the wrapped boxes that now sat under their tree, or to let her sleep here in the warmth of their bed, cuddled up to his side. Eventually, his desire to study her while she slept won out and he turned his head to look directly at her.

She was lovely, he thought; with her sleep tousled hair and her mouth slightly open. The scattering of freckles on her face attracted him all the more, even though she swore she hated them. They reminded him of childhood innocence and of her mischievous nature that made him laugh. And he'd had far too little to laugh about in his life. Yet, the past seven months had found him smiling more than he could ever remember. They'd had their rough start-horrific if he really thought about it-but they'd both worked past it together and now, here they were, in love and completely together.

"Stop staring."

Her whispered voice shook him from his thoughts, and he couldn't help but grin at her one eye that was fixed on him while the other remained closed.

"Can't help it," he shook his head and reached out to trace the line of her nose with his finger, "look what Father Christmas left in my bed last night."

She snorted out a laugh and moved over closer to him, wrapping her arms around his chest and lifting a leg over his hip. "You must have been a very good boy indeed then," she drawled out in a sleepy voice.

Harry laughed and hugged her to him. "I must have. Don't remember what I did, but I'll have to try and do it again."

"Promise?" she whispered and he smoothed down her hair a bit.

"Promise," he said as he kissed her head.

"How about now?" she asked cheekily.

* * *

"What did you do to Harry?"

Ginny swung around and grinned at her friend. "What?"

Hermione leaned in closer and nudged her shoulder. "Harry," she nodded to where Harry was lounging with Ron and George, and laughing uproariously at something Charlie was telling them. "I don't think I've ever seen him so happy. His face is going to crack if he smiles any wider."

Ginny smirked and gave a small shrug. "You can't think of anything that would relax him that much?"

Hermione snorted. "I'm guessing last night's discussion resolved itself."

"You could say that," Ginny shrugged and glanced up to see Harry wink at her.

"Exactly how late were you today?" Hermione asked under her breath. Molly and Fleur were chatting only a few seats away and Ginny was glad she was being discreet. She really didn't want to explain what they were talking about.

"We beat you two here," Ginny quipped back with a waggle of her eyebrows.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We had Christmas morning at my parents," she explained.

"Uh-huh, is that what you're calling it nowadays?" Hermione giggled at Ginny's comment and they both sobered when Molly shot them an inquisitive look. "Honestly, we just got a little carried away conserving water."

Hermione nudged her again. "Share a shower, eh?"

"Something like that," Ginny nodded. "Although I don't think we conserved anything."

"That does tend to happen." They both went silent for a minute, and then grinned at each other when the men roared again. "So, I'm assuming that everything went well."

"Which time?" Ginny deadpanned and Hermione choked on her tea. "Because there was once last night, twice this morning and... oh, yes, once in the bathroom off of the kitchen."

Hermione almost lost the grip on tea cup and quickly set it down, her eyes going wide. "Here? Right next to your mother's kitchen?" Ginny wasn't sure whether she was impressed or shocked. Her mother glanced up at them and Ginny was, once again, thankful that Hermione was whispering so low.

Ginny shrugged a shoulder and sipped her tea, winking at Harry who seemed to be staring at her suspiciously.

"Wow," Hermione whispered.

"Oh, Hermione," Ginny sighed. "What did you expect? If you think about it, it's almost like last night was our wedding and the rest of the weekend is our honeymoon."

"I guess I can see that," Hermione said, even as a sly smile peeked out. "I just never pictured Harry..."

"Let's just pray that potion I'm on is as good as they say it is, or I'll be in big trouble," Ginny said with a small smile. "Gwenog will have my hide if I'm in the pudding club."

"But it would be exciting, don't you think?"

Ginny glanced over to see a dreamy smile on Hermione's face. "Maybe," she said with a shrug. "Although, I just got him and I'm not ready to share just yet. There are so many places we have to shag still."

"Ginny," Hermione hissed, scandalized. "You make it sound so... dirty."

Ginny laughed and patted her on the knee. "It can be if you want it to. And don't lecture me; I'm the married one, not the one living in sin." She shot a very knowing look to her friend, and then scooted to the edge of the sofa. "And besides, you know all men can be led around by their—"

"Don't finish that," Hermione hissed again, although she was smiling.

"Don't believe me?" Ginny asked with a challenging grin. "Watch this... And keep them distracted for a bit, will you?"

Hermione's mouth dropped open as she watched Ginny stand and primly adjust her skirt before stalking over to Harry, whispering in his ear and trailing her fingernail along his shoulder before sashaying up the stairs. She shot a look toward Hermione and winked. Sure enough, Harry excused himself not a minute later and quickly disappeared up the stairs.

Chapter Thirteen

Ginny hurt in places she didn't really want to think about. She kept her eyes pressed tightly closed against the pain in her head and her shoulder. She'd tried opening them for a minute after the portkey had brought her to St. Mungo's, but the spinning dizziness that almost overcame her was too much. Better to sit still, she decided.

Outside in the hallway, she could hear her mother speaking in quick tones with the Healer. The rest of her family was, no doubt, draped over various surfaces in the waiting rooms, pacing up and down the hallway or, in George's case, probably trying to find some unsuspecting nurse to ask out. He and Angelina had decided to take a bit of a break from seeing each other for awhile. That was one relationship that Ginny was glad not to stick her nose into.

And Harry. He was around somewhere too. She'd heard his urgent questions to the Healer as they tended to her injured shoulder. In fact, they'd all but insisted he leave the room so that they could get their work done.

She'd wanted so badly to have a moment with him to tell him that she was really fine, but the fuzziness in her head and the swift movements of the team medics and Healers around her made it impossible.

Slowly, she pried one eye open just a fraction and blinked at the brightness of the room. The other eye opened and she gripped the sheets beneath her to keep a hold on something as the room moved.

She hated hospitals. Nothing good ever came of being in the hospital. Thankfully, in her short Quidditch career she'd only needed this one trip so far. But the many memories of waiting, pacing outside of hospital rooms, praying for any bit of news on Harry swam in her head now: pacing in the hallway with the Gryffindor Quidditch team in her second year, huddled with her mother and Bill in the corridor during her third year, listening at the doorway after the Final Battle.

His latest visit had been less than a month ago. She'd only been back from practice an hour when Ron had come to get her, paler than she'd seen him in years. Harry had taken a crushing curse to the arm, and the Healers were valiantly doing their best at St. Mungo's to save it.

Ginny and the other Weasleys had spent hours pacing the halls, drinking stale coffee and weak tea, waiting for any news once again. And it had turned out alright in the end, she supposed. Harry's arm was fine, although he still did exercises every day to improve the strength in his hand.

But she hadn't cried. Not even when she'd entered the room where he lay looking white as a sheet against the red of his Auror robes. Not even when she saw the blood stains on those robes and saw the mesh of scars up and down his bare arm. 'They'll heal.' That's what the Healer had said. And they had; eventually faded into pale, thin lines that she had to look closely to see anymore.

But the waiting had been the worst. And then Harry had laughed it off, joking with a still-pale Ron, and pretending that it hadn't hurt at all. She supposed that he was trying to be strong for her benefit. And it had worked, until she had gotten home and excused herself to the loo for ten minutes. Then the tears had come, slowly, gently trickling down her face.

She'd felt a bit indignant that she couldn't cry buckets right then. Why had she been able to cry so hard all those other times? Times when he hadn't been hers to cry over.

"Hi."

Ginny tried to smile when Harry slipped into the room, his fists deep in his pockets. Slowly, she swung her legs over the side of the bed, holding onto the sheets still as her head and shoulder throbbed.

"Hi."

"That was quite the fall."

"Was it?" she asked. "I don't remember much of it."

Harry stayed standing further away than she liked. His hair was tousled as if he'd been running his fingers through it. And his glasses were smudged; she could see them from where she sat.

"It seemed like it went on forever," he said quietly.

Ginny chuckled and slid her bottom off of the bed, testing her weight on her legs, before allowing herself to stand shakily.

"Should you be up now?" Harry asked as he took a step closer, his arm reaching out, she supposed, to catch her if her knees gave way.

"I'll be fine," she assured him in a voice that was much stronger than she felt right now. "I just need to get out of here." Her confidence slipped, however, when she looked up and caught the tension in his face.

"You should probably stay overnight."

"I'm not staying here one more minute," she affirmed, overriding his protest. "I'll be fine."

