

Harry Potter

The Space Between

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The Space Between

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Summary: Sometimes the outcome of the battle is dependant on a single decision, a perfect moment in time which balances all others. And when your name is Harry Potter, every moment counts. It's the space between those moments, however, that the real battles are fought.

Author's Notes: The title and chapter titles come from the Dave Matthews' song *The Space Between*.

Chapter 1: You Cannot Quit Me So Quickly

The highest room in The Burrow was hot. Ron might have been snoring away across the room, but Harry couldn't sleep. He counted the ticks of his new watch, marking the minutes as his birthday faded away. So much had happened today—turning seventeen, the party in the garden, Scrimgeour's arrival, and, most importantly, his stolen moment with Ginny—that it seemed as if it had been days, weeks even, rather than simply hours.

Harry rolled in his camp bed and rested on one shoulder. If he craned his neck he could just see out the window. It was bright tonight—almost a full moon—and the room was aglow with a silvery light that played in the shadows on the orange walls. The house was quiet now; finally everyone was settled into rooms, awaiting tomorrow's event.

It wasn't much of a surprise to Harry that he couldn't sleep. Too many thoughts were swirling in his head, yanking his attention from one thing to the next so frantically that Harry wondered if he'd ever be able to focus on one thing. In frustration, Harry thrust all thought from his mind and let his eyes scan the room. Ron's chest rose and fell peacefully and the low rumbles of his snores were soothing, familiar. Pig ruffled lightly in his cage and Harry felt a pang of regret. *Hedwig*.

His eyes finally rested on Ron's broom, resting in the corner of the room. Ron never liked to leave it in the shabby broom cupboard outside, claiming that some careless person might muck up the polish work he'd done on it if Ron didn't keep it up here in his room.

Harry's Firebolt had been another casualty of the escape from Privet Drive. And while it was far less important than the lives that had been lost and the injuries that had been suffered, Harry felt the weight of the absence right now. Sirius had given him that broom, and Harry had many wonderful memories of flying about on it, playing Quidditch just beyond the house where the wedding marquee sat now. He felt like the last bits of his childhood innocence had been stripped away with the loss of his broom and beloved pet.

The decision seemed to make itself and before Harry realized what he was doing, one leg was dangling out the window, Ron's broom clutched in his hand.

"Sorry, mate, hope you don't mind," he whispered to Ron's sleeping form. He held the broom out and fell onto it before directing it up around the roof. The air outside was cooler and Harry took a deep breath of it. He surveyed the whole area—eyeing the marquee that looked silver in the moonlight, the grey-green of the garden and trees beyond the edge of The Burrow, and the dark shadow of the house and shed. How he loved this place.

Other than Hogwarts, Harry felt The Burrow was the closest thing he'd ever come to having a home of his own. Thankfully, the Weasleys had never been greedy about sharing it with an orphaned boy who had befriended their children.

A shiver of dreadful anticipation shuddered through him and Harry forced it away. This might be the last time he ever saw The Burrow, but he could always hope he'd live to see its crooked form peering over the Devon horizon. It hurt enough to think that he might not see the quirky home again; Harry couldn't even bring himself to consider that he might not see the family that lived

there once more.

After a short fly around the top of the house and out over the trees, Harry hovered closer to The Burrow. He sat on the roof, legs dangling off the side, for a long time, watching the progress of the moon in the sky. A dark owl circled overhead but Harry couldn't tell if it was magical or just an ordinary one. It dove after some unseen rodent in the field and Harry watched attentively until his eyes watered from holding them open so long.

The sound of a window being raised startled him and he half expected Ron's bed-rumpled head to stick out, searching for him. Harry could just see the edge of Ron's window below his feet, but Ron's head never appeared. Someone else had opened a window, or pushed the sash up higher, at any rate.

Harry lifted one leg over the broom and slid off the roof. He still didn't feel tired, but he'd better get some sleep lest his polyjuiced-form look too weary tomorrow at the wedding.

When he drifted downward, however, something caught his eye. It was Ginny's window that had opened wider, Ginny's window where *she* now sat, curled around her knees, her white cotton nightgown pulled tightly around her. She startled when they saw each other and Harry was glad that she didn't say anything.

All day he'd been avoiding her eyes—not that he needed to. She understood that they couldn't pretend to be anything more than acquaintances. But every moment he got a chance, Harry feasted on the sight of her before scolding himself.

He'd promised Ron that it was over, but making a promise didn't change how he felt in his heart.

Harry tipped the end of the broom downward and slowly floated toward her.

"Hi."

She didn't respond back, but smiled.

"Couldn't sleep," Harry explained awkwardly. "Nicked Ron's broom for a bit of a fly."

"I used to fly at night all the time," she said. Harry had to listen hard to hear her voice, but he knew Hermione was asleep right behind Ginny in the bedroom. "And I always nicked brooms."

They shared a smile and it made Harry feel better about how they'd been forced to leave things between them. Ginny understood him—probably better than Harry even understood himself—and she wasn't going to demand promises he couldn't make right now. He wasn't free to promise anything and she knew that.

He should fly up to Ron's window and climb back inside, whisper goodnight to Ginny or make some casual reference to the wedding tomorrow and leave. But he couldn't. It felt too final, too much like goodbye to be comfortable.

Something about the way the light caught her face and shined on her hair, making it look like burnished copper, entreated Harry to stay. It urged him to nudge the broom forward until he was

hovering right next to her, close enough that his leg brushed her hip.

"I promised Ron that this was over."

"I know." She whispered back and there was just as much desperation and determination in her voice as Harry felt churn inside himself.

She kissed him. Her lips were dry and her hand hesitant as she rested it on his shoulder.

"I can take care of myself," she argued back, but there was no bite in her words for Harry. "I don't need Ron to fight for me."

"I'm sorry that—"

His words were cut off by her lips once more. "I know."

His chest felt tight and desperation exploded around them. Ginny gave a muffled squeak of surprise when he lifted her right off the window ledge and onto the broom with him. Their kissing didn't stop and Harry lost himself in the feel of her fingers in his hair, the solidness of her body, and the feel of her thighs draped over his. It was hard to remember to breathe, to remember that he had to have one hand on the broom behind Ginny to keep them from plummeting to the garden below.

"I know this can't be forever," Ginny whispered against his chin. "I know it can't be more than a stolen minute." She pressed a kiss to the side of his neck and Harry shivered. "But it's *my* moment."

The broom drifted of its own accord, circling in lazy loops until Harry's bare toes were tickled by the tips of the grass.

He clung to her, one hand fisted in the side of her nightgown. There was no space between them and Harry's face heated at what Ginny must surely feel. The kisses were the most heated they'd ever shared—frantic and demanding, gentle and caressing, all at the same time.

"We shouldn't do this." Harry moaned even as he buried his hand in her hair. The broom was still hovering just off the ground and he felt sure enough to let go.

"Shut up, Harry," Ginny said and kissed him again.

Her fingers grazed the bare skin of his side, just under the edge of his worn t-shirt, and Harry sucked in a breath through his nose. His body responded instantly, but Ginny didn't seem to notice or to care. A million reasons why they needed to stop flew through his mind like wild Snitches, whirling around and around. Everything cleared, though, when the pressure from her fingers grew and she gripped his side strongly.

She pulled back and they looked at each other, chests rising and falling in rhythm. She was the most beautiful thing Harry could ever remember seeing, especially disheveled and with her eyes so bright.

"Inside the marquee. No one can see in there."

He hesitated only a moment before reaching around her and grasping the broom once more.

They shouldn't be doing this. Not that they were doing anything more than kissing. It wasn't going to go beyond that; Harry would make sure of it. And although a part of him echoed his promise to Ron, Harry forcefully shut that away. Ron wasn't here right now. Harry wasn't doing anything that Ginny didn't want—that they *both* didn't want—and they both knew that it couldn't go further than here, in this moment.

He was weak for needing this, Harry knew, but he took it anyway. He embraced the moment and led the broom forward, urged by Ginny's lips on his neck and the way her fingers traced patterns on his side. Her chest rose and fell with his own—their hearts only separated by thin layers of cotton.

Stacks of chairs and tables lay haphazardly about, prepared to be set up for the wedding tomorrow. Harry led the broom toward the furthest corner, where the shadows were blackest and nothing obscured the grass of the garden.

"Ginny." He whispered her name but couldn't decide why he'd said it. Did he want her to stop touching him? Did he need her to continue touching him?

"It's okay, Harry," she assured him with a beautiful smile. Her fingertip traced his lips and then his jaw. "It's just a moment."

"Just a moment," he said, willing himself to believe it could be just that.

They were on the ground, Ron's broom forgotten at their feet. Harry's toes curled into the cool grass as he cupped the sides of Ginny's face in his hands. "Just this moment," he said once more and poured himself into kissing her.

Kissing Ginny always made him feel like he was flying, but this was more like soaring. He wasn't simply flying; he *was* the bird. Each touch of her fingers was electric to his skin. Every time she sighed into him or lifted against him, Harry felt his head spin. It was too much, too fast, and not enough at the same time. He was a starving man and Ginny was a feast laid right before him; his for the taking.

His shirt and glasses were abandoned much like the broom and Harry's whole body shook. He wasn't sure how Ginny was still standing, because his knees were knocking together like never before.

"Are you... is this..."

"It's just our moment, Harry," she assured him. There was a steadiness in her voice that Harry latched onto. He had no idea how she managed it, but he loved her for it. She was always so sure, so strong. "Nothing more than you want to give. Nothing more than you want to take."

A lump formed in his throat when he realized what she meant, and Harry pushed away. He steadied himself by clutching her shoulders.

"Ginny, I..." He blinked at her earnest face and nearly stopped breathing when her hand lifted and slid a button on her gown through its hole. Her hand was shaking now and her other clutched his side, pinching the flesh there. Harry didn't mind; the sharpness in her grip grounded them both. Each button disappeared, revealing snowy-white flesh beneath it. The fabric in his hands became looser until his grip was the only thing holding it on to her shoulders.

"It's really all right, Harry." She stepped closer and Harry could feel the heat of her body radiating onto the skin of his stomach and chest.

He let out a shaky breath and pulled her close until their bodies touched. If she'd somehow managed to be unaware of how aroused he'd been before, there was no disguising it now. Harry wasn't sure if he should apologize or say something to excuse his seventeen year-old hormone-driven state, but Ginny stole the chance away. Her finger traced the edge of his pyjama trousers and dipped just below the drawstring, bringing a whole new type of heat.

"Nothing more than you're willing to give," he whispered in a shaky voice. He leaned down to put a kiss on her shoulder as he pulled the fabric of her gown aside. There were freckles on her shoulder and he pressed his lips to each and every one of them. She shivered and held him to her.

"Nothing more than you're willing to take."

It was a promise spoken against her milky skin, and Harry let the cloth slide away from her. He couldn't bring himself to look at all of her bare—it would be too much right now—but he could feel her against him. She was soft and smooth, miraculously curved in all the best places. His hands explored her back and down to where her bottom began to curve, before sliding back up to tangle in her hair.

They kissed again and Harry decided that breathing wasn't necessary. He didn't need air when she filled him with everything he'd ever considered was necessary for life. Her hands rested on his arms and she guided him down to kneel between her legs.

"Breathe, Harry." The little smirk she wore was infuriating, but did force him to take a gasping breath. His eyes roamed over her as she lay awkwardly on the grass. He almost asked if she was comfortable, but bit back the words before they left his mouth. It sounded stupid to ask anyway.

She was lovely—but that wasn't the right word. Harry didn't know a word for something that took his breath away, and made his heart climb into his throat, and made him ache all over at the same time. Something nudged that the word was 'love', but he didn't know for sure.

Her chest rose and fell, making her breasts move slightly. Harry licked his dry lips and swallowed as he stared at the small pink circles on her chest. He'd touched her there once, through her uniform as they sat beside the Black Lake. She'd been the one to guide his hand that time. Ginny was good at leading him places.

His eyes traveled further down as he shifted restlessly on his knees. Her bellybutton was a cute little divot, decorated with a few pale freckles. Below that was a small pair of pure white knickers. The same kind he'd seen on the wash line at The Burrow now and again. They looked incredibly soft and there was a small flower sewn onto the elastic. Harry's shaking finger reached out and brushed over the stitched decoration there. Ginny bit her lip and made a sound he couldn't decipher.

"Come here." She said it softly, an invitation, and Harry leaned down to kiss her. He slowly lowered until their skin met, and then their lips. His groin ached where he was cradled between her thighs and he groaned in appreciation of the pressure she gave. Only in his dreams had he ever managed to get this far with her, and Harry wasn't completely convinced that this wasn't a dream. Surely, he'd wake at any minute and Ginny would slip away from him.

His hand caressed her side and finally found the soft part of her he wanted to touch. Ginny arched against him and sighed into their kiss when he touched her nipple. Her breathing was just as affected as his, and Harry took comfort in the fact that they were both new at this, both inexperienced and nervous. They hadn't talked about this—not about sex, not even about going this far—other than a mild joke or two in the weeks they'd been together. Harry couldn't imagine having a conversation about it now. That would involve removing his hands from her and he didn't think he could do that.

Her hands were just as busy exploring, tracing his spine and dipping below the waistband of his trousers. When she caressed his bum, Harry grunted and thrust into her. Her eyes fluttered at the pleasure and he did it again, bringing their hips into contact. Ginny made a happy little sound and lifted one of her legs to wrap around his.

Startled at the movement, Harry pulled back and they stared at each other with wide eyes. Perhaps she was realizing just how far they'd come tonight, or possibly reconsidering her offer.

"Ginny—"

"Don't." She shook her head against the grass. "I'm not changing my mind. I know what I want. Everything is this moment, Harry. Don't let..." Her voice faded off and she blinked bright eyes. Harry thought maybe tears welled there. "Don't let this be taken, too."

The desperation of it all shook him and he nodded before leaning down to bury his face in her neck. This wasn't how he'd always pictured making love to Ginny for the first time. There was no bed with clean sheets. There was no time for proclamations of love, or promises of forever. There were no tender touches, only the heat and frantic movements that one of them might regret later.

But it was *theirs*, and Harry couldn't force himself away from it. He wanted it, more than he'd wanted anything ever in his life.

"It's ours." He pressed a kiss to her collarbone and reached between them to untie his trousers. His fingers fumbled and he swore softly when they tangled with the laces. Ginny chuckled and arched against him, not helping Harry's concentration. He gave a panicked little laugh but was grateful that this was Ginny with him. She wouldn't tease or torment him about his failings as a lover. She wouldn't laugh when he didn't do things right, or when he was unsure of himself.

Her hands went to work too, but she didn't help him like Harry expected. Instead, she rocked her hips side to side until her knickers were lowered. Both of them awkwardly removed everything until they were completely bare, looking at each other.

This was it, Harry knew; the moment when everything changed between them. He wanted to ask one more time if she was sure, but was positive she'd hit him or possibly curse him if he asked again. So he reached for her instead, unsure where this sudden burst of courage was coming from. Their hands twisted together and Harry rested against her, just inches away from where his body urged him to be.

They looked at each other and Harry tried to decide if he needed to say something, needed to punctuate the moment. In the end, the words wouldn't come, so he kissed her instead. He didn't know what he was doing—his touches were hesitant and shaky, but together it was easier to know

what was right.

A quick flash of regret moved through his mind. Perhaps he should have looked at that book that Ron had given him. Maybe there was a section on what to do when a witch touched your chest and made that keening sound low in her throat, and how to make her head spin the way she did yours.

They looked at each other for a long moment before smiling awkwardly. Ginny's hand caressed his hip and Harry shivered. He reached between them and placed himself at her opening, fumbling to find the right place. Her breathing hitched and she lifted her knee, helping him in his quest. With one hesitant nudge, he was inside her.

The feeling was overwhelming, and Harry's vision narrowed until all he could see was Ginny's face, her hair spread on the grass, and the paleness of her flesh lit by the diffused moonlight.

She winced and Harry worried that she was going to tell him to stop moving, but she didn't. Instead, she urged him onward with whispers to relax, to seize the moment, to do what felt right.

So he did. He rocked into her, biting his lip against the raging need to thrust deeply. His mouth was hot and dry when he kissed her. Their lips were sticky and he caught the faint trace of toothpaste on her breath. Her hands touched everywhere, clutching his back, tracing his chest and sides, brushing the skin on his bum before starting all over again. She breathed his name again and again as he moved, and lifted against him.

And in one strong push, Harry felt everything give way. He felt as if he were falling and flying all at the same time. Logically, he knew what had happened—he'd come deep inside her—but it was all so surreal. A stolen moment in someone else's wedding marquee.

As much as he should regret it, Harry couldn't bring himself to find that feeling inside. Instead there was only acceptance and overwhelming humility that Ginny had given him such a gift. He wanted to do something for her, say something that would make her understand how much he felt for her, how much he appreciated who she was and how she knew him. But there were no words.

He stopped moving and hovered there above her, unsure what to do now. Harry kissed her lips lightly and then her cheek, her nose, her chin, each of her eyes. He kissed away the wetness there and was grateful that she wasn't crying openly.

"Happy Birthday, Harry," she whispered before kissing him once more. They lay together, bodies sweaty and breathing calming.

"It's not my birthday anymore." He moved off of her and lay in the grass next to her. His hand didn't leave her, however, and rested on her stomach.

Ginny smiled and curled into his chest. "All right, save it for next year then."

"I won't be here for your birthday." After sharing what they just had, Harry felt it was a betrayal to admit.

"Then you'll owe me," Ginny said cheekily. She kissed just below his Adam's apple and then fumbled behind her for her nightgown. Harry watched as she pulled it on and fussed with the

buttons, covering up where he'd just explored. He scuffled with his trousers, furtively sneaking peeks at her. He wasn't sure what to do now, what to say. Did he thank her, or would that be too trite? Did he tell her that he loved her, even if he wasn't sure what he was feeling right now? He was pretty sure he loved her, but love was such a huge concept.

He certainly couldn't make promises, and she knew that. She'd said it enough times tonight.

Once they were both dressed again, Ginny held Harry's glasses out to him, dangling on her finger. He slid them onto his face and then leaned down to kiss her. The urgency between them wasn't gone completely, but the kiss felt different. It wasn't blazing and demanding, but affirming.

"You're leaving soon."

Harry licked his lips and gave a jerky nod. He wound his arms around her shoulders and brought her closer, clinging to her. "Soon. Maybe tomorrow evening, or the next morning. We need..."

"I know." She nodded against his chest and held onto him just as tightly. "It's okay. At least you've got a bit more to remember than just a kiss."

He couldn't help but chuckle at that. "I won't ever forget it, Ginny. You..."

"Shhh." She pressed her fingers to his lips and Harry swallowed what he was going to say. She was right to stop him. He couldn't make promises and she wouldn't allow him to say something when he knew it might not come true.

"Come on, it's late."

They walked toward the front of the marquee, Harry carrying Ron's broom over one shoulder.

"I wish I could dance with you tomorrow." It was a fanciful desire, but one that he wanted right now. He wanted to be able to dance with her properly, even though he doubted he'd do much better at avoiding her toes than Neville had at the Yule Ball.