"Ginny..." He trailed off and ruffled his hair in annoyance, harshly scratching at his neck which was darkening. "You need to rest."

"I'm fine—"

"YOU ALMOST DIED!"

The anger in his voice rolled through the room and caught her off guard. She opened her mouth to retort, but felt the words fail her.

"Don't tell me you're fine, Ginny, I saw what happened out there."

"Don't try and—"

"You should quit, Ginny. There's no need for you to do this to yourself anymore. I've seen some of the bruises—"

Harry continued his rant, pacing back and forth in front of her, his face and neck turning deeper red by the minute. But Ginny couldn't hear more than the blood pounding in her ears. She couldn't believe what he was saying. He wanted her to quit.

“—and playing against men who are more than twice your size—”

All the time she'd sat next to his bed last month, her stomach rolling at the thought of him being injured, she'd never asked him to quit his job. He loved being an Auror; it was something that defined him. And Ginny knew that. How could he not understand that Quidditch did the same thing for her?

“You want me to quit?” she asked in a falsely calm voice.

Harry stopped mid-stride and focused on her, his chest heaving still. “Yes.”

“I can't,” she shook her head. Suddenly, she felt immensely stronger, her legs much more steady. “I won't.” She reached out and pulled the dark green cloak that draped over the back of the hospital chair to her. Scowling at the letters she could see, the OTTE, she balled it up so that she couldn't read the rest of the name. Harry reached out to steady her but she shrugged him away.

“How can you ask me that?” Her anger finally broke loose, and she gave a small push at his hand that kept reaching for her elbow. “How can you—”

“Damnit, Ginny! Aren't you listening to me?”

“No! I'm not, Harry. You're... this is just too much.” The last thing she saw was his incredulous face as she clutched her cloak and broom to her chest and then Apparated away.

* * *

Ginny slammed the door behind her and tossed her broom toward the sofa where it fell with a soft 'plop' onto the cushions. Her head still pounded; even more, if she thought about it. Perhaps Apparating out so quickly wasn't the best idea. It had been quite some time since she'd been so mad. And what made it worse, was that her git of a husband hadn't even listened to her.

No doubt the papers tomorrow would be featuring their row front page, in full color, with photographs and all. No, St. Mungo's probably was not the best place for them to have it out about Harry's insecurities and her career drive. She groaned aloud and rolled her aching shoulder as she leaned her hip against the back of the sofa and closed her eyes.

“Are you ready to listen to me yet?”

Ginny jumped and swore loudly. She hadn't even heard him Apparate into the flat.

“Probably not.”

Harry's face darkened again and his hands fisted in his hair. She knew that look. It was one she'd only seen a few times, but knew to be wary of all the same. Harry was extremely mad.

“Bloody woman,” he growled and stomped into the kitchen. She could hear him violently opening

drawers and slamming the refrigerator closed. He came out and leaned against the wall in the living room, his head back as he drained a cold butterbeer almost completely.

“Now you’re going to get drunk?” Ginny snapped. Her adrenaline was still running high from the game, and Harry’s harsh words at the hospital were enough to make her anger rise to the surface.

“It’s a butterbeer, Gin,” Harry sighed. “There’s not enough—”

“I bloody well know what it is you’re drinking,” she snapped, rubbing the back of her stiff neck and rolling her shoulder again. “The whole point, Harry, is that it’s another way for you to avoid what this stupid row is really about.”

Harry glared at her and then drained the rest of the liquid before banishing the bottle back to the kitchen. “And I suppose you’re going to tell me what it’s about?”

Ginny returned his look out of dark eyes and stalked toward the kitchen in search of her own drink.

“Because, the way I see it, this whole bloody thing started because you plowed yourself into the pitch out there,” Harry called out as she passed him.

“No,” Ginny quipped over her shoulder. “It’s because you don’t have respect for me.”

Harry gaped at her and took quick steps to follow her. “What the bloody hell are you talking about, Ginny? I don’t have respect for you?”

“That’s right,” Ginny yelled, slamming the refrigerator closed before she removed anything from it. “It’s alright for you to get injured in your job, but Merlin forbid I do my job.”

“It’s not the same, Ginny, and you know—”

“I know that you never would have let me say those things to you last month when you got hit with that crushing curse. It took a bloody week for you to get your hand back to working right. My shoulder is just fine, Harry.”

“Fine?” he snapped and took a step so that they were separated by mere inches. “That’s why you’ve got a great bloody bruise bigger than a quaffle all over your back?”

Ginny opened her mouth to yell back, and then stopped when she really looked at him for the first time since waking up in the hospital. His chest was heaving, his face was pale and carried a slight sweaty sheen. What she’d first assumed was fury, now appeared to be something quite different up close.

The paleness of his skin, offset by the dark stubble he’d not had time to shave off that morning, was chalky and lined with deep frown marks. His eyes were extremely bright behind his glasses and slightly red.

“Harry—”

She stopped when his hands came up and rested heavily on her upper arms, carefully on her left side, of course.

"Do you know what it did to me to see you lying there on that field not moving?" His voice hitched and he blinked rapidly, looking away as his chest shuddered momentarily. "It was like seeing you in that ruddy Chamber all over again, Gin. And they wouldn't let me near you. I had to fight to even make it to the field, and..." His hands dropped and he pulled away, turning his back to her and leaning forward on the counter. "And then they'd taken you away before I could see for myself."

The grief and panic she'd felt, only a month before, when an ashen faced Ron had contacted her and told her that Harry had been injured in the line of duty, hit her again with a delayed vengeance. "I'm sorry, Harry," she whispered, laying her hand on his back and then moving in close to wrap her arms around him.

"I shouldn't... I didn't mean what I said, Gin," he whispered back, running his hands along her arms and pulling her tight to his back. "You shouldn't give up Quidditch. You're a brilliant player. It's just... seeing you lying there just made me so scared."

Ginny nodded against his firm back and then winced just a bit as he turned in her grip and wrapped his arms around her, laying his head on top of hers.

"I understand," she said quietly. "And I'm sorry I overreacted. I just... I've worked so hard for this. And to have you tell me to give it all up..."

"I know," he nodded. "It wasn't fair."

"No, it wasn't. But that doesn't mean I don't understand why you did it. When you got hurt I wanted to tell you to quit."

"But you didn't."

Ginny sniffled against his chest and gave a wet chuckle. "It was a near thing. Hermione had to hold me back from telling Kingsley what I thought of him."

Harry chuckled and placed a small kiss on the crown of her head. "I would have liked to have seen that."

"Yeah, well, you were kind of unconscious at the time."

Harry only nodded in response. "That would have made it a bit hard."

They stood in silence, still locked in an embrace in the middle of their kitchen.

"I'm sorry," he said again quietly and leaned forward nuzzling her nose against his own.

"I know," she replied, equally as soft.

"I'll bet you're tired."

Ginny couldn't help the smile that threatened. How could he break past her defenses so fast? A few months ago she would have been throwing things at him and they would have argued for days about it. But, it was different now.

She supposed it had to do with getting to know each other so much better. And, possibly, the fact that they'd both seen what the other had gone through and could relate.

Whatever it was, it made Ginny's chest feel tight, and made her feel extremely emotional.

"I am," she agreed finally.

"And hungry?" Harry asked with a small smile. Ginny snorted softly and nodded. "Why don't you take a warm bath and I'll meet you in the bedroom with a pizza?" Gently, he stroked the side of her face and she peered up at him.

"You always say we should never eat in bed, but we always do."

He grinned down at her and pressed his lips to the tip of her nose. "I know."

"It sounds nice," she agreed.

"Extra cheese?"

"Extra cheese."

* * *

The water was brilliantly blue and the small, brightly colored fish swam in schools, back and forth through it. The small faces that pressed against the glass turned this way and that, watching as the yellow, orange and purple swimmers showed off their flashy movements.

Harry glanced down with a smile and watched as Teddy pressed his own small nose against the glass, his eyes, large and brown today, picked out his favorite blue fish.

"Look, Hawwee, look," he cried, turning his heart-shaped face up to make sure his godfather was watching.

"I see it, Teddy, there's the blue one that you like. Did you think of a name for him since the last time we came?" Harry sank down to Teddy's level, bracing his hand against the glass as they both turned to watch the fish.

"Fishy," Teddy proclaimed proudly, his pudgy finger smudging the glass.