"Appearances have to be kept," Ginny scolded, but she smirked at him. "And you have a promise to Ron to keep."

Harry swallowed the sick taste of that thought. He'd already broken that promise.

"Don't." Ginny's warning made him smile. She really did know him far too well. "This was *our* moment, Harry, one we never have to share with anyone else. Ever."

He liked that idea and nodded. This would be his treasure, something he could take out on long nights when they would be apart to remember and relive.

Harry kissed her once more before climbing on the broom. Ginny moved in front of him and leaned against his chest. Her hair smelled like flowers and grass—the perfect mixture of summer and freedom. Harry wrapped an arm around her waist and let the broom rise up the side of the house until they were hovering next to Ginny's window.

"I don't know what to say," he admitted when they'd stayed there, not moving, for a long minute.

"Don't say goodbye," Ginny said. "I don't like goodbyes."

He smiled at her finality and agreed, even if he felt he should really say goodbye. "Goodnight, then. Does that work?"

She tilted her head and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Goodnight will work."

Harry helped her balance as she climbed back in her window. She turned and leaned precariously back out to kiss him, and Harry nearly fell off the broom in his haste to prolong the moment.

"Goodnight, Harry."

Ginny was right. Goodnight was easier than goodbye. He repeated the greeting back to her and then pushed away from the house before drifting back up to Ron's window. His legs shook when he climbed back in and he nearly woke Ron when he bumped into Pig's cage and the little owl protested loudly.

"Bung him an owl treat, will you, Harry?" Ron grumbled and rolled over before a loud snore escaped him once more.

"Almost got me killed, you little bugger," Harry hissed before stuffing an owl treat through the bars. Pig greedily consumed the piece of food and ruffled his feather at Harry.

When Harry finally lay back down on his bed, his heart was much lighter than it had been earlier. Nothing had changed—he was still leaving with Ron and Hermione as soon as they could to begin hunting down Horcruxes, Ginny was still going back to Hogwarts without him, and he hadn't made any promises.

And, yet, everything had changed. Harry felt that down to his core he was a different person than before he'd helped Ginny climb out her window. Just maybe that all-too-short stolen moment would help him get through the next few months until he could see Ginny again.

And then 'goodnight' might never have to turn into 'goodbye'.

Chapter 2: Is No Hope In You For Me

The corridor swam before her and Ginny blinked away the dark spots that sparkled in her vision. She groped next to her for the wall and found the cool stone soothing. The hallways were much quieter at Hogwarts now—no one wanted Filch to catch them doing anything remotely against the rules and drag them to the Carrows—but they were almost as crowded as usual. The students stayed in packs now, for protection.

Faces were drawn and downcast. The war had arrived at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

“All right, Ginny?”

She jumped when Seamus’ heavy hand rested on her shoulder. His face was concerned and his eyes darted around, seeing everything in the narrow space.

“You’re out alone.” His voice was low and reprimanding, and Ginny bristled under it.

It was against the rules all of Gryffindor tower had agreed on immediately after the Welcoming Feast at the beginning of the year. They knew all the houses, even the more mild members of Slytherin, had implemented similar guidelines.

“Demelza was just ahead of me.” She looked into the hallway but her friend’s head was nowhere in sight right now.

“Two or more, Ginny, you know that.”

Ginny pushed away from the wall and hefted her bag higher onto her shoulder before darting ahead of a group of Hufflepuffs who were too startled to snap at her.

“Who put you in charge,” she grumbled. Seamus heard her because he stiffened.

“Ginny—”

“Don’t lecture me, Finnegan,” she said. “I’m the one who suggested the damned rule. I’ll be fine.” He gave a doubtful look but didn’t argue the point further.

“You look terrible, you know,” he pointed out, as if Ginny needed another opinion on it. The truth was, she felt horrible. Her whole body ached—and not just from scrubbing floors in the Entrance Hall two nights ago—and her appetite had completely disappeared. It was all she could do to swallow a few bites of anything at meal time. Worry was a large part of that, she knew, but a deeper, darker concern was starting to take its place.

“You don’t eat, you barely sleep—”

Ginny rounded on the Irish boy. “Are you my mother?!” He was quite a bit taller than Ginny, who barely reached the edge of his chin, but he flinched all the same.

“Er... we just... We’ve just noticed is all.”

We. That meant Neville had said something to Seamus.

Ginny sighed and rubbed her tired eyes with her fingertips. “I’m fine,” she explained, more patiently this time. Seamus, she could be cross with, but never Neville.

“We’re all worried.” Seamus’ tone lowered even more and he did his normal periodic scan of the corridor. No Carrows lurking. No Filch or Mrs. Norris to overhear. But you could never be too careful. “No one has heard anything.”

“And they won’t,” Ginny whispered forcefully. “Not until the end. For now we just wait.” And although she believed it with every fiber of her being, it still rankled. But Ginny knew her place, and it wasn’t out running around England with Harry. Her place was here at Hogwarts, upholding the swelling rebellion.

You could see it on almost every face in the hallway—disgust mingled with determination.

Voldemort had made a costly mistake by having his Death Eaters take over Hogwarts. If there was one thing that could ensure that a full scale uprising would occur, it was tightening the screws on a brooding, moody, reckless group of teenagers. Ginny wasn’t sure how or when, but this whole place was verging on eruption.

Seamus gave a tired sigh that echoed precisely how Ginny felt. And they’d only been back at Hogwarts for four weeks.

“Come on. You’re sitting between Neville and me tonight, and you’re going to eat everything on your plate.” He slid his hand under her elbow, only to remove it when he saw the look on her face.

Ginny was too tired to argue with him and she was touched by his—and Neville’s—concern for her. They truly did care about her and she knew she needed to be taking better care of herself. People looked up to her and she couldn’t let them down by being weak right now. They needed a strong leader here at Hogwarts and, like it or not, Ginny’s past with Harry put her on a pedestal.

“I’ll do my best.” Ginny gave a weak promise and didn’t argue. “But first I’m going up to take a nap.”

Seamus tripped on the stair next to her. “You’ll miss Muggle Studies! Ginny, you know you can’t—”

“So I scrub another few floors tomorrow. I don’t care. I’m too tired right now to care, and I’m not going to listen to that *witch’s* drivel anymore. I just can’t, Seamus.”

“Go to Madame Pomfrey then,” Seamus pleaded. “Tell her you’ve... you’ve got cramps, or something.” He winced at Ginny’s withering look, but didn’t stop. “She’s always good about getting us out of things.”

Ginny contemplated that and actually considered going to the nurse. If nothing else, she could give Ginny a Dreamless Sleep potion that might allow a few hours of uninterrupted rest—unmarred by visions of Harry being killed, her family being torn to pieces, and the war going on forever. Even as

she thought it, though, Ginny dismissed it. Madam Pomfrey was always good about not asking too many questions—especially now when they came in asking for pain potions or healing—but there were some answers that Ginny simply didn't want right now.

Some answers she couldn't handle when the question itself was far too painful to contemplate.

By the end of the week, when Ginny stood in front of the mirror in the girls' loo, looking at her ribs sticking out and the dark circles beneath her eyes, Ginny knew she was running out of options.

"You're so stupid, Ginny," she whispered to her reflection. Her hands lowered in the image and *almost* touched her lower belly. But she didn't feel it; she pulled her hands away as if they were about to touch fire and forced her eyes away from the mirror.

Tears welled in her eyes as she got dressed and pulled her hair back into a rough ponytail. How she looked didn't matter any longer; Ginny felt completely numb from the inside out. It took all she had not to burst into tears, or explode in a rage of anger, at any given moment.

Neville and Seamus, true to their promise, had been there at every meal time, filling Ginny's plate with more food than even Ron could eat. She never finished it all, but she was trying to make an effort. Sleep was still fleeting and she found herself dozing off more and more in classes. She was far too wary to sleep in either of the Carrow's classes, but Binns, Flitwick, and even McGonagall on occasion, never said a word when her head bobbed toward her desk. Flitwick and McGonagall both looked just as tired as Ginny.

"The things you get yourself into, girl." Ginny sighed and shook her head as she flopped down into a chair by the common room fire and pulled out a piece of parchment. She needed to send her mother a letter or, no doubt, Hogwarts would tremble with Molly Weasley's wrath. Before putting her on the Hogwarts Express, her parents had insisted that there was to be a letter sent each week to include key phrases—they were sure all mail would be monitored—to let them know Ginny was alive and well.

Her quill hesitated before she forced it down onto the page and scribbled the obligatory words indicating that she was safe and as well as could be expected. She even told a little about Professor Flitwick's class and beginning to learn silent casting. Normally, they learned that in Defense Against the Dark Arts, but as that class no longer existed the other professors had attempted to pick up the slack. Ginny had managed to make a book levitate so far, but hadn't tried much more.

Once the letter was written, Ginny tucked it into her bag. Students weren't allowed in the owlery anymore, and all post was taken to an unused classroom, where it was slated for delivery. And, of course, inspected for anything the Carrows could punish the students for saying, but that part wasn't ever advertised.

It was still too early to venture down to the Great Hall. Up in the dormitories she could hear signs of people stirring—loud yawns, doors opening and closing, trunks scraping along flagstones—but the common room was still deserted.

Alone was never a good thing.

Ginny was safe in Gryffindor tower, so she wasn't worried about not having someone with her, but *alone* gave her time to ponder deeper subjects.

The first few days of being back at Hogwarts, Ginny had cherished the quiet time in the mornings. She relived every moment with Harry this summer—the few there were—and replayed them in her head until they were so ingrained that she swore she could feel his hands on her. His hands: calloused in familiar patterns, rough and smooth at the same time.

But now those thoughts led somewhere far different, and Ginny sucked in a shaky breath as she mentally counted the days since August first. Too many to be mistaken. Plus, there were other signs that no witch could mistake: sore breasts, no cycle for two months, bone-tiredness, swelling abdomen, lifeless hair and skin... The list went on.

Panic welled up inside her and Ginny had to take short, shallow breaths, puffing out her cheeks simply to keep control. She only had a few more weeks until everyone would know her secret, and Ginny knew she had to make a decision soon. With her robes, she might be able to wait as long as Christmas when she was going home to The Burrow, but that was a gamble. If the Carrows or Snape ever caught on to her secret, Ginny knew everything would be in peril. She'd managed, through her own selfishness, to become the weakness that Harry had feared she might be.

With her carelessness, she'd undermined all of Harry's protections for her and made the situation so much worse. Harry would be so disappointed. And Ginny didn't even want to think of what her family would say. Getting herself pregnant in the middle of such dire circumstances was bad enough, but when you added the fact that she was carrying *Harry's* child...

Her eyes filled with tears and Ginny clutched the front of her robes, where her belly was, silently apologizing to Harry for her weakness on the night of his birthday, and to everyone else whom she was endangering now by carrying this secret.

No immediate plan came to her mind and Ginny blew out a shaky breath to calm herself. If she could make it to Christmas, she might be able to confide in her mother. Her parents would hide her away, perhaps they could even claim she'd gotten spattergroit from Ron, and protect her.

The plan was weak, but it was all she could focus on right now. Everything depended on timing and her own body. One thing was for sure, though, if she was pregnant, Ginny needed to start being more careful. She could definitely eat more, not only to help the baby, but to add more weight to her frame and disguise her changing body. She'd stop taking so many chances to defy the Carrows and keep her mouth shut more.

"Morning, Ginny."

Neville shuffled down the stairs, yawning widely. He looked so much older lately, yet his ruffled bed head and the crease from his sheets that was still red along his cheek made Ginny recognize, for just a second, the awkward, shy boy he'd once been.

"Morning."

"You waited." He looked pleased that she hadn't escaped to the Great Hall by herself this morning, like she'd done in the past.

She chuckled and stuffed the book she hadn't been reading into her bag. "I know when to give up the fight. You and Seamus would just lecture me again."

"Damn right," Neville muttered. "Come on. Seamus will bring the first wave down, and I'll double back for the next group after we've eaten."

Something inside her twinged as she looked at this boy-turned-man. Giving up his morning to escort students safely to meal times was something that Harry would have done without a second thought.

Ginny hesitated before stepping through the portrait hole and quickly threw her arms around Neville's shoulders. "You're pretty amazing, did you know that?"

He stammered and patted her awkwardly. "I... not really," he protested. "Just doing what needs to be done."

Ginny didn't continue to press the issue because it would only make Neville's face flame further. For just a brief moment, Ginny considered talking to her friend about her situation. She knew Neville wouldn't be disappointed, wouldn't be angry. He'd help her find a way to work things out. And maybe Luna would help too. That thought presented just a small burst of hope inside her that faded the instant she looked at him in the brighter light of the corridor.

A new scar ran down the side of his jaw—a *gift* from his first detention with the Carrows for standing during the Welcoming Feast and proclaiming that Harry Potter would never be truly gone from Hogwarts, just as Albus Dumbledore would never be gone. Had he been allowed to go to Madam Pomfrey right away, the scarring would have been hardly noticeable, but the Carrows had held him for two days afterwards and the flesh was partially ruined before the Healer was able to seal it back up.

If Ginny told Neville and he helped her hide the secret, or even escape from Hogwarts, Ginny knew a new scar would be the least of his worries. They would kill him. Snape would poison him and watch with glee as Neville suffered horribly.

Ginny swallowed the bile that the thought brought with it and decided it was better that Neville not know. He was too important to what was happening at the school to be forced into hiding. And the same went for Luna.

Ginny was on her own.

The sun shone brilliantly down on Ginny and Harry warmed just looking at her. He could sit here in the grass and look at her all day, if she'd let him. Sooner or later she'd poke him in the side or start tickling him to hide her blush.

It was a perfect Spring day—the wind moved the leaves above them, making the shadows dance across their skin.

"You're staring again."

“Am not.”

Harry smiled in amusement. Ginny wiggled her bare feet in the long grass and grinned at him.

“Okay. I was.”

“I’m supposed to be studying, remember? I promised Hermione.”

“I’m not stopping you.” Harry’s protests were received with a raised, mocking eyebrow. “What? You’ve been reading!”

“Harry, I’ve only managed one paragraph. You keep tickling my toes, or counting the freckles on my arms, or stealing kisses.”

“You haven’t complained before now.”

Ginny laughed and closed her book with a snap before leaning in close. “Of course I wouldn’t complain, Harry. There are much better ways to occupy my mouth.” Just as her lips brushed his, Harry woke.

He stared up at the gloomy interior of the living room in Grimmauld Place and tried to hold on to the last remnants of the dream. It was one of those glorious, sun-drenched moments of perfection before everything had fallen apart, and Harry missed them.

It seemed he rarely saw the sun anymore, tucked away in this gloomy house, plotting and scheming, and doing everything they could to keep away from the shadowy figures watching the street.

“... wish we had a better idea of what to do next...”

“... have to wait and see...”

Ron and Hermione’s whispers broke into Harry’s consciousness and he peeked at them, sitting on the sofa, huddled in blankets, trying valiantly not to wake him. They’d been doing this a lot—whispering when they thought he wasn’t paying attention, discussing Harry’s complete lack of direction.

The planning for infiltrating the Ministry was happening, but it wasn’t happening fast enough.

No one was more frustrated at that than Harry. He turned his head and tried to block out the sound of their voices. The helplessness wasn’t aided when he had dreams of being with Ginny. Since their stolen moment, all Harry could think about was getting back to her. He knew she was off at Hogwarts now, hopefully keeping out of trouble.

They just needed to finish this off so he could get back to the life he wanted—the life he’d gotten a glimpse of the night before the wedding in Ginny’s arms.

“... I trust Harry, Ron, and so should you...”

Harry closed his eyes and blocked Ron’s answer. He didn’t need to know if his best mate had enough faith in him to follow blindly. The truth was, Harry didn’t have much faith in himself.

She waited until it was nearly midnight before slipping out the portrait hole. The Fat Lady hissed her disdain for students being out of bed, but was quickly left behind as Ginny focused only on her goal.

She needed confirmation; circumstantial evidence simply wasn't enough any longer. Ginny had to know for sure that she was pregnant, and not simply suffering from some mental illness that had all the same symptoms.

But Neville and Seamus had been relentless the past few days. They hadn't let her out of their sight. Once, Neville even looked like he was going to follow her into the girls' bathroom before Ginny insisted that she'd been using the loo for sixteen years by herself and was perfectly capable of doing so without an escort.

Had her mind not been occupied with panic over the situation she'd landed herself in, Ginny might have protested Neville's adamant shadow everywhere she went. She was perfectly capable of taking care of herself in most cases, but was far too worried about other things to even pay attention right now.

'I have to know,' she told herself as she slinked through the shadowy corridors and slipped down to the Potions classroom. 'I have to be sure to even think of... Merlin, to think of *anything*.'

But it was time to face the facts and get on with making the right choices for everyone involved. Ginny couldn't wallow in denial any longer.

The castle was eerily quiet and Ginny forced her hand to relax around her wand. She was gripping it so tightly that she couldn't feel her fingertips. If the Carrows caught her out of the tower there would be no end to the punishment. If Filch did, she was carrying a whole pocket full of dung bombs to use as a diversion. She could claim it was a prank in the making. It was childish and not something she'd even remotely consider doing right now—who honestly thought about pranks when the world was crumbling around them?!—but Filch never cared about excuses. A few nights doing menial labor wouldn't hurt her.

The only sign she'd seen of anyone stirring on the way down was the ethereal glow of the Bloody Baron as he floated near the Great Hall. He had turned his head in her direction when she passed, but didn't pursue her or make even a motion to reprimand her.

She watched the door to the Potions classroom for nearly thirty minutes without anyone coming by. The Slytherin common room was around here someplace, she knew, but they were all tucked quietly inside.

'Just do it, Ginny,' she coaxed herself silently and moved from the protection of the shadows to stand in front of the door. A quick spell later and she was safely inside. Her heart pounded against her ribs and Ginny took a shuddered breath before she set about gathering the supplies she would need for the potion.

After researching it in the library, Ginny was surprised to see it was relatively simple to make. The ingredients weren't horribly hard to come by; in fact, they were all located in Slughorn's

cupboards. He'd already hinted to several of the more rebellious teens that he would make supplies for potions readily available for pilfering. It was the only thing he could offer right now.

It wasn't until her bag was full and Ginny was leaving the classroom that she heard the voice.

"... thinks he can tell me what to do... bloody git!"

Her hand froze, hovering over the doorknob before she dove into the dark corner of the hallway. The door to the classroom remained cracked open, but it was far too late to try and cover her tracks now.

Draco Malfoy, his blonde hair disheveled and his robes unclasped at the collar, came into the low light of the hallway. He froze at the sight of the open door and quickly pulled his wand.

Ginny held her breath and calculated the seconds she would need to run for the stairs—it was far too many. Draco would have a spell out before she could ever get away. She could stun him and make a quick exit, but there may be others following behind him. Even the Slytherins seemed to move in packs these days.

A stunning spell was on the tip of her tongue when Draco's face scanned the corridor. His eyes widened when he saw her in the shadow, but his wand dropped a fraction of an inch.

Ginny sucked in a breath and waited for the curse to come.

Slowly—slower than should have been possible—Draco's arm dropped completely. His eyes took in her face and the bulging bag of potion's supplies next to her feet. He opened his mouth to say something but then gave a miniscule shake of his head. Their eyes locked once and then he was gone, taking swift strides away from Ginny.