"Good one," Harry agreed. Compulsively, he reached up and tugged the knitted hat Teddy was wearing down tighter over the small boy's hair. It wouldn't do for the other children, or adults for that matter, to see Teddy's hair change to the shiny blue that mirrored his favorite fish.

"How about we walk over to see the birds?" Harry suggested, taking Teddy's hand in his. "Then we'll get some lunch, and maybe you can play on the playground."

"Monkey," Teddy insisted, nodding his head firmly. "Monkey."

Harry smiled at a mother of several young children who was standing next to them. She smiled fondly at Teddy's firm tone. "Monkeys it is, then," Harry agreed.

“Linons,” Teddy called out as they began a slow walk through the zoo.

“I thought it was monkeys,” Harry asked with a grin. They made this trip to the London Zoo often. It was one of Teddy’s favorite outings, besides going to see Ginny play Quidditch.

“Linons,” Teddy repeated firmly. Truly, Harry’s godson would be happy seeing any of the animals, but they went through the same routine every visit. As long as Teddy was able to see the hundreds of brightly colored fish, and of course his favorite one, then he was more than happy to wander anywhere, his little hand sticky and clammy in Harry’s.

Ten minutes watching the small pride of lions lounging in the sun, and then listening to the monkeys chatter away, and it seemed Teddy had had enough for the day. He and Harry ordered lunch at the small café, and ventured out into the chilly, but brilliant, day outside to eat. The playground had a few tables scattered around and usually Teddy would wander toward the toys once he’d had his fill of crisps and what small bits of sandwich Harry could talk him into eating.

The boy must have been hungry today as he sat quietly by Harry’s side, his small legs swinging back and forth, and his cheeks stuffed with food. Harry watched him fondly. He enjoyed their weekly visits immensely. Teddy’s perpetual happiness seemed to rub off on Harry during their visits and he came home even happier than he left; which was saying something as he was very happy with his life right now.

Ever since being named Teddy’s godfather, Harry had taken it upon himself to make sure the boy lacked for nothing. Andromeda had tried to refuse Harry’s financial support, but Harry had finally prevailed when he’d threatened to give her the entire Black fortune, which, in his mind, she was more entitled to than he was.

Harry had his first experiences with changing nappies, holding, and feeding a baby with little Teddy. He’d been terrified that he would drop the infant, but Andromeda had only chuckled and placed Teddy firmly in his arms. Harry visited quite often during those early days. It was a relief to him to come home from a tough day at Auror training and watch the small boy grow, change, and learn new things.

He’d even bought the boy his first real broom for Teddy’s first birthday. Of course, Andromeda had confiscated it and insisted that he be much older before riding it by himself. She did allow Harry to replace it with a toy broom that only hovered a foot off the floor. Harry had nearly laughed himself silly watching Teddy race around the living room and his grandmother chase after him, righting everything he knocked over. Even better, was Ron’s play-by-play commentary of the whole thing. Hermione had only shaken her head in disapproval at the two boys who were acting much younger than their eighteen years at the time. But Harry knew the truth; she’d been smiling just as much as they had that day.

“All done, little man?” Harry asked as Teddy placed a mangled bit of bread and cheese back onto the wrapper.

“Joose,” Teddy pointed to the small box of apple juice that was just out of his reach. Harry handed it to him and watched as Teddy eagerly sucked on the small straw, his eyes following a group of small children as they ran toward the playground. “All dum,” he proclaimed as he passed the juice

box to Harry.

“You want to go and play now?” Harry asked. Teddy nodded eagerly and slid his small bottom off of the bench. “Alright, stay where I can see you. Don’t leave with anyone but me, Teddy.”

His acknowledgment was lost in the air, as Teddy’s legs carried him quickly over to the brightly colored toys. Harry watched in amusement as he ran toward the swings and threw himself across one of them, his belly on the seat and his legs flying out behind him.

“Your son is very sweet.”

Harry turned to see the mother who had been at the aquarium exhibit sit at the far end of the table. Her three children scampered toward the toys as well. Harry almost corrected her, but then realized it really didn’t matter. He loved Teddy as if he were his own.

“Thank you.”

“Giving your wife a break today, are you?”

Harry smiled. “She’s out of town today for work so we planned an outing.” And it was true; Ginny had left this morning for Ireland to prepare for a game tonight. Harry would Apparate directly there after dropping Teddy off. “He loves to come to the zoo.”

“My children do as well.” They both lapsed into silence watching the children play on the toys.

Harry watched the children scamper about as his mind wandered a bit. He and Ginny had, just the other night, had a fairly frank discussion about children. Teddy had been over at their flat for dinner and, once they’d gotten him back through the floo to his grandmother’s, Harry had asked Ginny about when she’d like to have a baby.

He’d been a bit wary about bringing the subject up, in truth. He knew she was at the height of her career and loving every minute of playing professionally. A baby meant giving all of that up for something very different. Something even Harry wasn’t sure he was ready for.

But quiet times like these, watching Teddy scamper around, Harry could almost picture a little girl with long red hair and freckles chasing after him, or maybe a dark haired boy with bright brown eyes. It really didn’t matter to Harry which they had—they could have a hundred if Ginny liked—as long as they had their mother’s wonderful smile and laugh.

In the end, they’d decided to wait a few more years. Perhaps when Ginny grew tired of playing, or if she ever felt what her mother called the ‘maternal nudges’. Harry had agreed, even though he would like nothing more than to see her grow round with his child inside. For now it was enough for him to spend time with Teddy.

Eventually, the woman at the end of the table and her children wandered off to enjoy more of the zoo. Harry cleaned up the mess from lunch, and walked a few steps away to place it all in a rubbish bin. He’d just settled back on the bench when he had to laugh.

Teddy, still swinging on his belly had been surrounded by a group of small girls. Harry couldn’t hear

what they were saying to the boy, but it seemed they wanted his swing. Teddy shot a panicked look over at Harry, and then quickly abandoned the swing, scurrying over to the slide while looking back over his shoulder at the group of girls.

One of the group, a cute little girl with curly brown hair and a pink jumper on, followed Teddy and stood next to him in line for the slide. Teddy eyed her suspiciously and edged away from her slowly, a slightly disgusted look on his face.

Harry watched the mini-drama unfold, as the girl followed Teddy all around the playground and did everything he did. If Teddy hid, she only giggled louder and chased him.

Finally having enough, Teddy shook his head at her, said something Harry couldn't make out, and then pushed the little girl down. Quickly, he scampered back toward Harry. The girl didn't cry, surprisingly, but scowled at him and stuck her tongue out.

"What's the matter, lad?" Harry asked as Teddy climbed back up onto the bench. "Why did you push her down? That wasn't very nice."

"Hewr said hewr was gonna kiss me," Teddy proclaimed with a thoroughly disgruntled look. Harry laughed out loud, and then immediately felt bad as Teddy's face showed nothing but betrayal.

"You wouldn't like to be kissed?" Harry asked once the chuckles had died out.

"Ergh," Teddy shook his head. "Gran gives me kisses, and Ginny too. Sometimes Nana Weasley. But I don't like when Towry does."

"Does Victoire try and kiss you lots?" Harry asked, valiantly trying to keep a straight face.

Teddy nodded seriously. "Hewr always plays house."

"Ah, I see," Harry nodded. He picked Teddy up and set him on the table in front of him so that they were eye to eye. "Well, it's something you're going to have to get used to, mate. At your age girls are a bit... well, yucky, aren't they?" Harry smiled when Teddy nodded enthusiastically.

"But that will change when you get older. Girls know it faster than the boys do, though. One day, you'll see a girl that you like and you'll be the one who wants to kiss her."

"Hawwee," Teddy protested and rolled his eyes.

"I'm serious. When I was younger I thought girls weren't very good either. Except your Aunt Hermione, but then she was more like my sister. Anyway, one day I looked at Ginny and all I could think about was kissing her."

Teddy covered his face quickly and groaned aloud, making Harry crack up in laughter again. "Alright, lad, I can take a hint. Although I do have to warn you, girls can be quite the little minxes; especially the cute ones. But, that's no reason to push them down. Now, what do you think you should do to make this better?"

The look of disgust filling the small face made Harry wonder how well this was going to work. "Say

sowwy, I guess,” Teddy shrugged.

“An apology would be a good thing, I think,” Harry prompted. “Just go over there and say you’re sorry that you pushed her down.”

“Do I hafta kiss hewr?” he asked, a skeptical look on his face. Harry watched as he glanced back over his shoulder and shuddered slightly. “Towry says you hafta mean it when you say sowwy.”

“I think it would be enough just to say you’re sorry,” Harry suggested, struggling to keep a straight face. Teddy’s face crumpled into agony, and Harry stood quickly to lift him down to the ground. Shoulders slumped as if he were marching to a funeral, Teddy trudged his way toward the girls. Every so often he would shoot a pleading look back at Harry, who stood firm and looked pointedly to the girls.

When he finally made it to where the girls might be able to hear him, Teddy stuck his hands in his pockets and scuffed the ground with his toe. Harry couldn’t hear him speak, but had to chuckle as the little chestnut headed girl stuck her tongue out at him and marched away with her head held high.

“Tough break, lad,” Harry consoled as Teddy joined him again. They started walking back up the path that led to the front of the zoo.

“Hawwee?”

“Yes, Teddy?”

“What’s a minx?”

Chapter Fourteen

Harry tugged at the collar of his tuxedo and silently cursed Ron for allowing Hermione to talk him into making this wedding a mass of Muggle traditions. Arthur was thrilled, of course, chasing around after Hermione's dad and asking him every question that he could think of. Hermione had all but given up on trying to calm his excitement, and thrown her hands up when her future father-in-law broke out in raptures over the lift at the hotel. He'd all but squealed with delight when the bell rang announcing their arrival at the floor where their suites were to be.

Ron had rolled his eyes and gently tried to pull the older man from the lift, with Harry trailing along behind hiding his grin.

But, really, Harry thought that the mix of traditions probably fit Ron and Hermione perfectly. Hermione's parents were thrilled to be able to have something to do in what they considered 'Hermione's world'. Their relationship had been rocky, to say the least, once she'd retrieved them from Australia and Kingsley had helped to reverse the memory charms Hermione had performed. He'd been so impressed with her work that he'd immediately offered her a spot in the Ministry. Hermione, being who she was, had turned it down in favor of completing her education, and then joined the Ministry a year later.

"Are they supposed to choke you?" Ron grumbled as he too ran a finger along the stiff collar around his neck and swallowed audibly.

"Yeah, they are," George put in as he straightened his own suit in front of the mirror. "It's to remind you what you're getting into. Ask Harry how being married chokes the life out of you."

Harry only chuckled as he shook his head and resisted the urge to toss back a sarcastic comment.

"Nah," Charlie growled from where he was relaxing on a sofa, completely carefree that his suit was being horribly wrinkled. "You'd be asking the wrong bloke. Ginny's got him wrapped around her little finger."

"Rightly so," Arthur nodded and nudged George out of the way so that he could inspect himself. "Ron, you'd do well to look at Harry's example. That's the way you should look at Hermione."

Harry flushed when Ron gave him a knowing look.

"No thanks, dad," Ron quipped. "Hermione doesn't like it when I give her that look in public."

"Nice one," George cheered even as Arthur scowled at him, and Harry felt the need to shrink into oblivion. He knew he and Ginny were a bit amorous, although he didn't feel they were overly affectionate in public... well, with the exception of that one front page story. He shook his head at the thoughts that brought on. Best not to go there right now.

"It's time," he informed them all after glancing at his watch. "Hermione will skin me alive if I let you be late, mate." He clapped a rather pale Ron on the shoulder and nodded to the others. "I suggest you lot get in your places before one of the girls sees you." He fought the urge to chuckle as they scattered various ways, each moving to their assigned places.

“Nicely done,” Ron smirked, and he and Harry made their way down to the room where the ceremony would take place.

Harry was a bit overwhelmed at how much work Hermione and the Weasley women had put into this wedding. And it was a bit over the top, in his opinion at least. Fabric, and flowers, and ribbons adorned every surface that would stand still long enough. Even Percy had been forced to flee, as George had threatened to drape him in pale ivory silk and cover him in red flowers.

It made him appreciate the simplicity and minimalism of his and Ginny’s own wedding. For them, it had been perfect. And while he’d never really seen Hermione this... girly... before, he supposed it fit her.

Not for the first time, Harry thanked Merlin above for the easy going nature of his own wife. She’d not demanded anything fancy or out of character for either of them. Not that she’d felt much desire at the time. But, over the months of living together, Harry had come to realize that it was more her nature than it had been her lack of interest. She was, simply put, easy to please and very much like himself; not liking overly frilly and fussy things.

“Ready for this?” Harry asked as they waited for their signal to enter the room.

“If you can do it, I can, mate,” Ron teased, although his voice was a bit shaky. “Nothing to it, right?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that,” Harry teased. “I mean, mine was a bit different, yeah?”

Ron contemplated him for a minute before nodding. “That it was. But it was still good?”

Harry’s face stretched into a grin. “Definitely worth it.”

Ron smirked. “That’s because you’re getting laid on a regular basis.” He seemed to realize what his comment had implied and grimaced just a bit. “Not that I want to think about that... it is my sister after all.”

Harry laughed and clapped him on the back. “Just relax,” he suggested. “This is the worst part, the waiting for her to come in. Once she’s up there, you’ll look into her eyes and you won’t remember a thing.”

Ron gulped and turned a bit green. “What if I forget what I’m supposed to say?”

“I’ll poke you in the back,” Harry shrugged. “Look, Ron, I promise that you’ll do fine. You’ve got your vows memorized, I’ve got the ring, Ginny’s got the other one—all you have to do is stand up there and try not to faint when she walks in.”

Ron seemed to take courage from Harry’s words, because he nodded and straightened his collar again before turning around to stare at the blank door.

“I can do this,” he confirmed and Harry grinned at his back.

It seemed like hours later when the door finally cracked open and Bill’s scarred, but smiling, face

peeked through.

“Ready little brother?”

Ron nodded woodenly and Harry gave him a soft push forward. “He’s ready,” he answered for his friend. The two walked into the large ballroom that had been transformed by Hermione’s fabric and flowers. Ron slowed his step down as he saw all of the faces looking directly at him, but Harry nudged him forward.

“I don’t know this many people,” he muttered and Harry took his place beside Ron as Best Man.

“You’d be surprised,” Harry muttered back, willing the smile to stay on his face as his own gaze traveled over the crowd. The Weasley’s were there en force, red heads making up a large section on Ron’s side of the aisle. He broke out in a huge smile when his godson, Teddy, waved from his seat next to his grandmother. The bright faced boy lit up even more and flashed a toothy grin to Harry. People around them chuckled when Teddy’s usually-blue hair flashed to black; something it always did when he was excited to see Harry.

“Try explaining that one to Hermione’s family,” Ron mumbled, but Harry saw him stifle a smile.

“I know,” Harry said as he watched Andromeda distract the boy with some treat or another. “She offered to leave him home with a minder, but Hermione said it didn’t matter, most of her family knows a bit about it anyway.”

Ron contemplated that before nodding and scanning the crowd again.

Many people Harry recognized from Hogwarts were there as well. He nodded to Dean and Seamus who were sitting a few rows back and grinning at Ron’s stoic face. Neville was there as well with a very pretty Hannah Abbott draped on his arm. Harry raised an eyebrow at him and Neville blushed and shrugged a shoulder.

“Is there anyone Hermione didn’t invite?” Ron hissed and Harry chuckled. “Fifth row, sixth in—can’t take her eyes off you, mate.”

Harry’s expression slipped as he found the exotic, oriental eyes of Cho Chang sizing him up. He valiantly tried not to roll his eyes and continued to glance around.

“Don’t laugh, Ron,” Harry said softly. “She’s right next to Viktor Krum.”

Ron growled almost inaudibly, and Harry had to look down to avoid breaking out in laughter. Even after all these years, Krum was a sore subject for Ron.

A few seats from Cho, he saw Parvati and Padma Patil. It took Harry by surprise to see his ex-girlfriend there. He hadn’t been aware that she was back in the country. Not that he’d been thinking about her; not at all, he thought with surprise.

She, too, was studying him, although with more of an approving look than Cho had worn. Harry’s smile widened and he thought that, just maybe, he’d have to save her a dance later on—if Ginny wouldn’t have his hide for it.

It was in the middle of these musings that the music changed and his ability to breathe was suddenly thrown into question. He felt Ron's hand on his arm, steadying him and was immediately reminded of his own wedding-at seeing an angelic Ginny in her white wedding robes.