She let out her breath and quickly bolted up the stairs, lugging her bag along. It wasn't until she was safe in the Room of Requirement that she gave a panicked little laugh of relief.

Why had he let her go? Why had he allowed her to steal supplies and not be made an example of?

There were no answers to the questions, so she pushed them aside. She had a potion to make and decisions to ponder.

Chapter 3: These Twisted Games We're Playing

Ginny's chin rose in defiance, even though it only made Snape's eyes flash even more. She couldn't stop her body from trembling, but she would not be intimidated by this coward of a man.

Neville stood strong on her right, his shoulder slightly in front of her, as if he could shield her from whatever wrath the Headmaster was doling out. Luna stood to her left, as casual as could be. During the whole fiasco of breaking into Snape's office to retrieve the Sword of Gryffindor—the sword that rightfully belonged to Harry—Luna had been as calm and serene as a summer's day. She seemed equally unfazed by the volcanic eruption of temper building inside Snape right now.

"Insolent beyond belief," he hissed.

Amacys Carrow tightened his grip on Neville and the two scuffled slightly. Alecto held her wand on Ginny and Luna with a gleeful smile on her ugly face.

"Let us handle the punishment—"

"I'll be taking care of that myself," Snape cut off Alecto's offer. "After all, they did break into *my* office."

Ginny's stomach rolled. She wasn't sure which would be worse. Alecto bristled but didn't dare defy Snape.

The silence in the room made Ginny ache all over. While she regretted being caught in the act, she could never regret the choice she'd made to try and retrieve the sword for Harry. Dumbledore had willed the sword to Harry for a reason and Ginny was determined that he needed it to complete whatever quest he, Ron, and Hermione were on.

Part of it was defiance for Snape and the Death Eaters taking over the school, but Ginny knew that part of what drove her to do something as reckless as breaking into the Headmaster's office was guilt.

Ever since she'd realized that she was pregnant and had seen the potion prove her suspicion, Ginny had been dealing with the overwhelming responsibility of her decisions. She'd pushed Harry too far on the night of his birthday. They'd made a stupid decision because Ginny had been too weak to simply let him slip off into the night. She'd demanded his attentions and who could blame him for accepting what was offered. Now she was in trouble and with no where in Hogwarts to turn.

It should have been simple to get in and out tonight—Seamus was leading a team of distraction providers down near the Slytherin common room. It was sure to draw even Snape from his office, but they hadn't expected him to return so quickly. Neville hadn't even had a chance to get his hand around the hilt of the sword before Snape and the Carrows had burst in.

"I'll decide on a fitting punishment and inform you," Snape said. He measured each word carefully until it sounded like a death toll. His piercing gaze crept over each of them, making Ginny shiver.

Ginny thought about how much she hated this man. He'd played them all for fools and had murdered Dumbledore while Harry watched.

Her heart pounded painfully in her throat at the thought of Harry. Once more, a wave of guilt came over her. What was she going to tell him? And how would she tell him when he was off running around the countryside? How would he react?

The idea of standing in front of him and telling him about the baby was too much and Ginny brushed it aside. Moments of time flashed in front of her: Harry leaving her by Dumbeldore's tomb last spring, Harry's arrival at The Burrow, the way he kissed her and held her, the way they made love in the garden at The Burrow, the moment she realized that she was carrying his child...

Ginny gasped and physically jerked away from the wide, black eyes of Severus Snape.

"Out!" he barked. "Take them out!"

Amycus shoved Neville toward the door and Alecto forced her wand into the side of Ginny's neck. Luna gave a worried look at her companions before she opened the door.

"Stop pushing!" Neville grumbled. "I'm going..."

Ginny was just taking a step out the door when Snape spoke again.

"Weasley will stay."

"NO!" Neville lunged for his captor and landed a quick jab with his elbow.

Icy fear griped her heart and Ginny scrabbled to grasp Neville's hand. She could only manage to clasp onto his robes before Amycus retaliated for the hit. He smashed his fist into Neville's face and Luna screamed as Alecto pushed her out the door. Alecto sneered hatefully at Ginny before slamming the door in her face.

She was left alone with Snape.

The resolve and rebelliousness from before faded quickly as Ginny contemplated the situation. Snape knew. Somehow he had seen into her mind—didn't Harry mention that he had some powers of Legilimency?—and knew the truth.

Her breathing became harsh and she forced herself to turn slowly, to face the Death Eater than now held not only her fate in his hands, but the fate of Harry Potter's child.

Snape wore a look that Ginny couldn't place. For a moment it looked like pity, but that quickly melted into loathing.

"Foolish girl."

She jumped as if physically struck, but didn't move. There would be no escape from the situation.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Ginny didn't answer. The question was rhetorical, and not one she could respond to anyway. She wasn't ashamed of what she and Harry had done—it was a moment born of desperation and the love she felt for him—but she regretted that she'd been so foolishly preoccupied as to forget all common sense.

"How could you know," Snape answered his own query.

"Expel me." The words slipped from her mouth, startling them both. They stared at each other for a long minute and even the portraits were silent, frozen as they watched the scene in front of them. Ginny felt bare before him and didn't resist his probing gaze. If he wanted to see, she'd let him see every ounce of love she held for Harry.

"That would be too easy," Snape finally said. He sat at the desk that had once been Albus Dumbledore's and pulled a piece of parchment toward him. Ginny wanted to hiss out how ridiculous he looked, how small and insignificant Severus Snape was in comparison to the great giant of a man that Dumbledore had been, but she held her tongue. She was already in enough trouble right now.

"The three of you will serve detention tomorrow evening," he mumbled. Ginny peered at him as he continued to scratch away at the parchment with his quill. "With *Professor* Hagrid. I'm sure he can find some use for you out in the forest."

Complete confusion erupted inside her. Hagrid? That was hardly a fitting punishment for breaking into the Headmaster's office, attempting to steal the Sword of Gryffindor, and for what she, personally, was guilty of.

His quill scraped to a standstill and then he signed something to the bottom of the note that Ginny couldn't make out. She peered at it, but found that it simply looked blurry. She expected him to hand the parchment to her, but Snape folded it and tucked it away in a drawer. He stared at her a moment more and Ginny willed her heart to climb out of her throat and back to where it belonged.

"You are to leave this room, Ginevra Weasley," he said calmly, slowly. "You aren't to ever come back here again. Forget what you've tried to accomplish this night—it was a fool's errand. You have more... important things to worry about."

Ginny swallowed and tried to decide if there was a hidden meaning behind his words. But she didn't have more than a second to ponder before Snape flicked his wand and the door crashed open behind her.

"Don't make any more foolish choices, girl," he warned.

Ginny left his office and slowly walked down the stairs. She trailed her hand along the wall to steady her and tried to decide what to do. One of Voldemort's inner circle—a man he trusted deeply enough to give him charge of Hogwarts—knew she was carrying Harry's child.

She needed to leave. She needed to get out of Hogwarts as soon as possible and contact her family.

Tomorrow, while they were in the forest, she would slip away. She would summon her broom and escape while she could. Once she made the safety of Hogsmeade, Ginny could floo to The Burrow.

Waiting for Christmas was simply out of the question now. Ginny's choices had, once again, changed everything.

Tonks looked forlornly at her empty coffee cup and then gave a grumpy little poke to her rounding belly. Little Lupin, as she'd come to call the child growing within her, didn't like the morning coffee routine. Since she'd first unknowingly conceived, Tonks hadn't been able to have her usual morning cup of coffee. Her body violently rebelled at the taste of the liquid. Even though the smell made her stomach growl in anticipation, the moment the liquid hit her gut it would all come back up.

"I miss coffee," she grumbled to the empty kitchen. Remus was off doing something cagey for the Order. Tonks knew she shouldn't be shirty about it—the Order needed his expertise in dealing with the savage werewolf attacks that had been cropping up all over Great Britain—but she couldn't help feeling more than a bit useless, stuck here in her parents' house, waiting.

"I miss being out in the action, too," she added with a surreptitious glance down at her stomach. This was something relatively new, this lecturing her child, but on mornings like today when she was completely alone it gave her something to do.

But she couldn't hold it against the little barbarian growing inside her. The idea of *her* being a mother sent Tonks' head reeling. It wasn't something she'd ever contemplated, and she and Remus surely hadn't planned on getting pregnant before getting married, but sometimes fate had other things in mind for her that she would never anticipate.

How many times had Tonks heard her father say that exact thing while she was growing up?

Tonks gave a fond, sad smile. Ted Tonks was an amazing man. She had no doubt that wherever he was, he'd be helping whoever he could. Ted had the heart of a big teddy bear. His deep voice echoed in her mind from the morning he was packing a few hurried things into a rucksack and setting out before the Muggleborn Registration Commission tracked him down. 'We never know, Dora, what fate has in store for us, so don't kick against the pricks too hard. You may just be trying to rob yourself of opportunities.' And then he'd smiled that warm, wonderful Ted Tonks smile and disappeared.

But she refused to think about him right now. Too many people were gone—scattered all over the country, fleeing England in droves with illegal portkeys, attempts to Apparate to the continent, even taking Muggle transportation to put some distance between themselves and Voldemort's forces controlling the Ministry.

And then others had simply disappeared completely. Tonks knew that Harry, Ron and Hermione were out there somewhere, on some secret mission from Dumbledore himself. Molly Weasley flooded at least once every other day to cry about her missing children and to try and engage Tonks in speculating about where they were.

It did nothing to help Tonks' already frayed nerves.

"What I really need is a good shag." She drained the last of her pumpkin juice and pushed the cup

away. "But even that's not likely to happen right now." Remus' activities for the Order weren't something that could be scheduled. He'd been gone for a week already and might possibly be gone for much longer. Whatever was necessary.

"I'll have to settle for doing the washing up."

Tonks stared at the dishes in the sink. Her mother hated when she charmed them to wash themselves; she always claimed that they chipped along the edges. But her mother wasn't here right now, and Tonks simply wasn't in the mood to wash the dishes by hand.

The sound of the crockery clanking softly pleased Tonks and she had just turned to wander into the other room when an unfamiliar owl tapped on the window. She stared at the black and grey mottled bird before letting it into the kitchen.

"And who are you?"

The bird gave a low hoot before holding its foot out. There was a small scroll attached. It was sealed with a pale green wax. There was a healer's mark in the circle of wax that was familiar. But why would Poppy Pomfrey send a letter to her?

It made no sense. Tonks knew that the Hogwarts nurse was not a member of the Order of the Phoenix, but was not allied with the Death Eaters, either. She was fighting the same battle they all were, just not actively seeking the conflicts as the Order was.

The letter was short and in the same efficient, tight handwriting that Tonks remembered Madam Pomfrey having. She'd certainly seen enough of the nurse's writing in the past, having spent more than her fair share of time in the hospital wing while a student.

It has come to my attention that Ginny Weasley is in grave danger here at Hogwarts. I cannot discuss specifics, but know that you will do everything you can to help, Nymphadora. She will be serving detention this evening in the Forbidden Forest with Rubeus Hagrid.

Please, you must do everything you can to make sure she does not return to the school, for her own safety.

PP

Tonks gaped at the letter and then read it once more. She quickly did a magical scan of the parchment and found that only Poppy Pomfrey's magical signature was on the document. It had come straight from the Hogwarts nurse.

A million thoughts jumbled in her head as she tried to reason this out. Poppy wouldn't lie, and the wording of the letter was very particular and urgent. If Ginny was to have detention, then it was only a few hours away, at most. Tonks wouldn't have much time to mobilize a rescue mission.

And it didn't help that Kingsley had them all strictly bound with charms for their own safety. Tonks could only contact a few Order members, who could then contact a few members, and so on. She didn't know where the Weasleys were even staying. Remus was the contact for Bill Weasley, so she

couldn't go to him.

She tried flooing both Kingsley, who was her immediate contact, and Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, searching for Fred or George, but couldn't connect to either. There was always the chance of sending an owl, but that might take hours, depending on where Kingsley was.

The ticking of the clock weighed heavily as Tonks decided what to do.

"Looks like it's up to you and me, Little Lupin."

The idea of being an Auror again was exciting, even though it made her tense. It had been weeks since she'd been of any use at all, but that was all about to change. Ginny needed rescuing and Tonks would have to do. She couldn't bring her back to the house, not without having Kingsley reveal the location, but there were other places to hide.

Tonks scribbled a quick note to her mother and another to Kingsley, being horridly vague in both of them. She stuffed Madam Pomfrey's note into her pocket and gathered her heavy cloak.

"What do you say, little barbarian, up for an adventure?"

Chapter 4: Strange Allies With Warring Hearts

Neville looked nervous when Ginny and Luna joined him in the Entrance Hall, but he wasn't terrified, like he had been in the story he told of his first detention in the Forbidden Forest.

Luna was her usual dreamy self, and her casual observations of the world around them helped to distract Ginny.

"I do hope we stumble upon a schrandy berry bush in there," Luna said with a breathless excitement that made her seem so much younger than her sixteen years. "Daddy says schrandy berries are good luck, and not infested with nargles at all. In fact, they attract lovely little beings called Folwyn. They look something like a camel wrapped in the form of an octopus. I'm told they're very helpful and interesting, with their semi-transparent skin. They're good luck, you know."

Neville made a sound that was half-choking, half-laughter and Ginny smiled at her friend's oddness. If everything in the world was upside down and Ginny couldn't see the positive, at least she still had Luna to brighten her day.

"Well, if they're good luck," Ginny said, "then we'll be sure to keep an eye out for them. We can use all the luck we can get." She stared out over the grounds and at the dark trees of the Forbidden Forest.

"Let's get this over with," Neville grumbled. He strode out the door with his shoulders back and a determined look on his face. Ginny was struck then at how much Neville had grown up lately. It wasn't just his years, but the strength of character and the courage to become the man that his close friends always knew he could be. He reminded Ginny so strongly of Harry that it was a jolt straight to her heart.

"Oh, yes, let's," Luna cheered happily. She reached for Ginny's hand and laughed when she skipped down the steps together.

Despite the fact that Ginny was leaving tonight and not returning to Hogwarts—the few things she'd decided to take with her were stuffed in a small rucksack slung on her back—she couldn't help but feel the anticipation of adventure. There was nervousness and fear also, because Ginny had no idea what she was going to do once she disappeared from Hagrid's watchful care, but she was determined to face this challenge like she faced all challenges: with nerve and a little luck on her side.

A shiver ran through Ginny as she caught sight of a dark shadow on the grounds. The pale, sallow face of Severus Snape watched the three students from the blackness. He didn't move, but tracked their progress toward Hagrid's hut with only his eyes.

Don't make any more foolish choices, girl.

His words echoed in her head and Ginny squeezed Luna's hand so hard she was afraid she'd hurt her friend. But Luna didn't protest; she continued to skip along the way, talking about the Folwyn and what she might do if she found one.

When Ginny looked back over her shoulder before stepping into the warmth of Hagrid's hut, Snape was gone; melted back into the night where he belonged. And although she knew he was a Death Eater and responsible for Dumbledore's death, Ginny couldn't help but think he was helping her in some way, even if it was only steeling her resolve with his unyielding words and icy tone. He was giving her the motivation and courage to strike out on her own.

'Get to Hogsmeade, floo The Burrow, go home,' Ginny repeated over and over to herself.

Hagrid seemed glad to see them, even if he chided them for being too bold to attempt breaking into Snape's office.

"Yeh've got to watch yerselves," he warned gently, "we wouldn' want yeh to get into trouble now."

"And detention with you isn't getting into trouble?" Neville asked.

Hagrid's eyes crinkled at the corner. "Yer just lucky Snape thinks the Forbidden Forest'll scare the pants righ' off yeh."

"Oh, I love the forest," Luna said in a dreamy, happy voice. "There are so many wonderful creatures to meet. One never knows what adventure awaits!"

Ginny and Neville exchanged a look while Hagrid beamed at Luna.

"Yer exactly righ', Luna. Now, let's get started so's yeh can be back before midnight."

The three followed him out the door, focusing on the swaying lantern bobbing before him. Fang lumbered alongside his master, tongue lolling happily. His steps got more hesitant as they drew closer to the black woods, though.

"Stick together and stay on the path," Hagrid warned. "We'll be looking for the Thestral herd tonight. I've set out some meat to attract 'em, but they've been causing a ruckus with the Centaurs lately, so they may be scattered."

Luna began a conversation with Hagrid about various creatures in the forest and Ginny tucked her thumbs in the straps of her rucksack and repeated her plan once more. '*Get to Hogsmeade, floo The Burrow, go home.*'

"You're being awfully quiet tonight." Neville fell into line with her and Ginny forced a smile on her face.

"Just... just nervous, I guess."

He gave a skeptical look but didn't argue.

"Last time I was in here we were searching for unicorns," he said with a small shudder. "And Harry

got stuck with Malfoy and Fang.”

Ginny smiled. “I remember the story. At least you all came out safe.”

“Only because the Centaurs rescued Harry,” said Neville. “Malfoy, the coward, abandoned him.”

Ginny thought about that for a minute. Malfoy *was* a coward, but his behavior when he’d let her escape without punishment, even though he knew she’d stolen something from the Potions lab, made her think twice about him. He’d always been rather spineless, but maybe there was more to him than met the eye.

“Self preservation at all costs,” she said. “Isn’t that a Slytherin trait?”

Neville’s lips quirked in a smile. “I suppose it is.”

“Then he was just acting his part. I’m sure Harry was glad to be rid of him.”

He snorted and pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders.

Ginny’s skin prickled and her eyes traced the black forest all around them. She swore someone—or maybe *something*—had been watching them. Neville appeared more edgy than before, but he wasn’t jumping at every sound like Ginny was.

“What’s in the bag?” he asked finally.

Ginny couldn’t help it; she adjusted the rucksack on her back nervously. “Nothing,” she answered quickly. “Just some supplies... in case.”

“In case of what?” Neville queried.

“You never know,” Ginny said mysteriously. “We are in the Forbidden Forest, you know. It’s best to be prepared.”

Neville nudged her shoulder. “You sound like Hermione.”

Any amusement flooded away at the mention of their missing friend and Ginny swallowed through a tight throat. “I’m far too reckless to be Hermione. She wouldn’t have made the choices I have.”

Neville was quiet as they walked, winding further and further into the forest. Hagrid, Luna, and Fang were just steps ahead, quietly discussing something.

“I’ve seen Hermione be impulsive and reckless a time or two,” said Neville. “Harry and Ron always pulled her through, though. Or maybe they all helped each other.”

Ginny smiled fondly and fought the urge to panic. “They do make a great team.” She was heading off into the forest alone tonight, with no best friends beside her. Even the person she loved most in the world had no idea what she was going through right now. Ginny’s whole body shook and she repeated the plan to herself once more.

Get to Hogsmeade, floo The Burrow, go home.

Her family would help her; she knew they would. There would be the embarrassing moment of admitting that she'd gotten herself into trouble, but Ginny knew her parents and brothers wouldn't abandon her over the indiscretion. They'd find a way to help her.

"We should be gettin' close now," Hagrid called out.

The tangy scent of blood filled Ginny's nostrils and her stomach heaved. She almost tripped on a root and felt her stomach heave and roll dangerously. Neville's strong hand folded around her elbow to hold her up.

"Ginny, are you all right?"

Ginny clenched her teeth against another wave of sickness. She lost the battle with her stomach and threw up in the dead leaves beneath a large tree. The whole procession stopped to stare at her, but Ginny kept her face down, her hair hiding her embarrassment.

"Must have been something I ate," she mumbled and swiped at her mouth with the back of her sleeve.

"Sit here." Neville practically forced her to sit in the middle of the path. He fiddled around in his pockets and finally produced a small folded handkerchief. "It's clean."

"Thank you, Neville." Ginny couldn't look him in the eye right now, so she stared off into the trees. Somewhere, a twig or a small branch snapped and drew her attention. She stared into the black but couldn't make anything out. It was probably the Thestrals, drawn by the smell of what Hagrid had put out.

"Alrigh' Ginny?" Hagrid asked.

"Fine." She tried to sound bright, but it was hard when her stomach was still protesting the smell of the blood and meat. There was also another smell—much more animal—and Ginny remembered the ride to London at the end of her fourth year. "The Thestrals... they're here."

"Yeh can see 'em?" Hagrid's question was full of regret.

Ginny blinked up at him. "Er... no, actually. I can smell them."

"They are here," Luna said. She walked a step or two into the forest and lifted her hand to rub the animal. "And just as beautiful as ever."

"They are beautiful, aren't they?" Hagrid asked. He made to leave Ginny's side, but then hesitated.

"Go," Ginny urged him. "I'm not going anywhere." If they never left her alone, how was she going to slip away? Tonight was her only chance to go—they never let students out without a professor and Ginny's chances at escaping during Quidditch practice were nearly zero. Besides, she was far too nervous to even attempt riding a broom right now. What if she fell and hurt the baby?

Hagrid studied her for a minute before giving a firm nod. He joined Luna and began talking softly to the Thestral.

"I forgot that not everyone can see them," Neville said from beside her. "Merlin, we were insane to ride those beasts anywhere."

Ginny chuckled. "We *were* pretty insane, weren't we?"

"In a way," Neville said hesitantly, "I suppose they are sort of beautiful."

"Think you'd ever ride one again?" she challenged. Her forehead was all sweaty and beads of moisture soaked the inside of her collar. She needed to get away soon if she was going to make it to Hogsmeade tonight. If she'd mentally mapped the path correctly, she could backtrack for half a mile before turning south, toward the village. It couldn't be more than forty minutes away, at most.

"I suppose," Neville admitted, "if I had to."

"You should go and make friends with one," Ginny said. "You never know when it might come in handy."

Neville chuckled but stood. "Are you sure..."

"I'm fine," said Ginny. "I think I'm just overly tired and ate something at dinner that didn't agree. And the smell didn't help."

For a minute she thought he was going to refuse, but he took a step forward instead. He moved until he could join Hagrid and Luna, who were feeding the animals something dark and disgusting looking.

Ginny waited until they were all occupied before she stood. She took one small step backward, staring intently at her friends. They didn't notice her movement, so she took one more.

It would be best to veer off into the trees for a short way before rejoining the path, Ginny decided. If she stuck right on the path Hagrid would find her in no time. If he did, then Ginny would need to come up with some story to convince him to let her go. She knew if it was only Hagrid she had to deal with, she could do it. But Neville and Luna would never let her go off alone, no matter the circumstances.

What otherwise might have been a good trait in her friends was only a detriment tonight as she tried to flee.

Get to Hogsmeade, floo The Burrow, go home.

Once she couldn't see them any longer, Ginny spun on her heel and marched into the woods at a quick pace. She tried to make as little sound as possible and was almost at a jog when she felt the invisible eyes on her again. She started, but kept moving, increasing her pace as she ran from whatever was following her.

"Ginny, stop!"

"No!" she called back to the person chasing her. It was probably Neville, but Ginny swore the voice was feminine.

"It's me, Tonks! Don't make me run; I'll just trip over my own feet again!"

Ginny whirled and pulled her wand at the same time. The woman following her had a familiar face surrounded by a black cloak with a hood.

"Prove it!" Ginny demanded as her chest heaved. Her stomach twisted into knots. She hadn't even made it back to the main path before she'd been stopped. Getting to Hogsmeade and then The Burrow was going to be impossible at this rate.

"You and I used to sit in Grimmauld Place and paint our toenails. I always charmed mine blue because I was too clumsy to use the Muggle polish Hermione had."

Ginny was almost convinced, but her gut told her to keep questioning. "What was the colour?"

"You used Wicked Red, and Hermione used Razzelberry Pink."

"Tonks," Ginny gasped and lowered her wand. "What the hell are you doing out here?" Her heart thundered away against her ribs and she looked back to where she'd left her friends.

"Looking for you, actually." Tonks peered at her. "Why are you leaving Hagrid? You know he can—"

Ginny turned and began walking. "I don't have time for this, Tonks. I can take care of myself. I don't need an Auror childminding me—"

Tonks' hand came down onto Ginny's shoulder. "Will you hold still for a minute? Crikey, you're going to send me into labor!"

Realization settled on Ginny as she peered at her friend. "You're not an Auror anymore," she stated. She felt stupid for not remembering that Tonks had gone into hiding when she'd married Remus. And that she'd been pregnant.

"No," Tonks said. "Come on, you're so determined to get away from here tonight, let's keep walking."

Warning flares went off in Ginny's head, but she followed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to get you," Tonks said. She pressed her hand to her ribs as they walked, rubbing a stitch in her side. "Didn't think I was going to have to sprint to catch you."

Ginny's heart dropped to her knees. "Are you... did something happen?" She reached out and clutched Tonks' arm tightly. "My family—"

"Fine, as far as I know," Tonks reassured her. "I came for you."

Ginny gaped at her. "M-me?"

"Let's keep walking," said Tonks. She looked over her shoulder and surveyed the area around them. A quick mumbled spell and a bright light shot from her wand, illuminating the area around them for just a moment. "I always hated this forest. Hufflepuffs had more sense than to go wandering off through the trees."

Now it was Tonks leading the way, nearly pulling Ginny back to the path. They hurried through the trees as she explained. "I got a note from Madam Pomfrey telling me that you were in danger, and that you needed to leave immediately. Isn't that why you were running?"

Ginny swallowed thickly and rubbed at her forehead as they kept up the quick pace. "Er... no, well... How did Madam Pomfrey know about it?"

Tonks glared at the younger girl. "So you *are* in danger."

"Not danger, precisely," Ginny answered cagily. "Just... just in trouble, of sorts."

Tonks gave another nervous scan of the forest. "Right. No more talk until we're somewhere safe."

"Tonks... I... I need to go to The Burrow."

"We'll talk more in a minute," Tonks scolded. "I'm going to Apparate you—"

"Can you?" Ginny asked skeptically.

"Of course," Tonks said. "It's not a danger until I reach six months."

Ginny nodded and tucked that information away for future reference. "But..." She was still nervous that if Tonks wasn't concentrating fully there might be an issue with Ginny's baby. Ginny couldn't bring herself to say anything out loud, however, because Tonks seemed so ruffled about the forest around them.

Just before they Apparated, Ginny moved in close. "Tonks... I'm pregnant," she breathed.

To her credit, Tonks only stared with wide eyes before she gave a firm nod. "Hold on tightly."

They appeared in a well-kept park, enshrouded in the pitch black night. A high wrought iron fence surrounded the grassy area. It was deserted, which was understandable as it was late at night, and October.

"I wondered," Tonks said quietly. She gestured to a bench and the two women sat.

"I just... just found out."

"When?" Tonks asked.

"When did I find out?" Ginny asked. "I suspected for a while—"

"I meant, when did you become pregnant?"

Ginny felt her face heat and stared off into the park, letting her eyes trace over the dark bushes and trees. "Are we safe here?"

"Yes," Tonks answered automatically. "The Order has scouted places like this all over Britain."

Ginny nodded and chewed the inside of her lip. "Last day of July," she answered. "Or probably the first of August, if we're technical."

"That's a bit... specific."

"It's not like we went about shagging every chance we got!" Ginny scowled and turned to see Tonks smirking at her. "It was just... just the once."

"Once is all it takes," Tonks said with laugh. She rubbed her own belly fondly. "I'm not going to lecture you, Ginny. I'm in no position to chastise anyone for having sex outside marriage. I was already in the pudding club when Remus and I got hitched—but just barely."

Ginny had already guessed that by doing the calculations. She rubbed her face and realized just how exhausted she was. "And now... now I have to deal with all of this, and Harry... Harry can't know. He has so much already in front of him."

Tonks gave a sympathetic look and smoothed her hand down the back of Ginny's hair. "I'm sorry you're going through this."

"I just... I have to be strong, you know. I have no idea what I'm going to do—other than go to The Burrow. I never wanted to be a liability to him. I'm not *that* girl, you know?"

"I know exactly what you mean," said Tonks.

"He broke up with me to keep me safe, to let us both get on with what we had to do. He needs to be out there doing what he needs to do." Ginny gave a nod toward the locked gates of the park. "And I... I'm supposed to be at Hogwarts, helping where I can. Now I've gone and mucked that all up." Ginny was horrified when tears burned in her eyes. She hated crying and there had been enough of that lately—too many tears.

"You're not in this alone," Tonks assured her. "It's not like you went and got pregnant by yourself."

Ginny snorted and swiped at her eyes. "I pressured him into it."

Tonks gave a barking laugh that reminded Ginny of Sirius. "Not likely, love. He's seventeen and randy—I can pretty much guarantee all you had to do was give a little rub in the right way and he followed you anywhere."

"That didn't make it right," said Ginny. Her face burned at Tonks' forthrightness.

"We all make choices in this life, don't we?" Tonks asked. "I chose to fall in love with Remus—the most stubborn man who ever walked the face of this earth. And I love him, don't get me wrong, but there are days when I want to hex him until he can't sit down. But I made my choice to stand beside him and now I have to take the consequences of those choices. You love Harry and he loves you—don't give me that look, everyone can see it all over his face."

Ginny felt two more tears slip down her cheeks. Did Harry love her? He hadn't told her when they made love. Then again, she hadn't told him how she felt about him either.

"The two of you made a choice and now you have to deal with it," Tonks continued. "It's not the worst thing in the world, you know." She gave a little knowing look. "You just wait until you can feel the little bugger kick for the first time. Then you'll know."

"Know what?" Ginny asked.

Tonks gave a mysterious smile and shook her head. "It's not something I can describe, but you'll know it."

They lapsed into silence and Ginny used Neville's handkerchief to dry her eyes. "Thank you for coming for me. I... I was going in to Hogsmeade to—"

"Merlin," Tonks groaned. "It's a good thing I got that note when I did. Hogsmeade is under siege. We can't get people out or in right now. You-Know-Who has basically camped on Hogwarts threshold. I mean, *he's* not really there, of course, but his Death Eaters are. It would have been walking right into his clutches, going there."

Ginny's eyes widened as she considered that. "I... I was going to try and floo to The Burrow."

"Can't go there, either," Tonks said. "Your family isn't there, anyway. Everyone is in hiding, Ginny. I know it's no picnic at Hogwarts, but at least you're safe there—"

"Safe?" Ginny scoffed. "With Death Eaters as professors?! You're taking the piss, yeah? Tonks, you have no idea what goes on there. The Carrows are... they're horrible. They torture students for mouthing off, and when they're not the ones doing it, the Slytherins are. We're not allowed into the hospital wing unless one of them takes you. Madam Pomfrey's been hiding potions all over the castle and Slughorn leaves his classroom under only a mild locking charm so we can break in to brew our own pain and healing potions." Her voice rose and Tonks' shoulders slumped lower with each revelation.

"The students are all so terrified they move around in packs, just to make sure no one is out alone. We've even arranged watches around the clock. Some of the blokes don't get sleep for days because they're patrolling. And when they get caught..." Ginny trailed off and swallowed another roll of sickness sent from her middle. "They come back shaking with fresh wounds. We've all gotten really good at healing spells. We all keep our mouths shut and our heads down, just to avoid being dragged off into some classroom somewhere.

"I couldn't... I couldn't stay there," Ginny said softly. "The first week I was there Snape brought me into his office three times and questioned me about Harry—demanding to know where he was and if I knew what he was doing. And the Carrows are always mouthing off to me about him. If they knew..." She pressed her hand to her stomach and shuddered. "They'd kill us both."

"No," Tonks corrected. "They'd use you as a weapon, which is why they're not going to know. Madam Pomfrey's note got to me—"

"That's another thing," Ginny interrupted. "How did she know? Tonks, I haven't been to the hospital wing. I suspected and brewed my own potion. No one knows—except Snape." Horror filled her. "Snape knows, Tonks. I mean, I don't know for sure, but I think he can read minds or something—Harry mentioned that once—and when I was in there... he was going on about my stupid

choices and how they'd gotten me into trouble. Do you think..."

"I don't know what to think," Tonks said. She rubbed her face harshly. "I can't bring myself to trust Severus Snape; there is too much evidence against him. Maybe... maybe he just couldn't bring himself to kill you and the baby. Maybe there's an ounce of humanity left inside him. Or maybe he meant to ambush you and Madam Pomfrey managed to discover it. Her magical signature—and hers alone—was on the parchment."

Ginny's head spun and pounded. "I need to find my family."

"I'll need some time for that," said Tonks. "Everyone is in hiding. None of us knows where the others are. We're better protected that way. If one of us is taken we can't expose the whole group. I'll need to get a message sent out and wait for a reply. Sometimes it takes days. That's why I came by myself tonight. Remus is out on assignment and my other contact, Kingsley, didn't answer when I sent a message. He's probably tied up with something else. I even tried the twins at the shop, but no one answered."

Ginny's heart pounded loudly and her head spun. "So I can't even go home."

"Not right away, I'm afraid. What we need is a safe house until I can get you to them." She stood and paced slowly in front of Ginny, muttering names that made no sense to Ginny.

"Have you been sick?"

The question startled Ginny and she shook her head. "I mean, not really. I threw up tonight when I smelled the Thestrals. And the other day, once. But I can't really eat much."

"You look thin," said Tonks. "I eat everything in sight, you can't eat anything. Go figure." Her pacing stopped and she turned to Ginny. "I think I know a place, but you'll have to trust me."

"As long as it's not Grimmauld Place... or my Great Aunt Muriel's, I'll trust you."

Tonks smiled. "Nope. It's not either of those places. And it'll only be for a few days, just until I can get through to your family. We're all hidden by charms and spells these days. We'll stash you away somewhere safe, somewhere no one would ever think of, and then when I get through to them, I'll come for you. Can you stay somewhere like that?"

"I can survive anything for a few days," Ginny assured her. "I've managed at Hogwarts, and I would have stayed, but..."

"But that's not an option now," Tonks finished her thought. "Come on, it's late but I think we'll just manage to catch her before bed. She was always a night owl."

Chapter 5: Will I Hold You Again

The street they arrived in was average. The houses were older, small and not very ornate, but also not spread out like Ginny was used to; they were smashed together tightly and their fronts began right at the sidewalk. There were no large open fields for children to play in, no pond to swim in, no trees to roam through.

"Where are we?" Ginny asked. She smoothed her hair, more out of nervousness than worry about how she looked.

"Get inside," Tonks said. She cast one last glance around the silent neighborhood, giving a nod of satisfaction at the deserted street. A few of the houses still had their porch lights on, but most were dark as the night, hiding their owners away while they slept.

The house they stepped up to had a dim light in the window that was more lit blue-purple than orange.

"Told you she'd still be up."

Ginny peered at the window but couldn't see much for the lacy curtains pulled in front of the glass. The whole area looked Muggle and Ginny wasn't sure what to expect, or who Tonks was planning on having her stay with.

Tonks knocked on the door and an elderly woman answered. She was tall and had a rather masculine build—wide shoulders and a broad face—but smiled instantly.

"Och! I'd not expected to see you anytime soon, and at such an hour! You'd have thought your mother never taught you manners, girl."

"Aunt Prudy!" Tonks greeted the woman fondly and ushered Ginny inside. "I wonder if I might ask a favor..."

The woman's smile slipped for a moment, but was quickly replaced by a determined look. She shut the door behind them and slid the locks into place. "Into the kitchen," she directed them.

"Where are we?" Ginny demanded again.

"This is Prudence," Tonks said, nodding her head back toward the woman. "She and Dad were friends back in the day, before he went off to Hogwarts. They stayed close through the years."

Ginny peered at the woman who was efficiently making tea as she worried her bottom lip. Prudence's movements were quick, no energy wasted, and Ginny watched with fascination as she put the kettle on the hob to start it boiling. The flames leapt up toward the bottom when she turned a knob and Ginny's eyes widened when they lit with a whoosh of sound.

"And your friend is..."

Ginny started when Prudence pulled out a chair at the table and sat. She didn't invite Tonks or

Ginny to take a seat, but Tonks plopped down in one of the chairs and rubbed at her back.

"Ginny," Tonks said. "She's in need of a place to stay for a couple of days."

Prudence's eyes narrowed and she fumbled in her pocket before pulling out a pair of rectangular spectacles.

"Let's have a look at you, dearie."

Ginny felt like she was being inspected from head to toe, as if Prudence could see every inch of her soul, as well as her form.

The woman clucked her tongue when she lifted the sleeve of Ginny's robes—tattered and wet from her run through the Forbidden Forest earlier.

"She's one of yours, I take it."

Tonks smiled and gave Ginny a wink. "Yep. Through and through."

Prudence nodded. "Robes off, dearie. Never understood why you all went in for that look. Not flattering at all, if I say so."

Tonks smirked and Ginny bit her tongue rather than comment on Prudence's faded floral blouse and pale blue trousers that were at least one size too small on her large frame.

"Prudy is a Muggle," Tonks explained. "But she's all right. She knows all about our world."

Ginny swallowed and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you."

Prudence stared at it for a long minute before giving it a firm shake and smiling at Ginny for the first time since they'd arrived.

"Got a bit of spunk, have you? Well, good. You'll need it."

Ginny gave a small nod and tugged at her robes. She placed them on the back of an empty chair and stood still for another inspection.

"How far along?"

Ginny gasped in a breath at Prudence's question. How had the woman known?

"Not long," Tonks answered for her. "When did you say it was?" she asked Ginny.

Face burning, Ginny glared at Tonks. "I'm not—"

"Save it," Prudence chided. One eyebrow rose behind her glasses in challenge and Ginny swallowed her frustration. This woman was far too like Molly Weasley for Ginny's comforts. How had she known Ginny was pregnant? "I've been doing this for yonks, girly. I can tell a girl in trouble right away."

"Prudy is a midwife, Ginny," Tonks said. "I knew she wouldn't turn us out."

"As if I could ever turn you down," Prudence snapped at Tonks. She walked around Ginny and tugged at her jumper, pulling it tight over her middle.

"Well then?" she asked Ginny.

"August first," Ginny whispered.

"And the father is..."

"He's around," Tonks supplied. "Just... occupied."

Prudence's face twisted up like she might lecture, but then she swept the glasses off her face and stuck the arm in her mouth so that they dangled below her chin.