And, he wasn't sure if he was allowed by tact to admit it or not, but she was a hundred times more beautiful tonight. Her hair was swept back in some elegant twist or something, leaving her neck bare, save the thin gold chain that draped there. His grumblings about wearing Muggle clothing were forgotten as his eyes traveled up and down his wife's figure that looked like it was poured into the ivory and gold gown she was wearing. It was extremely tasteful, cut at all the right places and hinting at what treasures Harry was determined he would explore again. Very soon.

But it was the fact that her eyes were fixed only on him, and her demure little smile said that she appreciated what he was wearing as well, that made her all the more beautiful. It was the fact that behind those mischievous eyes, he knew she was thinking the very same thing that he was. It had been an extremely long day apart. Hermione's insistence that she not see Ron until she walked down the aisle apparently had extended to her Matron of Honor as well, and it had made Harry a nervous wreck. Going a day without some contact with his wife made him edgy and feeling very out of sorts.

Ginny gave him a quick wink as she took her place and turned to face where Hermione was just coming in.

"Sweet Merlin," Ron hissed under his breath and Harry chuckled, returning the favor of holding his best mate upright.

Hermione did look beautiful, Harry had to admit. But he was thankful that Wizarding wedding traditions were a bit simpler. He liked that he could see Ginny's face while they were completing the bonding. Hermione's was covered with a thin gauzy fabric.

The ceremony itself was very brief, which surprised Harry. He'd never been to any wedding besides a Wizarding one, and hadn't known what to expect. He really tried to pay attention, but his eyes kept drifting to Ginny, who seemed to be having the same problem. He blinked twice when Ron turned and held out his hand to him, trying to remember what it was he was supposed to be doing.

"Oh, right," he mumbled and dug in his pocket, producing the gold wedding band and smiling sheepishly. Ginny caught his eye from beyond Hermione and he shrugged. Her eyes flashed with amusement, and Harry had to swallow and focus on what Ron was saying to keep from being entirely too aroused than should have been allowed in front of this many people.

He grinned and clapped softly along with the guests when Ron kissed Hermione and the music began to play again. The two couples exchanged hugs and then, miraculously, Ginny was in his arms again.

Harry couldn't help the urge to reach over and kiss her. "I missed you," he whispered as they broke apart and followed Ron and Hermione back down the aisle, her arm entwined with his.

"Bit distracted there, weren't you, Potter?" she asked with a smirk.

"You're always distracting, Gin," he returned. The guests calling out soft greetings and waving to them were a blur as they passed, and once they'd cleared the back set of doors, Harry tugged on

her hand.

Ginny squeaked as he quickly pulled her toward an alcove that was made for coat racks filled to the brim. His arms found their way around her waist and pulled her to him.

"You look bloody brilliant, Gin," he whispered as she giggled and pulled tighter to him. He vaguely remembered her carrying a bunch of roses but wasn't sure where they'd got to now. And it really didn't matter, because her lips were pressed against his now and she was playing with the hair at the back of neck, like she always knew drove him crazy.

"I thought I was going to die when I saw you in this dress," he mumbled as his kisses slid from her lips and onto her jaw line, traveling down and tasting the bitter perfume on her neck.

Ginny giggled again. "You're supposed to be holding Ron up today, not the other way around, Harry."

"I couldn't help it," he protested, pulling back and grinning before rubbing his hands up and down her sides, loving the way the silky fabric rippled and bunched under his fingers. She pressed against him further when his fingers came up and traced the pattern of gold thread that danced along the edges of her breasts.

"Been thinking about you all day," she whispered into his ear and Harry shivered, letting his hands down to explore the back of the dress, finding more skin there than he'd expected. Suddenly, the trousers with this rented suit felt a bit tighter. The sensation got even worse as his hands caressed her bottom.

"Gin," he asked in a choked voice. She was sucking on his earlobe, something that usually made him weak in the knees, and was proving to do the same today. "Gin," he tried again and shuddered when the tip of her tongue traced the shell of his ear. "You're not wearing knickers," he whispered, and Ginny's soft giggle confirmed what his fingers were telling him.

"For that, sir, you'll just have to find out later," Ginny said as she pulled away and began running her fingers through his hair, trying to tame any damage she may have done. "We need to get back. The photographer will be looking for us soon, and if we're gone any longer Hermione will know what we've been up to. I really don't want to see her glare at me tonight, Harry."

Harry groaned and growled with disappointment. "Alright, but we're leaving early."

Ginny laughed and straightened his lapel and collar. "As early as we can."

"Give me a minute then," he sighed in resignation and willed himself to think about anything that would deflate his raging hormones. But it was hard in the close quarters where Ginny was still pressed against him, and he could still smell her perfume, and feel her breath on his neck, and...

"Problems there, Harry?" she asked in a sultry voice and tugged on his waistband.

Harry's head rolled back and he willed himself to focus on the decorative trim gracing the ceiling. "If you keep that up I'm going to ruin these trousers," he warned. Ginny laughed and pulled away a bit, giving him the space he needed to calm down.

A few deep breaths later, he was under control enough to walk again without anything noticeably wrong, at least he hoped not. His fingers found Ginny's and she smirked at him as they rejoined the Wedding party. He only grinned sheepishly as Ron rolled his eyes. Ginny was holding her own in a whispered conversation between Hermione and her mother. She quickly winked at him and they took their places beside the bride and groom to finish out the photographs. Where she'd found her bunch of flowers again he would never know.

* * *

Padma Patil hadn't wanted to come to the wedding at all. She'd tried several different excuses to talk Parvati into going alone, but none had prevailed. She and Hermione had only been passing acquaintances while at Hogwarts. They frequented the same study groups and had been in the DA together. After school, they'd worked on a rather large Ministry project together and had been building a bit of a friendship when the work ended.

The invitation had come as quite the surprise and she'd debated going at all, but her desire to see Harry outweighed the awkwardness she was afraid she'd feel. Surely he would be there; Ron was his best friend, wasn't he? Of course, as Parvati had also pointed out, they were now brother-in-laws as well. So Harry's wife would be there also.

She and Harry had done their best at being discreet about their relationship. Only a handful of people knew they'd even gone out. And she was fairly sure even his best friends hadn't known about it until afterwards.

Padma wasn't sure how she felt about the whole situation. She'd been very attracted to Harry when they'd first started talking. They'd been thrown together when some case Harry was working on required researching an unknown spell. Padma had been the only one in the office when he'd walked in, Auror robes unbuttoned to show the casual-and amazing looking-worn jeans underneath, and his hair in disarray. Even the smudges on his glasses had been cute.

And the few months they'd actually dated had been fun, although she felt that Harry was holding back a bit. He was such a mysterious person, as it was; and his dislike of the press caused him to spend most of his time in the Muggle world. Not that Padma had minded. In fact, she'd viewed it as a bit of an adventure to visit the restaurants and theaters that Harry had taken her to. They'd held hands, and walked through parks, and kissed by fountains.

But, in the end, it hadn't been enough; for her at least. And when the opportunity to travel to Greece and work as a sort of Ambassador came about, Padma had decided that following her dreams far outweighed any ties she had begun to form with Harry. There were times she regretted it, of course, especially on long, lonely nights when she would walk down some foreign street and see two lovers walk by, hand in hand.

And then the newspaper article proclaiming his betrothal had come. To say that it had shocked her was an understatement. Dreams of returning to England and casually walking into his office to see if he was still interested flew out the window and down in the sea that lay only a few blocks from her rented flat.

She'd felt sick as she read the horrid stories about how cold Harry's new wife was. She'd known

Ginny Weasley, only in passing, at school, and was surprised at the descriptions. Ginny had always been a very vibrant and well-liked girl growing up, and Harry had mentioned her in passing several times while he and Padma had been dating. And, once she took the time to examine those memories with much scrutiny, she wondered if there was something in his voice those times her name was used. But she would never be sure.

And now it didn't matter, because the photographs of the Potters as a happy couple, and very much in love, had finally made their way onto the front pages.

And Padma had been happy for him; she really had. Harry, more than anyone she'd ever met, deserved to be happy. And if Ginny could give him that, then she had all of Padma's approval. Parvati, however, didn't agree and had grumbled more than once about Ginny's reputation in school. Padma only smiled faintly and shrugged.

But now, seeing Harry so close up after a year, the awkwardness was winning out. He looked absolutely amazing in his formal wear. But the most noticeable thing, and the thing that Padma thought was absolutely the most attractive thing about him, was the genuine, full smile that seemed to be plastered on his face. And there was only one reason for it: the woman now swaying gracefully side to side, wrapped in his arms out on the dance floor.

"He seems happy," Parvati observed as she narrowed her eyes.

"He does," Padma confirmed, emotions waging war inside her. On one hand, she was thrilled to see him so content. The couple was entirely wrapped up in each other, dancing extremely close, foreheads touching and whispering back and forth.

On the other hand, she was positive Harry had never looked at her that way, and she said as much to her sister.

"Not even when you—"

"Not even then," Padma hissed with a mild glare at Parvati to watch what she said. They were definitely in company who wouldn't want to hear about Harry's previous conquests; not while he was dancing ten feet away with his wife, whom he obviously adored.

She turned her attention back toward the table where they were seated and sighed. It wouldn't do to dwell on things that would never happen, or never would have. The past was just that: past.

"May I have this dance?"

Padma looked up to see Dean Thomas holding out his hand. She was pleasantly surprised, although she didn't know the former Gryffindor well. They'd always been agreeable toward each other, however, so she accepted and the two began waltzing around the floor.

Dean was a very pleasant companion, she decided, and they spent several songs together. He seemed genuinely interested in her account of living in Greece, and asked intelligent questions. She, in turn, learned that he had gone back to Hogwarts after missing his seventh year and completed his education.

He was just about to tell her where he was working when the song ended and they pulled apart, clapping softly for the band.

“May I cut in?”

Dean’s face stretched into a grin and he clasped Harry’s hand warmly.

“Only if the lady doesn’t object,” Dean said with a raised eyebrow toward Padma. She felt as if her tongue had abandoned her completely as she stared dumbly at Harry. “But only for one dance. You can’t occupy all the best looking women here, Potter.” Harry chuckled.

“How about you spin me around then, Dean?” Ginny said from the far side of Harry. Padma hadn’t seen her behind him before.

“It’s a deal,” Dean beamed and held out his arm for Ginny to take.

“Padma?” Harry asked softly and she stopped watching Dean and Ginny walk away and turned back to Harry. “Is that alright? Would you like to dance?”

“Oh,” she felt extremely stupid, “yes, I’d like that.”

Harry smiled at her and she immediately clamped down on the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. Gently, he placed his hand at her waist and held out his other one, placing them in the traditional hold for dancing, and leaving plenty of space between them.

“I hadn’t heard you were back in the country,” Harry said softly as they began to move to the music.

“Only just,” she managed to say and forced herself to relax. “I’ve been back a few weeks, actually.”

“Did you enjoy yourself there?” he continued on making polite conversation as the dance floor around them filled up.

“It was a busy year,” Padma said and finally allowed herself to study him closely. He seemed much healthier and more relaxed than she remembered. “Although I hear you’ve had the busiest year.”

Harry chuckled and glanced down at her. “That it has been.”

“I never expected...” Padma said softly and then shook her head. “I guess I always thought that when I got back...”

Harry smiled sadly and nodded his understanding. “Regret is a horrible thing, Padma. Don’t let it bother you or hold you back.” He sighed and looked down, a serious look in his eyes. “It wouldn’t have worked between us anyway.”

“How do you know?”

Harry looked uncomfortable for a minute and Padma wondered if he was trying to find a way to say something without hurting her.

“Be honest,” she said with a small smile.

He seemed to consider it again, before nodding. “*Honestly*, you and I had a good time together, Padma. But what I felt for you... it’s not the same as what I do for Ginny. I don’t know what may have happened if you and I had stayed together. Maybe it would have developed into something more... but maybe not.

“And you would have ended up with her anyway,” Padma said resignedly. She watched Harry watch Ginny laugh and twirl under Dean’s arm. “She’s good for you,” she admitted. “I’ve never seen you smile like that.”

“I have the best reason to now,” he said and glanced back down to her with that smile that she’d never been able to give him. “I hope one day you can find someone that looks at you like that. Someone that loves you as much as I love her.”

“I hope so too,” she said softly. The music was ending and she knew her time with Harry was over.

“Thank you for the dance,” Harry said. Hesitantly, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead before moving through the crowd toward a group of people who could only be Weasleys with all that red hair.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said to his retreating back, knowing that he didn’t hear and that it really didn’t matter. He was happy, and that made her happy in a strange sort of way.

* * *

Harry watched as Neville, and then Seamus, claimed dances with his wife. He was more than content to watch her laugh and have fun while he sipped another glass of firewhiskey. Both George and Charlie had been keeping him well supplied, and he vaguely wondered if they had some sort of bet going.

“Can I have the next dance?”

He almost choked on his drink when the soft, seductive voice sounded from his left side.

“Cho,” he greeted and wasn’t surprised when she glanced demurely up at him through her lashes. He debated ignoring her question and then sighed, thinking it would be best to just dance with her and be done with it. He was definitely claiming his wife back after this one, though.

“Sure,” he said and drained the remains of his drink before holding out his hand to indicate that she should go before him. She looked a bit disappointed when he didn’t lead her onto the floor, and Harry cleared his throat. She pulled in a bit too tightly when they started to dance and Harry gave a little push at her, hoping to get his point across.

“How are you, Harry?” she asked.

“I’m great,” he said in cheerful tone. “Quite happy, actually.”

“That’s good,” she said, her smile slipping a bit. “I read about you and Ginny.”

He wasn't sure how to respond so he nodded. "Yeah, quite the thing, wasn't it?"

Cho tilted her head to the side and he blinked, searching over her head for his wife. He finally found her standing with Charlie and holding up a glass full of firewhiskey in his direction. He grimaced as she waggled her eyebrows at him. She and Charlie laughed and downed their drinks. Harry's attention was drawn back when Cho's finger touched the back of his neck.

"I think it's atrocious, Harry," she said thoughtfully. "I think it's absolutely horrid that they forced you to marry someone you don't love."

"But I do love Ginny, Cho," he protested and she continued as if she hadn't heard at all.

"And she's not exactly the best wife for you, is she?"

"What do you mean—"

Cho rode over his words. "Well, she's not very dignified, is she? I mean, the way she handles herself on the pitch. I was at the match where she hit that other Chaser. She actually broke his nose with her fist. Shocking!"

A slow and very satisfied smile spread over Harry's face, and he had to bite his lip to keep from laughing out loud. "It was bloody brilliant, was what it was," he defended.

"But she was reprimanded publicly and fined over five thousand galleons," Cho said in a low voice. She glanced around to where more and more people were watching them. "She's not exactly who I'd pictured you ending up with, Harry."

"I gladly paid the fine, Cho," Harry said plainly, pushing away a bit more. "And I'd have doubled it if I'd been able to get my own shot in. But then again, she did a right number on him and I didn't need to."

"How can you—"

"That ponce," Harry proclaimed, his eyes darting to the attention they were drawing, "grabbed her arse and made a vulgar proposition. I'd have pounded him into the pitch myself if she hadn't." He grinned in memory of the perfect punch Ginny had landed. Feeling less irritated with Cho, and more pitying, he sighed. "Let me make something completely clear to you, and anyone else who's listening." Harry didn't bother to keep his voice down, and more than one couple had stopped dancing to overhear. He tried to keep his words small and his tone patient, so that she might finally understand. "I am married to the most beautiful, the most wonderful, the most bloody amazing woman ever. And I didn't marry her because I was forced to. I married her because I loved her. I loved her then, and I love her now. It might have started out as two different types of love, but don't ever question that that's what it is."

Harry pointed to where Ginny was watching with a blazing look in her eyes. "That is my wife, my soul-mate, and the mother of my future children. And I don't give a damn about whether you approve or not, Cho, because at the end of the day I go home to someone who loves me more than anyone else ever has. And that's all that matters."

With that, Harry turned on his heel and walked over to where Ginny was cheering along with her brothers. He wrapped his arms around her once he arrived and pressed his lips possessively to hers, lifting her up against him as he did. Whistles and laughter sounded through the room and Ginny finally broke away with a giggle.

“Tell us how you really feel, Harry,” Dean called out. Harry smiled sheepishly and clung to Ginny. Ron and Hermione arrived a second later, and Ron smirked at him while Hermione tried to give him a disapproving look, failing spectacularly.

“Please tell me, Hermione,” he said quietly as he leaned over to her, “why you felt the need to invite every ex-girlfriend of mine. It’s a damn good thing you didn’t meet any of the others.” Ginny, overhearing his comment, poked his side and they laughed together.