"Couple of days you say?"

"Week at most," Tonks assured her. "Her family is in hiding, like the rest of us. I just need to get a message to them."

Prudence nodded thoughtfully. "I told your father he should'a come here. Nobody would'a suspected that."

Tonks swallowed and looked away. Ginny tucked that little bit of information away for use later. She knew Ted Tonks was Muggleborn, but hadn't realized he was on the run from the Ministry, although it made perfect sense.

"He's too much like me," Tonks quipped. "Wants to be doing something useful."

Ginny stood helplessly as the two women talked. They acted like she wasn't in the room and while it irritated, it also gave Ginny a chance to inspect her surroundings.

The kitchen was all Muggle, with appliances that looked as if they'd seen better days. The floors were wooden, faded and scuffed, but clean. The curtains above the small window might have once been yellow, but now were a dark cream color, bleached from the sunlight on them every day.

There were no decorations on the wall—save two framed paintings that were dwarfed by the pale white color on the walls. No cookbooks, pots and pans, utensils, or partially begun cooking projects cluttered the counters like at The Burrow. The whole place was rather dated, but spotless. It made Ginny feel very out of place as she stood in the middle of it all.

"I'll let you get on with it," Tonks said abruptly and Ginny's attention snapped back to the two women.

She stepped forward and gripped Tonks' arm tightly, unsure of what she wanted to say. "Are you sure..."

"You'll be fine, here," Tonks assured her. "Prudy can be a bit... stiff, but she'll loosen up." The older woman huffed from across the floor where she was pouring two cups of tea and lacing them

with far too much sugar.

"Should we use some sort of charm, or something?" Ginny asked. She bit her lip and tried to recall what she knew about charms that hid people away. There was the Fidelius, of course, but there had to be others that would work.

"It's only a couple of days, Ginny," Tonks said softly. "Besides, I'm rubbish at charms. You know that. We'll use some basic masking ones—owls won't find you and such, but more than that and we're tempting fate."

Ginny nodded distractedly and rubbed at her forehead. The plan had sounded so simple back in the deserted park, but now, actually facing being left all alone with a woman she didn't know, Ginny was dealing with the exhaustion of it all.

Tonks must have seen it in her face because she threw her arms around Ginny and pulled her in for a massive embrace.

"You're going to be fine here, love. I promise everything will be all right. You can hide out here—let Prudy spoil you a bit, yeah?—and before you know it we'll have you reunited with your family. Then you'll have to defend Harry's honor to all those brothers of yours."

Ginny snorted through her tears. "I know. I'm just... tired."

"And overwhelmed," Tonks said as she wiped Ginny's face with her fingertips. "Blame the hormones. It's a brilliant excuse to be stroppy and get away with it."

"None of that 'round here," Prudence chided. "She'll be learnin' to care for that littl'un and learnin' to do a bit o' practical things about the house. No need fer all that magical nonsense when you've got two strong hands, now is there?"

"Great," Ginny said dryly. "You've stuck me with a cross between Hermione and my mother."

Tonks laughed. "That does remind me, though. No magic, Ginny."

Ginny swallowed thickly and fingered the wand in her pocket. "None?"

"Unless you want You-Know-Who to suss out where you are immediately," Tonks said firmly. "The Ministry will be looking for anything standing out and magic in a Muggle neighborhood would definitely point a finger here."

"None," Ginny confirmed and nodded. She brought her wand out and made to hand it over, but Tonks scoffed.

"Not on your life. You keep that with you at all times; just don't use it unless it's an emergency."

Ginny slid the wand back into her pocket, feeling all the safer for the familiar weight of it there. The idea of not having her magic to defend herself made her feel all shaky and vulnerable inside. And there wouldn't be anyone about to help, just the shirty old woman whom she'd just met. Perfect.

"I'll be back in a couple of days with good news," Tonks said. She kissed Ginny on the forehead and exchanged a quick hug with Prudence before leaving out the back door.

"Well," Prudence said as she sipped at her tea. "Seems like we're going to get to know each other better. How about I start talking while you have a little tea to calm the nerves?"

Ginny sank into the chair Tonks had left pulled out and peered into the warm liquid in the cup. She took a sip and while it was far sweeter than she normally took her tea, it soothed.

"I grew up with Ted Tonks," Prudence said. "Would'a married him, too, if it weren't fer him meetin' Andromeda Black." She gave a small little smirk and tipped her cup up in front of her face slightly. "But that's water under the bridge. Married one of his best friends instead—Muggle, like me. Never had no children—couldn't have 'em."

Ginny swallowed and wondered if she should say something. 'I'm sorry', came to mind, but it felt so strange to say to this brusque woman.

"But that's all right," Prudence continued. "I've birthed enough babies in my lifetime. And now Morty is gone... been almost eight years now, and I'm on my own."

Ginny drained the rest of her tea. "Ginny Weasley," she said quietly. "I grew up in Devon and I'm the youngest of seven."

"Och!" Prudence weaved in her chair dramatically. "Bless yer mother, then."

A small smile came to Ginny then. "We're all involved in the war," she finished quietly.

Prudence nodded and added one final spoonful of sugar to the dregs in her cup. She stirred it and then spooned the super-sweet sludge into her mouth with a satisfied sigh.

"I'm allowed," she protested Ginny's raised eyebrows. "When you get to be my age, girly, yer allowed a few sweet pleasures."

Ginny gave a short nod of agreement.

"And the father? He's a good'un?"

"The best," Ginny defended valiantly. A pang of longing and sadness careened through her at the thought of Harry. "He's out fighting for our freedom. We didn't plan this, or anything."

"It's rarely planned," Prudence assured her. "But we get through it."

The exhaustion of the day, the harrowing events that built through it all, drained Ginny until she felt every ounce of it weigh down on her shoulders.

"Let's get you to bed, girly," Prudence said. She slid her hand under Ginny's arm and lifted with surprising strength. "You'll probably sleep two whole days after what you've been through."

Ginny let the woman guide her through a narrow door and down a flight of stairs to a small basement flat. It was quirky and cramped, with old furniture shoved here and there.

"This was Morty's rooms," Prudence informed her as she pointed out the bed, sofa, loo and other corners. "His sanctuary, he called it," she finished with a smirk. "He liked his private time, away from my nattering and waffling."

"Thank you," Ginny said earnestly. "I know you didn't have to take me in. You could have... It would have been safer..."

Prudence watched her with a strange expression—almost stony, but there was compassion there, as well. "I've never turned away a stray," she said with a shrug. "And Ted's girl is a good thing, despite what she tries to make everyone think. She watches out for me."

Once Prudence had left Ginny standing alone in the middle of the dark cluttered room—only one small lamp painted a circle of light on the floor—Ginny let herself take a full breath in.

She sat on the edge of the bed and bounced once or twice, testing the mattress. It sighed satisfactorily—just like her bed at The Burrow did—and Ginny played with the edge of the tattered quilt that lay over it.

"Home, for now," she whispered. She lay down on it and pulled one of the pillows to her chest, wrapping around it. Strangely, now that she was alone and allowed to break down, the tears didn't come. Instead, there was a calm feeling that washed over her. She wasn't where she'd expected to be, but at least she was away from Hogwarts and in a place where she wasn't too terrified to close her eyes and rest for a bit.

It would work until she could be with her family once more.

Harry's heart thundered in his chest and he gasped as the vision in his dream faded away. It was bittersweet, in a way, because it was only in his dreams that he could see Ginny's face so clearly. There he could still remember the feel of her skin on his, remember the scent of her hair and the way she touched him in ways that drove him crazy.

But the dream tonight had been twisted, demented with visions of her running through the Forbidden Forest with Neville and Luna, trying to escape the hoards of Acromantula, the Centaurs, and other faceless and terrifying creatures. Through it all, Snape hunted them relentlessly, forcing Hagrid, Fang, and Grawp to smash the trees aside to find his prey.

Ever since overhearing the Goblins and Dirk speak of the daring raid on Snape's office that Ginny, Neville and Luna had undertaken, every thought of Ginny had been punctuated with fear.

'Hagrid would take care of them,' he assured himself time and time again. 'Hagrid would never let anything happen to them.'

But he couldn't be sure. There was no way to get news out here on the run. And now Ron was gone, too.

Harry swung his legs off the narrow, uncomfortable camp bed and rubbed his face. He pushed his glasses on and listened for sounds of Hermione moving outside the tent. It was just coming light,

early enough that Hermione wouldn't come looking for him yet, and bright enough that he could sneak a peak at the Marauder's Map.

A part of him felt guilty that he'd been spying on Ginny, searching out her dot and running his finger over the spot. It was a poor imitation of being with her, seeing her once more, but it was all Harry had, unless he counted his dreams.

He let his eyes slip closed and pulled the true memory of their last night together to the front of his mind. His skin prickled at the poignancy of it and he wished he'd been in a better frame of mind right then to memorize every detail of the moments. As it was, some things weren't clear—did her skin taste of strawberries, or was it bitter, or salty? Were there three freckles just on the edge of her collarbone, or five?—and Harry felt slightly cheated.

He blew out a tired breath and pulled the map open. A quick tap of his wand and the muttered words brought the hidden lines to life. They scrolled over the page and dots began to appear. He quickly found Neville's in Gryffindor tower, near Seamus, but they were perfectly motionless. Still in bed, it appeared.

Some dots were milling about in the hallways, grouped in two's and three's. Ginny's dot wasn't among them. Harry frowned as his eyes scanned the entire map quickly. Surely she had to be there. Where else would she have gone? Maybe his eyes simply weren't seeing her.

She wasn't in her dormitory or in the tower at all. She wasn't in the Great Hall or—

"I know you're awake, Harry." Hermione's quiet voice penetrated the thin canvas wall. "I'm supposed to be on watch for another hour or so—"

Harry cleared his throat and folded the map away, stuffing it under his blanket. "I'll, er, I'll be right out."

"I'm sorry—"

"It's fine." Harry rode over her protests when he heard how scratchy her voice was. He suspected she'd been crying—no doubt over Ron's prattish ways—but was grateful that she did that out of Harry's presence. He had no idea what to say to make her feel better. "I'm up anyway."

He quickly pulled on a pair of trousers and jumper before bundling his blanket around his shoulders. The air was chilly, especially when he'd be sitting still for the next few hours until Hermione got some rest. They could delay departing long enough to allow that. Besides, Harry didn't have an idea where to go next anyway.

Hermione's eyes were red and only half-open when Harry insisted she go in and lay down. Her protests were weak and she gave a small smile when he told her his bed was still warm.

"Oh, Hermione..." She stopped and Harry hesitated in asking her for the Horcrux. But she had been wearing it for days now. Harry hated the feeling he got when it pressed against his skin, but knew it was his turn. "It's time to switch."

She didn't even ask what he meant but removed the chain and placed it in his hand. It seemed like

a visible weight lifted from her shoulders and she rotated them slowly.

"I wish it wasn't so hard to bear."

"It won't be long now," Harry lied. He slid the chain over his head and tucked it beneath his jumper. "Go get some sleep. We'll move on later."

"Thank you." Hermione let out a jaw-cracking yawn and disappeared into the tent.

Harry huddled in the precise spot Hermione had been in—it was still warm—and pulled the blanket around his shoulders tighter. When he was sure she was asleep, he slipped the map from inside the folds and looked at it again.

Ginny's dot wasn't on there. She was gone.

Panic welled up inside him and Harry cursed himself for not looking earlier. He should have thought about looking right after hearing that she'd broken into Snape's office. He should have found some way to check on her.

He tore his eyes from the map and stared out into the frosty forest. His eyes burned with emotion and with the brightness of the sun coming up. His chest compressed until he worried that a sob might break loose from him.

He couldn't lose her, not after all that they'd shared. Not after everything they'd been through. Ginny had to survive.

No. She couldn't be gone. She was at Hogwarts... somewhere.

He searched the map once more and then cleared it, stuffing it away into his back pocket when her dot didn't appear again.

There had to be a rational explanation. Perhaps the Weasley's had pulled her from school and were in hiding.

Maybe the map was wrong. Sirius' words from Harry's third year echoed in his head. The map didn't lie. It couldn't be fooled by Polyjuice or an Animagus form.

Perhaps she was simply in a place where the map couldn't see her.

Harry sat up as that thought hit him. Last year, when his Malfoy-tracking had been at its height, Harry discovered that going in to the Room of Requirement made a person's dot disappear from the map.

That had to be it. Ginny was perfectly safe at the castle—well, as safe as she could be in a school run by Death Eaters—but for some unknown reason was in the Room of Requirement.

The panic eased from his chest and Harry felt surprisingly lighter. He'd make sure to check the map later and find her dot. Knowing her, she was probably practicing her dueling, or using the room to cook up some plot worthy of Fred and George.

He only hoped she was more careful than she had been when she and her rogue mates had stormed Snape's office and gotten caught.

A somewhat proud smile came to him as he thought about her fierce, blazing expression. He had no doubt Ginny had stood up to Snape with squared shoulders and bit out something truly horrid about him. Thankfully, a trip into the Forest with Hagrid was all that they'd been punished with.

Harry shivered under his blanket and decided that the morning wasn't nearly as bad as it had started out. He would let Hermione sleep for a few hours and then they'd move on.

The locket under his jumper brushed his skin and made him flinch at the coldness of it. And he couldn't help but feel horribly alone and empty for a second.

Damned Horcrux anyway.

Chapter 6: Spinning Out In The Madness

Harry rolled the new wand back and forth in his hand, watching the unfamiliar wood. It didn't give off any warmth or make him feel the connection to his magic that his holly wand did, but a wand was a wand. At least he had one.

And now he had Ron back, as well. Harry couldn't help but smile at that thought. The last few hours had been harrowing—following the doe, jumping into the pool, nearly being killed by the Horcrux only to be rescued by someone he feared had left him for good, Ron's battle with the Horcrux, and, finally, their return to face Hermione. Were their whole lives set to be simply a series of dramatic moments strung together?!

Behind him, Ron was putting his maroon pyjamas on, and across from him Hermione had her head buried under the blankets. Harry could tell she wasn't asleep. Her back was to him but he could see the shaky rise and fall of her shoulders. She might be crying, he decided, but she obviously didn't want to show him or Ron right now.

"Thanks, again, for the wand," Harry mumbled to Ron.

"No problem," Ron answered. Harry heard the rustle of blankets and turned to see Ron lying down, staring up at the ceiling of the tent with his arms behind his head. He glanced over at Hermione before giving Harry a serious look. "There was another band of Snatchers around the last few days. I... I almost didn't come because I was following them." He whispered the last part, trying to conceal it from Hermione, no doubt.

There was no point; in such a small, confined area, they could all hear each other breathe.

"What do you *mean* 'almost didn't come'?! " Hermione screeched. "You would have left us—"

"Hang on," Harry defended. "Maybe he was trying to keep them from being led right toward us," he said. Hermione almost faltered at his logic, but then looked to Ron for an explanation.

Ron's flushed face answered her question, however. "I... I followed them to see if they might take me to where... to where Ginny is."

Harry felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. He stared at Ron helplessly as thoughts whirled in his brain, not fully connecting to give him some sort of picture.

"Explain," Hermione said dangerously.

Ron sat up and stared at his hands for a long minute. "Remember when we heard Dean and that Dirk bloke? And the goblins? They were talking about Ginny trying to steal the sword?" He motioned to the Sword of Gryffindor that lay between Harry and Ron's beds.

"Quite," Hermione snapped.

Harry wanted to demand to know exactly what had happened, to shake Ron by the shoulders until the story spilled out of him faster, but Hermione was blocking his way, kneeling on his bed now,

demanding her own answers from Ron.

"She went with Hagrid, Neville, and Luna into the forest for detention," Ron continued, "but she didn't come back.

"We think she was taken, just snatched right from the forest. The family has been going barmy looking for her. Charlie came home from Romania and is tearing apart the whole country. Bill says Mum cries every night until she can't see anymore; her eyes are so swollen." Ron trailed off and Harry could hear the heartbreak in his voice, but it couldn't compare to the anguish consuming Harry right now.

Harry swore violently and pushed his hands into his hair, grabbing great hanks of it and tugging until it hurt. Ginny was gone. Ginny had been taken. And it was all his fault.

"I... I broke it off with her to keep her safe and... and it didn't do a damned bit of good," he whispered. A picture of her face appeared in his head. She was lying on the grass beneath the wedding marquee, her hair spread like a dark halo around her head, smiling up at him.

Harry felt violently ill, like never before. He felt so much emotion—anger and helplessness, longing and despair—filling his every pore that he thought his whole body was sure to explode with the weight of it.

Vaguely, he heard Ron and Hermione arguing, but it all faded into the background as he considered what he was going to do.

Ginny was gone; taken. And he needed to find her. Without her... He swallowed past the thought, not allowing it to take hold and cause him to panic completely. His legs shook as he stood and pulled his damp cloak around his shoulders. He slid the sword into his belt and stowed the stolen wand into his pocket. Each movement steeled his resolve and fed his anger.

He had no idea where he was going, but staying in this tent while Ginny was out there somewhere, wasn't an option any longer. He had to find her, to bring her back with him. She wasn't safe anywhere but at his side, obviously.

Ron's heavy hand on his shoulder was the only thing stopping him. Harry had the idea that Ron had just asked him a question, but he couldn't remember hearing it.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Harry glared at his best mate. "Ginny's out there," he said. "I'm going to find her. And then I'm going to kill the bastard who took her."

Ron flinched back as if Harry had struck him, but Harry couldn't feel bad for the murder in his voice. He couldn't be bothered with offending Ron when Ginny was in danger.

"Harry, wait!" Hermione dove for the door of the tent. "You can't just storm off without any idea—"

"Move, Hermione," Harry warned her in a low, deadly voice.

“Harry, think about what you’re doing,” she pleaded. “We have no idea where—”

“Don’t you think I would have stayed searching with Bill and Charlie if we had anything to go on?” Ron snapped. His face crumpled and he looked away before turning back to Harry. His hand clutched Harry’s cloak, pulling it tighter and tighter. “We searched almost the whole time I was gone. And they’re not giving up, mate.”

Irrational anger at Ron exploded out of Harry. “Why the *hell* did you come back then?! You should have stayed! You should have found her!” Harry pulled out of Ron’s grip and then pushed at him until they were grappling and Hermione was screaming at them to stop.

The walls of the tent shook violently as they wrestled and Harry pushed at Ron until he could take a swing. His fist connected with Ron’s jaw and the crack of it startled them both.

Ron glared at him and then growled loudly. He flipped them until Harry was pinned beneath him. His punch knocked the wind out of Harry.

The energy drained from Harry as he recovered from the blow and his eyes filled with tears—both from the pain of the punch and the reality of what had just happened.

It couldn’t be true. Ginny couldn’t be gone. He’d just seen her dot on the map...

Realization that it had been weeks since he’d searched for Ginny’s name on the map settled in. He hadn’t forgotten about her—quite the contrary, actually—but he and Hermione had been so busy with Godric’s Hollow and the attack of Nagini that taking the map out had fallen to the back of Harry’s mind.

“I came back,” Ron huffed, “because the best thing we can do is to end this thing!”

“He’s right, Harry,” Hermione said.