Hermione glared at him. “For your information, I didn’t invite Cho.”

“Really?” Ginny asked, a nasty smile spreading on her face. “She crashed the wedding?” Harry snorted in amusement and downed the glass of Firewhiskey Charlie had handed to him. “And she thinks I’m uncultured.”

“She didn’t crash,” Ron informed them with a rather smug smile. “She came with Vicky.”

Hermione sighed and turned to her husband. “His name is Viktor,” she hissed. Everyone around them laughed and Harry leaned in to Ginny.

“Let’s get out of here; I thought they’d fight less after getting married.”

Ginny only sniggered and nodded. “I had hoped as well. Take me home, Harry,” she called out rather loudly, “I’m in the mood for a good shag.” Harry laughed at the shocked expressions around them and held out his arm for her to take.

“I think I can oblige,” he stated through laughter, “although I’m not sure I can wait for home.”

Chapter Fifteen

Harry was extremely nervous. Not necessarily the most nervous he'd ever been in his life—no there had been much worse moments. But right now he couldn't remember any. The only thing he could think about was the plan. The plan had to be perfect.

Today was his first anniversary. And so far, the plan had been a complete success. He'd snuck out of bed early this morning and filled the room with perfect red roses—real ones, not conjured ones. Kreacher had showed up right at seven with a wonderful breakfast of fresh fruit, soft homemade bread toasted just perfectly, and fluffy scrambled eggs. They were all Ginny's favorites. Harry thanked the house elf profusely and then hurried back into the bedroom carrying the tray, slipped off his dressing gown, and climbed back in next to his wife, cuddling up to her silk-clad form and nuzzling her neck.

"Morning beautiful," he whispered as he gently kissed her ear. Ginny squirmed away from him a bit, and then giggled as his fingers flitted under the edge of her short nightgown.

"Harry!" she scolded and wiggled away from his fingers.

"What?" he protested and pulled her back to him with a laugh. "Happy Anniversary," he whispered before kissing her gently.

"Happy Anniversary," she echoed and rolled to kiss him more thoroughly. "I smell eggs," she said against his mouth, and he laughed. "And roses."

"That's because there are eggs," Harry replied and wrapped his arms around her. "That's what I got you. Eggs. And roses."

"You're a tease," she said as she poked his side in a particularly sensitive spot.

"And you love it."

"I love you."

"And I love you."

He stayed lying down, as Ginny sat up and stared in shock at the room full of roses. "Harry..." She spun back around and pounced on him, straddling his middle and kissing him deeply. He reached for her hips and held on tightly.

"You didn't have to."

"I wanted to."

For the millionth time, it seemed, she took his breath away. He thought she was the most beautiful he'd ever seen her just then, with her hair mussed from their bed, sitting above him, and draped in the dark green silk nightgown he'd bought her for Christmas. Her skin was flushed and he reached up a finger to touch his favorite patch of freckles. He swore they made a heart right where the pale

white skin of her breast started. Quickly, he leaned up and fastened his lips there while she held on to his head and moaned.

Breakfast was cold by the time they got to it, but it didn't matter. Harry could think of no better activity to celebrate their love than to stay in bed all day.

"What are we going to do to celebrate?" Ginny said, twisting herself in the sheet and resting her head on his stomach.

"I thought we just did," Harry smirked up at the ceiling, "twice if I remember right."

"Prat," she growled as she poked his side. "I meant once we stop being lazy and finally get out of this bed."

Harry smoothed her hair back from her face and grinned down at her. "Anything you want, love. The only thing I have planned is dinner tonight."

Ginny let her fingers draw a circle on his chest and then traced his muscles while he watched her in contentment. "Where are we going?"

"Uh-uh, it's a surprise."

She tried to pout, sticking out her bottom lip and Harry laughed. "You know that doesn't work on me."

"It does too," she protested and crawled up to kiss him. "How about this?"

Harry broke the kiss and stared up at the ceiling as if trying to decide something. "Now that... has merit. Maybe if you worked a bit more at it, though..."

Ginny growled and attacked him then. Her fingers flew along his ribs and Harry laughed as she ended up sitting on his stomach. He wasn't extremely ticklish but he'd pretend for her if she kept moving like... yeah, just like that. The sheet she'd been using to cover up slipped and gave Harry a wonderful view again. She stopped when she noticed that he wasn't responding anymore, and was simply staring at her chest.

"Pervert," she pushed his shoulder a bit and laughed.

"Am not," he teased back. "It's not perverted to stare at you when you're mine."

"It's not?" Ginny said, her tone taking a husky timber to it that drove him crazy.

"Nope."

"Uh huh," she said as she proceeded to pull the sheet off the rest of the way. "I say it is."

"Nope," he said again as he pulled her down to him and rolled them so that he was pressing her down into the mattress. "I think it was in the vows somewhere. Do you Ginny, allow Harry to look at you in all your glory when ever he likes, and touch, and lick, and taste..."

Ginny squirmed under him as the both dissolved into laughter. "I don't remember that part!" she cried, reaching around to squeeze his bottom.

"You just had to listen carefully," Harry insisted and bent down to kiss her neck.

"I must have been a bit distracted."

"I can be a bit distracting," he agreed with a grin.

* * *

Ginny had finally convinced Harry to get out of bed, and they'd recreated one of their earliest 'dates' by walking through downtown London.

They were walking down the same street in Picadilly Circus, when Harry tugged her hand toward the small shop they'd visited before. He'd bought her several spun glass ornaments through the year from this very shop and she'd been surprised every time she'd opened them. She gave him a quick kiss as he opened the door for her and they entered.

Ginny watched him surreptitiously, as he watched her wander around the shop. When he'd presented her with the last present, she'd laughed as his face was full of such concentration watching her open it. He'd flushed and gruffly explained that seeing her awed by something that seemed so... girly... made him see her in a whole new light. Obviously, he knew she was a girl, but her sensitive side, that she so rarely showed, was a wonderfully distracting side of her to see.

Eventually, she decided on a small hand-spun tulip with pale shades of red through the glass.

"Why that one?" he asked as the saleslady wrapped the figure in paper and placed it in a small box.

"It reminds me of the Burrow in spring. Mum always made me help her plant tulips outside the kitchen window in the fall. I always hated that-being stuck out in the mud when the boys were all out chasing gnomes or flying in the orchard. But then, when those flowers would bloom in the spring, it was... magical," she finished with a slight giggle. "Sometimes, I wondered if Mum helped them along, seeing how much they cheered me up."

Harry only smiled and ran his finger gently along her cheek. "I'd buy every last little thing just like that one if I could see you smile just like that."

"You don't have to buy me things, Harry."

"I know," he nodded. And she knew he did.

He still wouldn't tell her where he was taking her for dinner, only assuring her that it had the best food around and the warmest atmosphere.

He'd insisted that she buy a new dress, with all the extras as well, and she was sure she bored him silly by trying on a dozen or so before deciding on a plain black velvet one. She'd known it was the one when she'd come out of the dressing room and Harry's mouth had hung open. She'd bought it, new shoes, and a spring-weight cloak to match. She'd also slipped in a piece of black lace that

Harry hadn't seen her pick up. She was sure he'd approve anyway.

Once they were groomed and changed, Harry stepped behind her, his arms encircling her.

"We're Apparating straight in, so don't open those eyes until I tell you to." She nodded her understanding.

The wonderful smell was the first thing that she experienced once the horrid squeezing sensation was over. She'd only ever smelled such heavenly food at...

"The Burrow?" she asked as Harry removed his arms from around her and she opened her eyes to find her whole family there, surrounding a candlelit table heaping with all of her favorite foods.

"I thought you might like to celebrate with everyone," Harry said softly. She had to admit, a quiet and extremely romantic dinner was more what she had in mind, but seeing all those happy faces smiling at her, dressed in their best clothes and waiting for her approval, made her realize that Harry really did know her too well.

"It's perfect," she said and gave him a passionate kiss. She smiled when all of her brothers groaned, and felt Harry's cheeks heat next to hers. "Sod off," she growled as Harry led her to their empty chairs.

"Ginny," her mother scolded and Ginny only smiled innocently at her.

And the dinner was wonderful. They all laughed, and talked, and recalled memories that Ginny herself had long forgotten.

In the middle of it all, Harry took her hand. "Having a good time?" he asked quietly in her ear. "I know it's not the usual romantic—"

"It's perfect, Harry." She placed a finger on his lips. "You know me so well." And he did; despite that she loved to do fun and fancy things, deep at heart, she was a family girl and always would be. She was always most at ease in the company of those who loved her.

Harry only nodded, and then turned back to where Ron was asking him a question. She was surprised when, at the end of the main course, Harry scooted his chair back and stood, his goblet of elderberry wine held up for a toast. Harry rarely drew this type of attention to himself. He'd almost had a fit when Ron had asked him to give the toast at his and Hermione's wedding.

"I'd like to say thank you to you all for being here, not just tonight, but... for everything." Ginny watched as all of her family beamed at him and held up their glasses as well. He then turned to her and, setting his drink down on the table, took her hands in his.

"Ginny, this year has been the best year of my life. And while we didn't start out that way, I can't imagine being more in love with someone than I am with you. Your dad gave me a bit of advice on our wedding day and I found out its true. He said that if we did this right, that I'd love you more today than I did on our wedding day. And he was right. I love you more today than I did even yesterday, and I'm sure tomorrow will be more than today. You've given me so much, Gin. And I can't ever give more than I am right now..."

She gasped as he sank down onto one knee in front of her and pulled out a familiar gold circle.

“I know that you once told me you didn’t feel worthy of wearing this; that you couldn’t look down on this ring every day and know that it was meant for the woman I was going to love for the rest of my life. Ginny, I hope you’ll reconsider now. Because you are the woman I’m going to love forever. Will you marry me?”

Tears sprang to her eyes as she wrapped her arms around him and cried, “Yes, yes, yes,” over and over.

Her family erupted around them, but she almost couldn’t hear them as his lips finally found hers.

Epilogue

Harry watched his small son scamper after Teddy Lupin like a red-headed shadow and smiled. James loved the older boy, and adored following him around. Luckily, Teddy was patient with the barely two-year-old, and was always willing to show the boy fun and amazing things.

Right now Teddy was showing little James a new trick on the broom Harry had bought him for his birthday. James clapped his chubby hands, and grinned the wide smile that was so much his mother's that it made Harry's heart hitch.

Life was an amazing thing, Harry thought to himself, as he sat back against the tree and crossed his legs at the ankles. Who would have guessed that Harry Potter would have everything his heart had ever desired?

"Bloody mental, the whole lot of them."

Harry chuckled as Ron folded his lanky frame down on the blanket next to him, and tugged at a handful of grass sticking up at the edge of the wool.

"And you're just going to add to it, you know mate?"

Harry grinned again and shrugged. "It'll die down soon. Remember how they were after James was born?"

Ron nodded and proceeded to shred a piece of grass into tiny shavings. "I remember that mum wouldn't stop talking in that high pitched voice and saying how cute he was. 'Oh, look, little James smiled for the first time-isn't he cute!' " Harry chuckled again as Ron's voice shot up an octave or two, imitating his mother's. " 'Isn't that just adorable, James just shat his pants! It's just the cutest thing I ever saw.' " He shook his head and grimaced in disgust.

Harry laughed. "It'll pass. Besides, Rose is a very cute kid."

Ron's lips quirked up on one side. "She is, isn't she? It's a good thing she took after me."

Harry nodded with a smile and nudged his shoulder. "Don't let Hermione hear you say that." Ron shuddered and the two laughed.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Ron tossed the grass he'd played with away from him, and stared off at the back of the Burrow where Teddy now had little James in stitches as he tossed a garden gnome over the fence.

"What?"

"This... the whole thing," Ron threw his arms out expansively. And Harry thought he understood. He smiled fondly and nodded. A small group of children, most sporting the trademark Weasley hair, ran past, grinning and giggling the whole way.

"It is," he agreed. They both turned when a noise like a small explosion sounded, and a jet of red

hair came streaking out the back door and off toward Arthur's shop.

"Gideon Frederick!"

Both Harry and Ron chuckled. "Run, Freddy, run," Ron mumbled and the two watched George's wife, the former Angelina Johnson, stride determinedly toward her son.

George and Angelina had all but given up when his other uncles began to call him Freddy instead of Gideon. Harry had seen the look on Molly's face the first time Ron had used the name at the Burrow. And, surprisingly, it was one of memories and fondness instead of hurt and sorrow. The name had stuck to the mischievous little demon; except for his mother, who still insisted on calling him by his given name.

Harry's attention was drawn back to the Burrow when a group of women came out surrounding Hermione who carried a tiny pink bundle in her arms. He lazily watched them set their various armloads of food on the table and continue their conversation, although his full attention was drawn by the last person out the door.

Ginny was radiant today. Her face was flushed and her cheeks the happy pink of contentment. He watched as she glanced around, her shoulders finally relaxing when she saw Teddy holding James' hand and pointing at something a ways off.

Her next task was to find Harry himself, he presumed, because her eyes scanned the back lot and she smiled when they met his.

His heart pounded in his chest and he had to swallow to breathe again. He knew it was nonsense because they were too far away to see it, but he swore he saw the love in her eyes. And it made him all the more attracted to her.

"Stop staring at her, you lovesick git," Ron teased and slugged him in the shoulder.

Harry, too busy staring at his wife, only grinned wryly. "I can't," he said softly. "She's beautiful."

Ron snorted. "It's no wonder you knocked her up again." Harry turned his head to protest, but stopped when he saw the contented smile on his friend's face. "You two never take your eyes off each other."

"Our hands either," Harry teased and Ron groaned, hitting him again. They shoved and pushed back and forth a bit, before settling back down to their spots. Harry watched his wife move around, smiling and laughing.

"You ever think it would be like this?" Ron asked in a soft voice. Harry glanced at him and found him staring at his own wife and daughter.

"No," Harry admitted and turned back to see Ginny talking with her mother, her hand resting on her large, round belly. "No, I didn't."

"But, you're happy, aren't you?" Ron asked.

Harry contemplated that and watched as Ginny pressed her hands into the small of her back and walked slowly over to his godson and their little James. “Yeah, I am,” he nodded. “Although happy isn’t the right word.”

“No,” Ron shook his head. “I know. I don’t know what it would be then.”

“Perfection,” Harry supplied in a low voice. Ginny bent slowly and ruffled James’ hair, saying something that had the toddler beaming up at his mother. Teddy puffed out his chest a bit and grinned at her as she straightened and brushed her fingers along his cheek in affection. He could hear her laugh dance along the breeze as Teddy’s hair flashed a brilliant blue color.

And it was, to him at least. His life with Ginny and their children was perfection. On the rare occasion that he allowed himself the time to be nostalgic and think about the past, it seemed like another life—something he’d once read about or watched on some film.

It didn’t seem real that there was once a Harry Potter who wasn’t in love with Ginny Potter, and wasn’t a father to James, with a new baby on the way. Ginny, and James, and Teddy, and even the newest still-coming-Potter, had to have been a part of his life forever because he couldn’t imagine being whole without them.

“You ever have any regrets?” Ron said softly. “I mean, it’s not like you and Ginny really chose this life, did you?”

Harry shook his head. “Actually, Ron, we did choose it. It may not have started out like we’d pictured it, but we did choose it. It certainly wasn’t an easy choice, but it was the right one.”

He contemplated the best way to explain to his best friend, and brother, what he felt all of the time. “You know that old saying about finding the silver lining in the clouds?”

Ron furrowed up his brow, as if trying to see where Harry was going with the line of thinking. “I’ve heard it.”

“Being with Ginny... being married to her,” Harry leaned his head back against the rough bark of the tree and looked up to the cloudless sky. “It’s like... I’m not just looking for it, trying to find it, you know. I’m actually living in that silver.”

Ron contemplated that for a minute and the two men sat in the silence of the early summer breeze, feeling it ruffle their hair and carry the happy sounds of their families to them.

Harry’s eyes found his wife again as she gingerly lifted James onto her knee, and directed his attention to where his father sat under the tree. Harry couldn’t help but mirror the little boy’s grin as he slid off of her lap and began trotting toward them, his legs pumping faster and faster as he gained speed.

James was almost to him when Harry moved onto his knees to intercept the flying leap that he anticipated. Pudgy arms wrapped around his neck and a sloppy, sticky kiss was pressed to his cheek as he laughed. Over James’ shoulder, he could see Ginny smiling contentedly. And, once again, it was perfection.