Harry shoved Ron off him and rolled away. “I thought you were mad at him. Now you’re agreeing with him?”

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms in front of her. “I think you’re *both* idiots,” she said. “But he has a point. Charlie and Bill will find her, Harry. You have to believe that.”

Harry looked away from her and stared at dull brown canvas of the tent wall. The anger was still there, but helplessness was settling in and the earlier exhaustion was multiplied a hundredfold. He was so tired of it all.

“I almost didn’t tell you,” Ron said. He was sitting next to Harry in pyjamas that were too short for his long legs, elbows resting on his knees. “I knew you’d be worried.”

Harry pushed up from the floor. “Worried? Shit, Ron, you really don’t get it, do you?” When Ron didn’t answer, he continued. “She’s not just some girl I snogged because she was convenient, you know. And I know she was cut up when I broke things off—don’t you think I felt anything at all about it? It gutted me, but I thought I was making the right choice. I thought I was keeping her safe. I thought...” He trailed off as a sob bubbled up from his middle and almost escaped.

An inarticulate growl of rage took its place and Harry slashed out with the sword, shredding the side of the tent open.

"She was supposed to be safe. She was supposed to be there, waiting, when I got back. She was..."

Hermione's trembling hand rested on his arm and Harry lowered the sword until it dropped at his feet. Her arms came around his chest, but Harry couldn't bring himself to embrace her back.

"We know you love her, Harry. We know."

"Charlie and Bill will find her," Ron said, although it sounded far too weak in Harry's ears—a promise that Ron didn't fully believe in.

"We just need to have a plan, Harry. We need to end this."

Harry knew they were right even if in his heart all he wanted to do was tear out into the night to find Ginny. He watched Hermione's wandwork knit the side of the tent back together and then sat heavily on his bundle of blankets. He felt he should apologize for falling apart, but at the same time he knew he didn't need to. They understood what he felt for Ginny—at least Hermione did.

"I know you're not messing Ginny around, Harry," Ron said quietly as he climbed beneath his blankets. "I know that you... you know. And I knew you'd be gutted when I told you."

"They're looking?" he asked finally. He had to know someone was out there searching.

"Yeah," Ron assured him. "It's all Charlie does. Bill's splitting his time between the Order and searching. I didn't get to see anyone else—they're all in hiding—but Bill told me Fred and George are doing everything they can, too. Tons of people are missing, and not just Muggleborns. Pureblood families—those that aren't Death Eaters—are leaving England in hordes, flocking to the Continent. Snatchers are dragging everybody they can to the Ministry, or to the Death Eaters, trying to get rewarded.

"Hagrid... he searches the forest every night, mate," Ron said sadly. "Blames himself for Ginny being taken on his watch. And Neville..."

Harry winced when he thought about it.

"He wanted to leave Hogwarts and join the search," said Ron. "He tracked Bill down and told him everything he knew about what had happened. Bill convinced him that he was better off there, taking care of things. But you and I know that this will never end until we take care of things." He gave Harry a significant look and Harry stared up at the ceiling.

His mind was too full—visions of Ginny being dragged away through the Forbidden Forest, tortured for information, and possibly... NO! He couldn't let himself think they would kill her. If Voldemort had Ginny, he'd keep her as a bargaining chip against Harry. He wasn't stupid; he knew that having Ginny would give him the advantage over Harry.

And, damn it all, Harry had to admit that it was the truth.

It had been weeks, rather than days, that Ginny sat in her basement room and waited. The two times Tonks had appeared, she'd been drawn and harried. The Order was constantly being targeted right now—the Ministry was conducting raids on homes, tearing them apart to find subversive members of the organization. Remus had been forced into hiding once again, and Tonks hadn't spoken to him since before she'd come to rescue Ginny. Owls were being intercepted constantly so Tonks couldn't even risk trying to contact the Weasleys that way. It was better to wait, she said. She'd get a message to them as soon as she could, but right now Ginny was very well hidden, and safe.

Frustration and anger set in as the days marched toward Christmas. Ginny decided that the cramped basement wouldn't do and set about organizing it. Prudence sometimes came down to help in between her appointments with other expectant mothers. The physical project of moving furniture and sorting boxes helped to dull Ginny's mind and occupy her thoughts.

Night was the time that the shadows crept in. She dreamed all the time now—horrible dreams of Harry being torn apart by werewolves, of the Ministry dragging her family in and torturing them until they told where she was hiding, of her baby being stolen by Snatchers and taken to Voldemort.

Prudence said the vivid dreams were normal for some pregnant women and dismissed them quickly, but Ginny just wished she would stop dreaming altogether.

"Everything looks good. Baby has a strong heartbeat. Want to hear?"

Ginny startled out of her musings and blinked up at Prudence. She stared down at the bare skin of her rounding belly and at the strange black object the woman was holding out to her.

"I can..."

"If you listen, you'll hear it." Prudence urged her to put the odd instrument into her ears and Ginny closed her eyes, listening intently.

At first she couldn't hear anything other than the harsh movement of the bit that was still held to her skin, then, very faintly, a rhythmic sound reached her. It was very low, and fast.

Ginny's eyes flew open and she stared at Prudence, who wore a knowing, wide smile.

"That's... that's him?"

"Or her," Prudence agreed. "No way to know which you've got in there unless we take you to a clinic to get an ultrasound."

Ginny had no idea what that meant, but she didn't care. She was lost in the soft whoosh-whoosh of the baby's heartbeat. It was such a tiny sound, but one she didn't think she would ever forget.

"It's real now, isn't it?"

She nodded to Prudence's question as tears filled her eyes. Logically, she knew she was pregnant,

but until this precise minute the idea of a living, growing baby inside her hadn't registered.

Ginny was a mother.

The thought terrified her, but it gave her a strong purpose, as well. She may not be able to be at Hogwarts leading a rebellion, she may not be out there with Harry searching for a way to end the war, but she had her own part to play. And Ginny wasn't going to allow this child to grow up without parents, if she had anything to say about it. There was nothing she could do about Harry—a thought that sent horror down to her very bones—but she had plenty of control over herself.

The next time Tonks came, Ginny was going to ask to stay here, with Prudence. If there were really attacks happening all the time against Order members, then Ginny wasn't going to chance her child's life on the possibility she *might* be safe. The Weasleys had never been quiet about their support of Dumbledore, or Harry, and Ginny had no doubt the list of Voldemort's enemies was full of her families' names.

"Everything is good?" she asked Prudence as she blinked away tears.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Your blood pressure is a little high, but I'd say that's to be expected, considering the circumstances. It's something we'll work on."

Ginny made a silent vow to watch what she was eating and get more rest. She didn't need to move any more furniture around, and she certainly didn't need to spend her days staring off into space, wishing she was somewhere else.

"Prudence—"

"Call me Prue, love."

Ginny smiled and handed the instrument back to the woman. "Prue, I need to learn everything I can. I... I want to stay here until... until my baby is born, or until the war is over. We're safe here."

Prudence's thoughtful scowl turned into a smile and she patted Ginny's hand before lowering her shirt over the baby. "You're welcome here, dearie. I haven't minded the company at all, and you've made the whole basement so lovely down there."

Ginny sat up from the sofa and looked at the drab little room in a new light. This would be her home until the war was over.

"I know! I know I'm horribly late in getting you out of here, but..." Tonks burst into the sitting room and held her hands in front of herself in protest. It was clear to Ginny that the former Auror expected Ginny to explode in rage about being left in Elland and forgotten about.

Ginny and Prue shared a smile over their tea cups and Prue moved to take Tonks' cloak.

"I'm fine," Ginny said. "I'm not angry."

The fight drained from Tonks' face and she sank into a chair, moving awkwardly around her growing

belly. "You're not going to hex me?"

"No magic, remember?" Ginny said. "I'm really fine here, Tonks."

Tonks accepted the cup of tea that Prue offered and didn't protest when the woman fussed about her. "It's barmy out there," she said with a heavy sigh. "I haven't been able to get away before now."

Ginny sat up straighter in her chair. "Is everything all right? My family? Harry?"

"Everyone is safe," Tonks said. "Well, I have no idea about Harry, but no news is good news with them. Remus had to go into hiding again so no one has talked to your family in the last few weeks, but Kingsley keeps an eye on everyone for me. I had planned on taking you to my parents' and then seeing if we can contact Bill—"

"I'm staying here," Ginny said. Prue patted her on the shoulder. "It's all decided. We're safe here." She cradled her belly. "You can come for us when it's over, or... maybe when the baby comes we can go to my family. But for now we're safe."

"That's... I hadn't planned..."

Ginny smiled and reached for her friend's hand. "I know, and I appreciate all that you've been doing, the secret you've kept for me, all the worry, but it is best this way."

"You've really thought this through."

"I can't be a target. I won't allow our baby to be used as a weapon against Harry. He's got a job to do and until it's over we have to stay hidden."

Tonks was quiet for a long minute. Her fingers traced the rim of her cup. "Have you thought about what you'll do if he doesn't—"

"I believe in Harry," Ginny said. "I believe he'll do what he needs to do. Thinking about anything else terrifies me and I can't dwell on things like that. I have to be positive."

Tonks nodded and sipped at her tea. Ginny took a minute to appraise her friend. There were dark smudges beneath her puffy eyes and she was much too thin considering the size of her belly.

"What's been happening?" Ginny asked. "You look like you haven't slept in a month and you're not eating."

"You sound like your mother," Tonks grumbled.

"She has a point," Prue said. "Before you go I'm going to give you an exam. You can glare at me all you want, it's going to happen."

Tonks rolled her eyes but didn't protest. "It's bad, Ginny. People are disappearing left and right. Fred and George had to close down their shop; Diagon Alley is almost deserted. Hogwarts is under siege. Snape has stopped all mail in and out—that happened months ago, though. Muggleborns are on the run and the Ministry is hunting them down, making them register. It's terrifying."

"How is the baby?"

"Good." Tonks smiled and rubbed her belly. "Growing far too big for me to be running all over England, that's for sure. Only a few more months and we'll get to meet him. Or... I will, anyway. Remus..." Her face twisted and she barely managed to control her emotions.

Ginny reached for her hand. Not hearing anything from Harry was hard, but at least Ginny didn't have to *know* what he was going through. She didn't see the evidence of what he was suffering, or what he was dealing with like Tonks did with Remus. Sometimes her imagination was more than she could handle—proof of Harry battling Death Eaters and barely escaping Voldemort wasn't anything that Ginny could handle right now.

"It'll get better," she said, "it has to. A few more months, like you said, and you'll have a new life to take care of. That has to count for something."

"It does," Tonks said. She smiled and held onto Ginny's hand. "Until then, you and I will hold on, we'll keep praying and waiting, doing our little parts for the future."

"It's all we have," Ginny agreed. "Tell my family that I'm safe, that I love them and that I'll be home as soon as I can."

"I'll get the message to them. Somehow." Tonks promised.

Harry's stomach lurched as he watched the blood drain from Snape's face.

"Take....it.... Take....it..."

As he siphoned the memories from the floor Harry tried not to look into the man's eyes, to see death taking him away. No matter how much he had loathed the man in life, no one deserved to die like this. The vial was full when the last few drops of silver leaked out of Snape's mouth. Harry frantically tried to collect them, but they slipped away into the cracks between the floorboards; lost forever.

"Look... at... me..."

As the light left Snape's eyes, Harry clutched the vial of silvery memories so tightly in his hand he thought it might break. And then Snape was gone, his eyes black and unseeing.

He didn't remember much about Hermione and Ron leading him back into the castle; Voldemort's booming voice drown everything out, along with the new horror he'd just witnessed.

The whole last few hours were a blur that Harry couldn't process completely. He'd come to Hogwarts, hoping—praying—that Ginny would turn up, a little worse for wear, perhaps, but healthy and as fiery as ever. But there was no flash of brilliant crimson hair, no chocolate eyes that understood him with a single glance. Bill gave him a pained, apologetic look when their eyes met, and Harry understood. She was truly gone.

His legs were like lead as he slipped away from his friends and made his way to the Headmaster's office. He had to view the memories that Snape had given him, had to know what was so important. And it would be welcome relief to get out of his own head for a few minutes, even if it meant venturing into Snape's. No matter how horrible the thoughts were, nothing could compare to the torture that was in Harry's mind right now.

He was wrong, though. Seeing Snape's past, understanding how much he had loved Harry's mother, only brought Ginny into Harry's mind sharply. Snape had lived his whole life in devotion to someone who had never understood what he could feel for her. It sickened Harry and made pity swirl in his belly at the same time.

And then the most important memory, which brought everything into sharp focus for Harry; Harry was to die.

'Harry must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could he have the strength to do what must be done?'

Dumbledore's words left a gaping wound in Harry's heart. He would die. He would leave everyone he loved behind to live in a world that he was never meant to be a part of.

One final memory—a misty haze of a moment—reformed and Harry startled to see Snape staring down at Ginny as she stood in this very office.

"Foolish girl."

Ginny glared back at him, full of defiance even as her body shook. Harry tried to cling to the vision of her.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?"

The memory melted away and Harry had to squint to see what was happening in the darkness of the next one. Snape stood in the trees, cloaked all in black, and watched as Ginny was taken by another black-cloaked figure.

She was gone, stolen right out from under Snape's nose, and he hadn't done a thing to stop it.

Harry came to lying on the dusty carpet of the Headmaster's office.

He was going to die. Ginny had been kidnapped by Death Eaters and was most likely dead. No one had seen or heard from her in months. Snape might have loved Lily Potter with a devotion that stretched beyond the grave, he might have protected Harry, but he had drawn the line at saving the thing most precious to Harry.

Harry had broken things off with Ginny to protect her, but it hadn't mattered in the end. Somehow Voldemort knew that taking Ginny would weaken Harry and he'd played the most painful card in his hand. Since he had not taunted Harry with Ginny's imprisonment, Harry could only assume she was gone.

"I'm coming, Ginny," he whispered as he stood on shaky legs and picked his Invisibility Cloak off the

ground.

He would see her soon enough. He would be with her again.

Interlude 1: Sinking Ship

He knew he had to watch carefully, or he'd miss it. There would be only one second between the flash of red and then nothing as the man Apparated away. Honestly, it had been nothing short of a miracle that he'd been able to track the Weasley twins down. But this is where George—or was it Fred?—had told him to wait, and so he'd made sure he was here more than two hours before they'd said he should be. Better to be safe than sorry.

Gran was going to kill him for missing out on one of her Christmas festivities—there weren't many this year. The Longbottom home was usually decorated from top to bottom and his Gran's friends would come over all the time, bringing biscuits and puddings, pinching his cheeks and making him feel like he was five years old again.

But most of the old ladies had either stopped going out or were in hiding. Gran had tried valiantly to make Neville feel like nothing was wrong, but the drawn, exhausted look on her face said everything she couldn't express to him. And if Bill didn't show up today, Neville would be stuck waiting another day for him. Gran definitely wouldn't be pleased.

Neville hadn't told her a word of what was happening at Hogwarts. She didn't need that type of burden.

In truth, if he hadn't had this errand on his mind, Neville might have stayed at Hogwarts. The hallways and corridors were deserted, though; *everyone* went home for the holidays, which allowed Neville to feel much better about boarding the train bound for London.

If the first few weeks of Hogwarts had been rough, the last few were simply hell. Ever since Ginny had been taken...

Neville forced the thought away. There would be time to dwell on it later, time to measure each footstep through the Forbidden Forest and see just where he'd gone wrong. Time to decide how he was going to tell Harry that he'd failed in taking care of Ginny, that he'd let his guard down *once* and she'd been taken. That was the thought that kept him up most at nights; that and the idea of what might be happening to Ginny, wherever they'd taken her.

The old building was creepy and it rattled in the blizzard outside. At least it wasn't dark out; Neville wasn't sure he was brave enough to approach the place in the dead of night.

Right on time, Bill Weasley Apparated into the dilapidated, abandoned factory, wand drawn.

Neville sucked in a breath of fright and then lowered his own wand. "I wasn't sure if you'd—"

But Bill interrupted with a string of questions rapidly fired. Neville floundered on a few of them but must have passed Bill's tests because the tall, scarred curse breaker finally relaxed.

"The twins said you've been looking for me."

Neville swallowed thickly and nodded. "I... I need to talk to you about Ginny."

Bill scowled and conjured two chairs. He sat in one and waited for Neville to take the other. "We haven't found anything, if that's what you wanted to know. Not even a hint of where she might be."

"I was hoping that maybe..." Neville rubbed his eyes and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Word in and out of Hogwarts is nearly impossible, and it gets worse every day. They used to just read our post, now we're not even allowed to send owls. They figured out we were using codes. The Ravenclaw's came up with that." He grimaced at the memory of Michael Corner's bruised and bloody face after the Carrows had caught him sending a letter to his parents full of odd phrases and little drawings. Several other Ravenclaw's had been interrogated and intimidated before Snape discontinued all post completely.

"I'm surprised they even let you leave for the holiday, then," Bill said. He peered intently at Neville's face and Neville took another breath, watching the fog that built in front of him when he exhaled.

"I think they were trying to build morale," said Neville. It struck him as ironically funny and he smirked. Bill found it much less amusing, but he did manage a small smile.

"I wish there was something more we could do. As it is, you're probably safer there than out here, and that's not saying much." Bill slumped against the back of the chair and Neville watched him carefully. He didn't look just tired; he looked exhausted—like death warmed over.

"I want to know if there's anything I can do to help," Neville said finally. He'd rehearsed this all on the train ride home and knew it was the right thing to do. "I don't have to go back. I can—"

"You need to go back," Bill said. He jerked forward and stared at Neville, eyes wide and insistent. "They need you there."

"But Ginny..." Neville stood and paced back and forth across the filthy floors. "I owe it to Harry to help find her. It was my responsibility to watch her and I... I failed." Neville's throat closed and he had to swallow several times to keep the emotion under control.

Bill's hand closed on his shoulder and he patted awkwardly. "It wasn't your fault, Neville. Hagrid's told me everything about that night—several times. We've sifted through his memories so many times I feel like I was standing right there next to all of you. One minute she was there, the next she wasn't. No one could have prevented that."

"Do you want my memories, too?"

Bill thought about it before shrugging. "I don't see how it would really help much. You, Hagrid, and Luna were all there together. Unless there's something we don't know about, some conversation you had with Ginny, something that you saw... I think we've got all the information we need, it just doesn't lead us anywhere."

Neville stared off into the deserted building. "I wish I'd paid more attention. I knew something was wrong with her, but I thought it was just... stress."

Bill perked up and his eyes narrowed. "What do you mean 'something was wrong'?"

Neville wondered if he'd said something off, but pressed on anyway. Maybe there was something he wasn't seeing, but someone else might know more.

"She wasn't eating hardly anything. She looked really pale and fragile, you know. Not that she was, or anything. She just..." He stared down at his shoes and gathered his thoughts. "She looked lost."

The tall redhead thought about that for a minute before sighing and rubbing his face. "I suppose we all feel like that."

"Yeah, but this was worse," Neville said. "I think... I think she really missed Harry. I mean, we didn't talk about it or anything, but I know they were... together... before."

Bill nodded. "They didn't make a big thing of it, but I knew something had gone on between them."

Neville closed his eyes and tried to remember the weeks before Ginny disappeared. "And she started to get better, toward the end there. She seemed preoccupied a lot; at times she'd just sit there and stare off into space. I thought maybe she was planning things, you know, to make it harder for the Carrows and Snape. She was good at that."

Bill chuckled. "She's definitely Fred and George's little sister."

"And then we went after the sword." Neville shuddered at the memory of Snape's black eyes on them and the icy coldness of his words. "She never told me what he did to her, why he kept her longer than us... What he said to her... I don't know."

"We may never know," Bill said. "Listen, I need to go. But I really think you should go back. They need you there, Neville. They need..."

"They need *Harry*," Neville said. "I'm not like him. I'm no one."

Bill clasped his shoulders tightly and Neville was shocked to see that he didn't look quite so tall this close up. "They need *you* Neville, because you're Gryffindor enough to stand up to those Death Eaters. And you're strong enough to take care of those who can't do it for themselves."

Neville felt his face heat as Bill kept speaking.

"You're the best chance they have right now of making it out of there. Just keep your head down. You don't need anymore of this." He tapped the scar on Neville's face and gave a knowing look.

"Although, in my experience, the witches go for the scarred look." He gave a smirk and waggled his eyebrows, making Neville flush.

"That's not... I don't know..." Neville trailed off and shifted awkwardly. "Can you do me a favor? Let my Gran know if you do find out anything about Ginny. I'm not sure how she'll get the message to me, but she will. She's... persistent."

Bill chuckled and clapped Neville on the shoulder. "I'll do my best. Keep doing what you're doing, Neville. I know it's not easy, but one day it'll all be worth it."

Neville nodded even though he didn't feel anywhere near to thinking that. From where he sat,

things couldn't get much worse. The school was under siege, Harry, Ron and Hermione were missing, Ginny had been kidnapped, Seamus was off traipsing around England searching for Dean during the holiday break...

"Choose between what's right and what's easy, right?" he asked, remembering Professor Dumbledore's words after the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

"Exactly," said Bill. "Take care, Neville."

"You, as well."

Chapter 7: Where You'll Find Me

"I am about to die."

Harry clasped the black stone in his hand when it came out of the Snitch. He knew what he had to do with the stone now. He would see Ginny once more. She would take his hand and lead him forward to where he needed to go. He would see his family once more. The stone that had been lauded as a way to bring the dead back to life would be his salvation. It wasn't going to be used to resurrect the dead; it was being used to send Harry among them. Ginny would be there to take him to be with her.

His heart thundered in his chest and Harry still counted each beat as he turned the stone over in his hand. Once, twice, and three times. He closed his eyes and heard the motion around him. Slowly, Harry looked, tracing ethereal feet from the ground up legs that were not fully ghost, not fully alive.

The woman that stood in front of him smiled.

"Ginny?"

Harry's heart lurched and he took a step forward, studying her intently. But this wasn't Ginny. She didn't smile the same, and her face was longer, less rounded.

"Harry."

And then Harry understood. This was his mother. Next to her stood his father, the same height as Harry, his arm draped around Harry's mother. On Lily's other side was Sirius, roguish and more handsome than Harry remembered him being. And Lupin was there, as well, smiling widely.

"You've been so brave."

Harry startled at his mother's words and searched the forest around him. He clutched the Resurrection Stone so tightly that the edges pressed painfully into his palm.

"Ginny? She's supposed to be here."

"You're so close," James said. "We came to be with you."

"But Ginny..." Harry's mind wouldn't let him focus on anything else. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. He was doing this to be with Ginny once more. He would die and they would be together, where nothing could keep them apart again.

"I don't know, Harry," Lily said.

"Ginny Weasley?" Sirius asked. A wide smile split his face and he nudged James playfully. "Told you."

Harry's eyes burned and he looked away quickly, rather than give in to the emotion threatening to

pull him under. "She's my... I love her."

"I haven't seen her, Harry," Remus said. "Maybe she's not—"

"I have to see her. I never told her... And now she's gone."

Lily moved closer, close enough to touch him if she'd been real. "You can't give up hope, Harry. If she's not here perhaps you were wrong about her fate."

His chest tightened painfully, like a vice gripping, crushing bone and muscle. It took Harry a minute to realize that the sensation was hope. Could he be wrong about Ginny's death? Could she still be alive?

Harry stared off into the forest, piecing it all together in his head. If she was alive, Harry really wouldn't see her again. He couldn't escape death; not this time.

"Does it hurt?" Harry asked before he could stop himself.

"Not at all," Sirius assured him. "Like falling asleep."

Harry gave a jerky nod and took another step forward. He spoke with Remus about Teddy as he moved his feet, one step at a time, and his family followed.

"Stay close to me." Harry's sentry fell silent as they neared the clearing. He felt the Dementors all around him. His heart was still beating, his brain was still working, his limbs still moving him forward, but Harry felt apart from it all. He didn't even think—couldn't move past this precise moment in time.

The clearing became solid in front of him. He hesitated and gave one backward glance to his family.

"Never give up hope, Harry," his mother said. "You have to hold on to that in the end."

Harry nodded and let the stone slip from his hand. The presence of his family faded and Harry was left alone, with only the hope his mother had given him to face Voldemort.

He would die, but in doing so, he could give Ginny one more chance at life.

The first of May. It felt like May, Ginny decided as she walked down the street—well, waddled would probably be the better term. The distance from Prue's to Mrs. Fleming's house seemed to grow each day. It started out as a few houses, and stretched into a whole street, and then into several. Her feet were tired and swollen—not that she could see them any longer—and her back had been killing her all day. Sitting on the floor to play with little Nigel and Fannie hadn't been the best idea, Ginny could admit now. But they were beautiful children and very understanding why Ginny couldn't pick them up any longer and tired so easily. Fannie, the very precocious four year-old, claimed to know all about babies.

Mrs. Fleming had let her go early upon seeing Ginny's state this afternoon.

"You'd best get some rest, Ginny, or that baby will come sooner than you think!"

As she walked, Ginny pressed her hands into her back, rubbing the sore muscles that the baby had caused. Thankfully, the pain wasn't constant, just a dull ache low in her back for the past few days. Off and on, come and go. It made sleeping almost impossible, but she was getting used to running on only a few hours.

"You can come out anytime you like, little one," Ginny muttered to herself. She didn't care that Mrs. Tomkins watched her pass with scorn ('Young ladies have no business getting themselves into that sort of trouble!') or that Mr. Pepperidge looked on the verge of wobbling down his stairs on his frail legs to guide her home. ('You look like you could use some help there.')

Even as Ginny imagined the relief from not carrying the baby around all day, she still wanted to wait to have it. Every morning she marked another X on the calendar, counting down the days until that magical, perfect day would arrive and Tonks would come to bring her home. The war was dragging on and Ginny wondered if the end would ever come.

"Your Daddy is going to owe me an explanation, you know," she told the baby. A mighty kick answered her and Ginny gasped, clutching her belly. After a few breaths the pain subsided and she was able to shuffle the few remaining steps.

Prue's eyes went wide when Ginny entered the house. She flew to Ginny's side and helped her to sit on the sofa.

"How long have you been like this, ducky?!"

"Just now," Ginny said. The pain returned again and Ginny's whole body tightened against it. "When I was walking home."

Prue tsk'ed and fluffed pillows, stuffing them behind Ginny's back. "And you've not had any other pains today?"

"Just my back," Ginny said, "but that's been aching for days." Now that she was sitting down, the overwhelming need to rest was consuming her. She slumped toward the cushions, intent on sleeping for days.

"What am I going to do with you, girly? You're in labor!"

Ginny opened her eyes and tried to focus on Prue's hovering face. "I am?"

Prue rolled her eyes and heaved Ginny up. "We need to get you to a bed."

The room spun as Ginny sat upright and she had to cling to Prue to keep from passing out. "No stairs," she breathed. "Can't make it."

"Not in this condition," Prue agreed. "Come on with you, we'll use the room up here."

Ginny tried not to panic as Prue settled her in the tiny guest bedroom. She tried to remember the breathing Prue had taught her, and forced the reality of the situation into her mind. The baby was

coming *now*.

"It's too soon," Ginny moaned. In truth, her due date had passed just a few days ago, but she wanted Harry to be here. The war was supposed to be over and she was supposed to be with her family, having this baby with her mother here and Harry by her side. She clutched her belly as another pain rolled over her. "Not... yet. Harry!"

Prue moved quickly, darting around the room and gathering things. "Love, this baby is coming whether the father is here or not. Don't forget to breathe. You're going to be fine."

Hours later, all pretense of not panicking were gone. Ginny was exhausted. Her whole body shook from the fatigue of contractions. Prue kept murmuring words of encouragement, but Ginny was close to breaking. She wanted her mother, she wanted Harry, and she wanted all of it to end.

"Can I go home?" she begged. "I just want to go home."

Prue gave a chuckle and shifted Ginny in the bed. "Come on, love, you're almost there." She disappeared for a second, probing under the sheet. Ginny whimpered and closed her eyes rather than stare at the magnolia plaster ceiling. She'd never been so tired in her life.

"This little one has no patience at all," Prue proclaimed with a huge smile. "You're all ready to begin pushing!"

Even though it sounded impossible, Ginny summoned enough energy to give one good push. It felt good to be doing anything, rather than lying on her back, feeling as if her life was draining away.

"Another one, just like that," Prue said.

"I can't!" Ginny flopped back against the bed. "No more."

"Push!" Prue helped Ginny grip her knees and together they counted, Ginny pushing with everything she had.

"Let's see that little one. Another push, Ginny, another push!"

Ginny groaned and reached deep inside herself, focusing on doing the only thing she could do right now. She pulled Harry's face into her mind and imagined it was him urging her on, his hands holding her as she brought their child into the world, his presence she felt in the room.

"One more, Ginny!"

A wail broke the tension in the room and Ginny opened her eyes to see Prue holding a tiny, slime-covered being in her arms. The baby protested loudly when it was laid on Ginny's stomach.

"It's a boy!"

Ginny watched with awe as they cleaned the baby together, wiping away the mess that covered him. He was so little; smaller than Ginny expected, although she hadn't really been around children much growing up. His thatch of dark hair was all Harry's, but Ginny thought she could see a bit of Weasley in the roundness of his face.

“A boy.”

It echoed through her head just as much as her son’s protests. She whispered it over and over, willing Harry to know—wherever he was—that his son had been born. He was a father and he didn’t even know it.

Once they were all cleaned up, the baby swaddled in her arms and blinking swollen eyes up at her, Ginny felt the exhaustion creep back up.

“What will you name him?” Prue watched them fondly.

Ginny blinked at the baby. She’d thought of names, but choosing one without Harry to help was painful.

“James,” she whispered. It was the right one; a name that Harry could be proud of. “James Ronald Potter.”

“It’s a strong name,” Prue agreed. “For a strong boy. Born on May the second. A good day.”

Ginny thanked Prue quietly and stared down at her son. In all the nights lying awake, wondering what this baby would be like, Ginny could honestly say she hadn’t ever imagined this exact moment. There was no way to describe the overwhelming love she felt for James, the lengths she would go to for him.

And she finally understood Lily and James Potter’s sacrifice all those years ago. It made sense in a way that Ginny didn’t think any person that wasn’t a parent could understand.

There was nothing in the world she wouldn’t do to save this wrinkle-faced little bit of perfection. No fire she wouldn’t walk through, no sacrifice too great. Seeing James’ face—such a mixture of Weasley and Potter features—convinced her that this right here, love in its truest form, was the most powerful force in the world. She closed her eyes and willed Harry, wherever he was, to feel that surge of strength. Perhaps he would sense her wishes for him, feel the love that she sent his way, and know that she was somewhere out there, waiting until he finished his quest.

“James Ronald Potter,” she whispered to the baby as he drifted off to sleep. It was a good, strong name.

It was the bright light of day that woke him. The dust motes danced in the air and Harry watched them before rolling over and staring up at the drapes around his bed in Gryffindor Tower.

His body still ached but the bone-tiredness was ebbing away with the light. His stomach growled noisily, but it was still too much effort to think about getting out of bed.

It felt like years ago that he had slipped out of the Great Hall, climbed the stairs to the tower, and fallen into a deep sleep. Harry didn’t even know what day it was; it might be the day after the battle, or days, or weeks after, in truth. He’d been exhausted enough to sleep that long.

None of it seemed real, and yet Harry felt different. He felt the weight of the past hovering above him, just off his shoulders. It was still tangible and close enough to reach out and grasp, but the pressing heaviness wasn't there.

He still felt numb, especially when he considered the deaths that lay at his feet. He may not have killed them, but he was responsible all the same.

Colin. Tonks. Remus. Fred. So many others.

The burden of it all crashed down on him and Harry moaned. Then he shook as a sob shuddered from his very soul.

Tears of grief, of pain, of relief slid down his hot cheeks. He cried for every thing he could think of—the lost, the missing, the dead, the ones who were still living. And he cried for himself.

It was over. He no longer had a death sentence stamped into him. He was free.

And yet that freedom had come with a price. The people he loved most were deeply affected by their relationship with him.

Ginny.

It all came back to her, Harry decided as he swiped at his eyes. They stung from the dirt on his hands, but he didn't care anymore.

He'd died to give Ginny the chance to live, and had then been granted a second opportunity at life himself. If only Dumbledore had known where she was, or how to find her; but he had no answers for Harry when they'd met at King's Cross Station. Harry could have sworn there was something there, in the old man's eyes that said he knew far more than he was sharing, but it didn't surprise Harry that even in death, Dumbledore had his secrets.

"I'm going to find you, I promise," he told the vision of Ginny in his mind. "I'll find you."

His mother's words—never give up hope—were just as clear in his head as when she'd spoken them at the edge of the forest.

"I'll never give up, Ginny, I promise."

Chapter 8: Where We Hope To Keep Safe from Pain

The hustle and bustle of the Ministry wasn't what Harry expected. The whole Wizarding World seemed to be in a stupor of shock following the Final Battle and the end of Voldemort's reign. Things were being done, but everything was moving at a much slower pace. Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade were virtual ghost towns with very few shoppers; everyone had learned to go into Muggle villages or simply do without for the past year, it seemed.

So seeing workers tearing down the horrific reminders of Death Eater rule was a welcome sight. Seeing Ministry employees filling the halls, levitating boxes into the lifts, vanishing propaganda posters tacked to everything, and even adding fresh paint to the walls gave Harry more hope.

Percy ran Harry down with a stack of boxes and then apologized profusely. His hairline was moist with sweat and his normally-pristine robes were dusty and rumpled.

"Sorry about that, Harry. I should have been watching where I was going." He helped Harry up off the floor and they stared at each other for a few minutes.

"I'm surprised to see you here," Harry said, even though he really wasn't. It was possible that Percy simply *lived* at the Ministry, Harry decided.

Percy adjusted his glasses and quickly glanced away. "The work helps, I think. The faster we get all of this mess out of here, the faster we can get on with things." He kicked the boxes with his foot and Harry could only imagine what they contained. "Dad's around here somewhere—some of the others, too. Minister Shackbolt called everyone in and asked for volunteers to help us straighten everything out. They'll begin real work again tomorrow."

"Sounds like a good idea. It gives people a purpose."

"Are you here to volunteer?" Percy asked.

"Er... not exactly," Harry said. "I'm here to talk to Kingsley about joining the Aurors."

Percy made a face at Harry's familiar use of the Minister's first name, but Harry thought it might be more out of habit than contempt for Harry. He and Percy may not see eye to eye on many things but they'd fought the same battle, bled the same red blood, and lost the same people.

"It may be none of my business, Harry, but it's only been a few days," Percy said quietly. "Maybe you should take some time for yourself. You've been through a lot."

Harry smiled tightly and clapped him on the shoulder. "So have you, you know." He didn't want to take time off, lounging around Grimmauld Place or playing Quidditch in the field behind The Burrow. As far as Harry was concerned, the war wasn't over until he found Ginny and brought her safely home. He had no doubt she'd have a few choice words for him, and possibly a nasty bat-bogey hex, if she found out he'd had a lie in while she was out there waiting for him to find her.

"I suppose we all have," Percy sighed. He levitated the boxes once more and gave Harry a nod. "Good luck with the Minister."

"Thanks, Percy."

"I just don't think it's a good idea."

"Kingsley, you have to understand—"

"I understand more than you think, Harry."

Harry sat back in the chair and forced himself to bite his tongue. It wouldn't do to burn the flimsy bridges he had been building with his new job only a few weeks after starting.

"We've found no evidence that Ginny was ever at Malfoy Manor."

"I know," Harry said sullenly. "I was there, remember?"

Kingsley looked frazzled and overly tired. Harry felt bad coming to him, but his immediate supervisor, Robards, never listened to Harry. Granted, Harry had insisted that he start at the bottom of the ranks, rather than take a spot near the top. It didn't seem right that he could step right out of Hogwarts (having taken no N.E.W.T.'s or even the entrance exams) and slide right into the rank and file of the Aurors. So when Harry had been granted a place in the corps, he had joined with the newest members and was given no special consideration.

But this was different. This had nothing to do with other cases and Harry's position as an Auror. This was about *Ginny*. To Harry the distinction was very clear, but not so much to those he worked with.

Kingsley had promised the full resources of the Ministry in finding Ginny, but Harry couldn't see that anything had been done besides passive questioning of former Death Eaters.

"I'll give you five minutes with him, but you have to understand that Draco Malfoy has not been charged with any crimes currently. The Ministry is not holding him—he's free to go and is free to choose whether he talks to you or not."

That rankled, even though Harry agreed that Draco wasn't mixed up in the worst Death Eater business, he still participated when Dumbledore had offered him a way out. Less guilty was still guilty.

"Five minutes is enough," Harry agreed reluctantly. There was certainly nothing to stop Harry from tracking Draco down outside the Ministry, in an un-official capacity, and making him answer questions.

'Some things never change,' Harry told himself as he watched Malfoy sit imperiously in his chair and toss his blonde hair artfully. Harry remembered meeting the man when they were both just eleven year old boys. He had the same superior nature even then.

The last year hadn't been easy on Malfoy; his face was leaner than it should be and his clothes were

more worn than usual. Harry knew that Lucius had been returned to Azkaban to finish out his original sentence and that he would have a new trial coming up. Narcissa Malfoy had been investigated and it was largely Harry's testimony of her mercy upon him that influenced the Wizengamot to acquit her of any wrong doing. The Malfoy name held very little favor with the current Ministry and Draco was in no position to bargain for anything. He would likely stand trial for his involvement in Voldemort's regime, but Harry doubted he'd actually go to Azkaban.

Draco's eyes widened when Harry stepped into the room. The two men appraised each other but the time for childish taunts was over.

"I have a few questions."

"You can ask," Draco said. "I doubt I have any more answers than last time I was questioned."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the reminder of his brief stay at Malfoy Manor. Harry hadn't spoken to Draco directly, but Ron had demanded to know where Ginny was and if Draco knew anything about her disappearance.

"Maybe the questions are different," Harry said.

Draco nodded his head in acquiescence and settled back into his chair.

"When was the last time you saw Ginny Weasley?" Harry asked. He took the chair opposite Draco and the two men stared at each other.

"At the beginning of October, I caught her coming out of the locked Potion's classroom."

Harry blinked at the revelation. "And what did you do to her?"

"Nothing." Draco shrugged casually.

"I find that hard to believe."

Draco's jaw tightened but he swallowed whatever bitter words he had and cleared his throat. "The only thing I could have done was curse her—which would have been vindictive and pointless—or turn her over to the Carrows. I may have agreed with the Dark Lord's theories, Potter, but not all of his methods. Amycs and Alecto Carrow were the worst sort of rubbish. They had only one goal being at Hogwarts—to torture innocent witches and wizards. Whatever Ginny Weasley was, she was also a pureblood witch. I had no argument with her."

"You knew that she and I were together," Harry pointed out.

"All of Hogwarts knew, Potter," Draco said. "You hardly kept your relationship a secret. *You* handed the Dark Lord that weapon. Rather Gryffindor of you—all heart, no brains."

Harry let the accusation fall from his shoulders. They weren't boys anymore and words barely hurt after what Harry was going through.

"What was Ginny doing down in the dungeons?"

“Stealing Potions ingredients would be my guess, but I didn’t take the time to stop and ask her. We saw each other and then went our separate ways. I may have seen her in the Great Hall or the corridors after—I really don’t remember. Our paths would not normally cross.”

“So you don’t know why she was taken or who took her?”

“I told the Weasel—er...” Draco cleared his throat and gathered himself. “As I told Ronald Weasley when he was held at Malfoy Manor, I had no knowledge of a scheme to abduct his sister. I do not know who took her or where she was kept. It’s likely she’s dead, since it’s been so long, but I don’t know that for sure.”

Harry’s fingernails dug into his palms and he silently counted down from one hundred to rein his temper in. He believed Malfoy was telling the truth, even if the man had to get in those little digs to make it hurt even more.

“Am I free to go, or are you planning on detaining me?”

Harry stared at him for a long minute. “Did Voldemort know of my connection to Ginny?”

Draco flinched at the name and rolled his shoulders in annoyance. “I am not aware of what the Dark Lord knew. I was not in his confidences. I suspect he knew, though. It’s possible that he had one of his followers kidnap her to be used as a weapon. That sounds like something he might do, but *again* I don’t know that based on fact.”

Harry felt frustration build inside him once again. All they’d done was hit one dead end after another in their search for Ginny. It had been two months since the Battle and there was still no sign of her.

“You’re free to go,” Harry said. He stood and the sound of his chair scraping on the floor echoed in the room.

“That’s it?” Draco questioned. “No Veritaserum, Potter? No Cruciatus? She must not mean that much to you if you’re willing to give up so easily.”

Harry tried to ignore the way the words made him feel. A very small part of him agreed—if he *really* loved Ginny, he would do anything to get her back. That unreasonable demand on himself was easy to ignore, though, because he knew it was wrong. He loved Ginny with everything he had, and the moment he found her he was going to pour his heart out and tell her.

“You don’t know anything about love,” Harry said quietly. “If you did, you’d know she wouldn’t want me to become some sort of monster to find her.”

“Maybe,” Draco answered. They stared at each other and then parted ways.

Ginny watched James as he stretched for the colorful set of keys. They were just out of his reach. His little legs kicked and he squeaked in frustration.

"He's going to be crawling before you know it," Prue warned Ginny.

James extended just a bit further, lost his balance and rolled from his belly onto his back. He looked startled for a moment but then grinned toothlessly and stuffed the keys—which he had just managed to snatch—into his mouth.

"And running after that," Ginny said.

A pang of sadness niggled at her brain, but Ginny didn't let it envelope her like she had just after James had been born. She spent many afternoons sobbing into her pillow, wishing she could share this wonderful miracle with the people she loved most. Worry over their safety—Harry's especially—weighed down on her until she couldn't seem to see the happiness in any situation.

Prue called it Post-*something* depression and did her best to help ease Ginny's melancholy. Eventually, Ginny pulled herself out of the dark place. She was a mother, for Merlin's sake, and James was all she had in the world right now. He deserved better than a mum who couldn't get dressed or comb her hair.

Mrs. Fleming had been thrilled when Ginny offered to watch little Nigel and Fannie once more.

"I was sure you would have gone back to your family by now," she had said as she cooed over James in the second-hand pram.

"No," Ginny said. "Not yet. My... my boyfriend is in the military. He's off..." She trailed off and Mrs. Fleming's smile turned into something bordering on pity. While the essence of the story was true, she felt bad for misleading a woman who had been nothing but kind.

"Oh, you poor thing. I had no idea."

"I'm fine," Ginny assured her. It wasn't a lie; each morning got a little easier, and James was such a wonderful baby.

Several times a week now Ginny would take the three children to the park or play little games with them to keep them occupied while Mrs. Fleming did the marketing, or had tea with her friends, or worked in the small estate agent's office in town.

The days turned into something routine, trudging onward. The summer was hot—sweltering—but Ginny managed to keep the children from getting too sunburned during their outings. They had ice lollies before lunch, made games out of almost everything, and Fannie learned to read.

The worst days were Harry's birthday and Ginny's. Prue insisted on a small cake for Ginny, but the celebration was stilted by the reality of the situation.

"I'm not sure what to do, honestly," Ginny said as she picked at the slice of chocolate cake. "Tonks hasn't come for months. I know she's in hiding and probably busy with the baby, but..."

"But some news would be nice," Prue said.

"I keep watching the news, looking for some sign that..." Ginny took a bite of the cake and forced a

smile. "It's good."

Prue patted her hand lovingly and ruffled James' hair. "There won't be anything in our news, I'm sure. There never is."

Ginny had to agree—nothing she'd seen pointed to the war being over. There were things that gave Ginny hope—the lack of misty weather covering England, no huge calamities like last year—but with no contact from anyone, she had no choice but to stay hidden.

August turned into September: James began rolling everywhere, Ginny's mood improved as she refused to let herself succumb to the greyness that lay just below the surface, two bright white teeth peeked through James' pink gums, and the leaves on the trees began to turn.

Sometimes at night, while James was cuddled tightly next to her—Ginny knew sharing the bed with him was spoiling him horribly, but it was easier to sleep when he was with her—she talked to Harry. She told him all about their son, quiet words whispered into the dark. She cried and let herself be angry with him for not coming. She even allowed herself to think the worst; that he'd been killed or hurt so badly in the fight that he was unable to come for them.

And every morning, even on those bad ones, she would wake to Jamie's smiling face. If it weren't for him, Ginny knew she would have been lost long ago.

Ron stared down at his best mate and felt a twinge of far more than annoyance at Harry. He couldn't quite call it anger, though, because he understood what Harry was going through.

The whole family was still a mess after Ginny's disappearance. And as much as Ron hated to say it, he couldn't help but feel it was time for them all to begin moving on. Ginny was gone. Whether that meant she'd been killed or was simply missing forever, Ron didn't know. Either way, wallowing in misery and refusing to move forward wasn't the way to go.

Bloody hell, Ginny was his little sister and it tore his insides out that she wasn't here anymore, grinning in that impish way she had, taking the piss for everything and nothing... It gutted him.

So he understood perfectly what Harry was going through, even if Harry couldn't see that. Harry never allowed himself to see anything except his own anger and pain.

He'd missed another Sunday dinner at The Burrow and Ron's mother had sent Ron out to track Harry down. Bill and George were covertly checking the pubs surrounding Grimmauld Place, but Ron knew Harry would be here, holed up in this miserable place, torturing himself.

Harry hadn't even bothered with going up the stairs to the bedroom lately. The sitting room was scattered with dirty clothing, crumpled parchment, and various bits of dried, decaying food.

Ron scrunched his nose in distaste and nudged Harry with his foot. His friend was asleep on the narrow sofa, his head hanging off one side and his arm dangling down to the floor. Ron hadn't seen him in more than a week, but he could tell Harry wasn't taking care of himself. A scruffy, ragged black beard was growing in over his cheeks and chin, and his hair was wild and unkempt. The

clothing he slept in—a simple t-shirt and boxers—were rumpled and smelly.

“Wake up, Harry.” Ron nudged Harry’s shoulder with his hand and jumped back as Harry whirled and stuck his wand right in Ron’s face.

“Woah!” Ron yelled. “Just me, mate!”

Harry blinked wide eyes at Ron and lowered his wand a fraction of an inch. Once Ron had answered a lightning fast round of question-and-answer to prove his identity, Harry flopped back down and rubbed his whole face with both hands.

“Don’t do that, Ron,” Harry warned him.

Ron scowled at Harry and sat down on the edge of one of the chairs in the room after nudging a pile of laundry to the side. “It’s not like I was attacking you. And this place has more wards on it than the Ministry, *mate*!”

Harry glared at him before snatching his glasses off the floor next to the sofa. He stood abruptly and moved his arms as if he were going to clean the place up, but never took a step. Instead, he surveyed the room helplessly and Ron wondered if he even cared about anything anymore.

“Mum was worried,” Ron said shortly. “Hermione, as well.”

Harry huffed and dove toward a pile of clothing, sorting out pieces and sniffing them before discarding all of the pieces to the floor. “But not you?” He glanced at Ron and turned to another pile of clothing. “Sorry. Don’t mean to be a burden,” he mumbled darkly.

“Bloody hell, Harry! You’re not a burden! We worry because you’re our friend, and you’re doing a ruddy terrible job at taking care of yourself. We worry because you’re acting like a prat—ignoring your friends and forgetting about the family that loves you.”

The words had some effect—at least Harry’s shoulders flinched before he pulled a semi-clean t-shirt on.

“I’m fine,” Harry said. He found a pair of jeans that weren’t horribly dirty and tugged them on as well. “I’ve told you—”

“Yeah, well, you look terrible.” Ron felt a vindictive thrill at finally being able to tell Harry how he felt. Hermione wasn’t here to baby Harry, and his mother wasn’t here to correct Ron about his language.

“Thanks,” Harry said dully. He flicked his wand and the piles of laundry flew across the room to one large heap. He marched out the door and Ron was forced to follow him as Harry stomped to the kitchen.

“Where’s Kreacher?” Ron asked. The kitchen was just as much a disaster as the sitting room. No laundry littered the floor and furniture, but there was a huge stack of dirty dishes in the sink and the rubbish bin was overflowing. Harry didn’t seem to notice as he dug in the larder for something.

"I don't need a minder." Harry appeared again with a box Wizard O's—Free Toy Wand in Every Box!—and poured almost the entire amount into a huge bowl before adding milk.

"Sure," Ron answered sarcastically. He watched Harry devour the cereal mindlessly.

"He's at Hogwarts," Harry said through a mouthful of food. "Didn't need him around here."

It hurt to see Harry so lifeless, so without purpose. If he asked, Ron knew Harry would scoff at the idea and say he had plenty of purpose.

"Tonight was dinner at The Burrow."

Harry's next bite hovered near his mouth and he scowled down at it before stuffing the overloaded spoon in his mouth. He gave a half shrug and chewed loudly, as if he couldn't be bothered with details like that.

Ron pressed on. "Were you planning on coming and simply fell asleep?" He knew the answer but wanted to see if Harry would actually admit it.

"I have to work," Harry said darkly. He pushed the half-eaten bowl of food away and it sat in the center of the table as Harry snatched a set of dark robes off the back of a chair.

"You're a bastard, Harry, did'ya know that?" Ron had had enough of the pitiful, hermit lifestyle Harry had been living. "And you don't deserve to have the friends you do!"

Harry's wand was out in an instant, but he didn't point it. Instead, he glared at Ron and clenched his fist over and over again.

"It's so easy for you, isn't it, Ron? Always have Mummy and Daddy go to home to. Always have—"

Ron launched across the room until they were toe to toe. "Ginny was my sister, you git!" he roared. "And I've mourned her more than anyone—"

"Shut the hell up, Ron!" Harry's wand let off a dangerous flash of bright sparks toward the ground. "Don't you compare my pain to yours. Don't you dare! She might have been your sister, but Ginny was... she was..."

His voice broke and Ron nearly crowed in triumph. Harry needed to break down; he needed this confrontation so he could let his ruddy feelings go. Holding everything inside was eating away at Harry until Ron could barely recognize his friend in the man who stood before him anymore.

But Harry didn't break down. He sucked in a shuddering breath and slid his wand into his pocket before turning away.

"She was my everything," he said quietly. "And I don't know how to... how to deal with any of this without her."

"You talk to your friends," Ron said. "You stop shutting people out and accept the fact that we want to help you, Harry."

The tortured look that crossed Harry's face twisted Ron's heart. "I can't... can't..." He didn't finish, though. Instead, he balled up his fist and punched the wall. The plasterboard gave way, but only barely, and Harry's fist made a bloody print there.

"I went to Azkaban yesterday," Harry admitted through clenched teeth. "I can't bloody make a Patronus anymore. I tried and they just kept coming... Dementors... closer and closer... Jackson had to step in."

Ron watched, mesmerized as a drop of blood from Harry's mangled hand ran down his finger and dripped onto the floor.

Even in the worst of times—surrounded by a hundred Dementors—Harry had been able to summon a Patronus. If he couldn't now...

"You don't understand what I'm feeling," Harry said harshly. He snatched a towel off the cluttered table and wrapped it around his bleeding hand. "You can't understand when you still have someone to go home to, Ron."

Before Ron could argue, Harry Apparated away. Ron was left standing in the stinking, lonely kitchen at Grimmauld Place.

The picture of Harry standing on the shore at Azkaban, shivering horribly while the Dementors closed in on him and he struggled to cling to any happy memory to drive the effects away, was too real. When the Harry in his mind could only manage a wispy bit of light, Ron slammed his eyes closed against the image.

"Kreacher!" he bellowed.

The House-elf arrived and surveyed the room with shock before stuttering. "Y-You called, M-Master Weasley?"

Ron ran his hand harshly over his face. "I know Harry sent you to Hogwarts but he needs you here. No matter what he says, you're to stay here and take care of him. Understand?"

Kreacher looked torn for a minute before Ron slowly sank down so that they were the same height.

"He won't take care of himself, Kreacher, and he sure as hell won't let me do it. But he won't be able to refuse you. That's why he sent you away in the first place, because he knew he couldn't be angry with you. Please, Kreacher..."

New resolve filled the stooped elf's face. "Kreacher can hide from Master Harry if he needs to. Kreacher can work at night, or when Master Harry is gone from the house. If Master Harry cannot see Kreacher, he cannot yell at Kreacher."

Ron's face broke out in the first smile he'd felt all day. "That's a good idea, Kreacher. If you need anything... you can find me."

Kreacher nodded and seemed to gather himself before snapping his fingers. The dishes in the sink immediately began to organize themselves into a washing line.

“Kreacher will have this mess cleaned up in no time, Master Weasley.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Ron said. He watched the elf work for a few minutes before Apparating away.

Chapter 9: In The Middle Of A Crowded Room

The stacks of parchment seemed never-ending and Harry was just about ready to march out and accuse the secretaries in the Magical Law Enforcement office of placing a multiplying hex on them. Honestly, the paperwork was the worst part of being an Auror. That and the overwhelming sense of distrust that permeated Harry's relationships with the older, more experienced Aurors.

He blew out a breath in frustration and pulled yet another report toward him. Three full sheets of parchment to fill out for a single count of magic usage in front of a Muggle. It was ridiculous that they made the Aurors fill out this much drivel every time the Obliviators were called out. If he didn't know better, Harry would suspect Robards of burying him in paperwork just to see if Harry could really keep up with the other Aurors.

"About finished with the McCurdy file, Potter?"

Andy Kirkin's head appeared above the divider between their cubicles. He, Harry, and Darcy Jackson were the newest members of the Auror squad and were often grouped together for cases and, of course, paperwork.

"I have a few witness statements that got left out." Kirkin sighed as he peered closely at the parchments. Andy needed glasses, but he hadn't brought himself to go out and get them yet. It was something Jackson chided him over often.

"Yeah," Harry sighed. He shifted the stack of files about and finally summoned the file impatiently. "Here it is."

"Thanks." Kirkin stuffed the parchments in, but didn't sink back down to his desk. Instead, he rested his elbows on the low wall and watched Harry work.

Harry shifted uncomfortably, but fought the urge to snap at the man. When Kingsley had agreed to let Harry join the Aurors, Harry had insisted on taking the lowest position, rather than starting with more authority. He felt it would appear as favoritism for him to automatically be given a position of seniority when he hadn't even been through the Academy, technically. But there were days, like today, when he wanted nothing more than to blast the stack of paperwork to bits, storm out of the office and demand he be sent to work in the field.

"Did you need something?" He peered up at Kirkin who was studying him closely.

"Not really." The other man shrugged. "Just wondering."

Harry waited for him to finish, but wasn't surprised when he didn't. Kirkin liked to be cryptic about his thoughts. He liked people to try and guess what he was thinking.

"Yeah?"

"The trials start next week."

Harry's grip on his quill tightened until he thought it might snap in two. His teeth ground together

so tightly that his jaw ached.

“So what?” he forced himself to say. Everyone knew when the trials for the former Death Eaters would be. *The Prophet* had been spouting off about it for weeks now. And the reporters had been speculating what Harry’s role in all of it was, as well. Harry refused to speak with any of them. He didn’t want to dwell on the statements he’d already made before the Wizengamot. It was painful enough to go through at the time, but it was past him now. All that was left was waiting for the actual trials and the sentences.

“Think they’ll all go to Azkaban?”

Harry bristled at the question, but didn’t admit what he truly thought. Honestly, he believed most of them deserved far more than to sit in some cell forever, Dementors or not. After all that they’d done...

“Don’t know,” he finally grunted out. “Not up to me.”

Kirkin made a non-committal noise, but didn’t leave his position, either.

“I heard they’re bringing one of the Carrows in today. Probably the brother, since his trial is first.”

Harry’s hand jerked and left a dark streak of ink over the entire width of the report he’d just finished. He blinked up at Kirkin while his mind wrapped around that information. Kingsley and Robards hadn’t allowed Harry to be involved in questioning many of the Death Eaters—they said he was far too emotionally vested to be worth much—and the Carrows were the ones he’d wanted to speak with most of all.

They’d been at Hogwarts, torturing students. They both admitted to taking a liking to punishing Ginny while she’d been a student there, and Harry always felt there was more to it. Perhaps they knew what had happened to Ginny, or who had taken her. Perhaps they were involved. He’d read every inch of reports taken on them over and over until he had them all memorized, but neither admitted to knowing any details.

Harry lay his hands flat on his desk and used them to steady himself as he rose slowly. “When?” he asked.

Kirkin seemed surprised and stared with wide eyes. “Oh, er... not sure. I overheard Robards telling Clarke and Bennett to get the release order from the Minister this morning.”

Harry didn’t wait for another word. He left his cubicle—ignoring Kirkin’s call of “I don’t think this is a good idea!”—and marched towards Robard’s office.

The large man’s door was open and he was scribbling something out while several paper airplanes circled near the ceiling.

“I want to be included when they bring Carrow in,” Harry burst out.

Robards blinked up at Harry and didn’t argue right away. Harry respected the normally quiet man almost as much as he respected Kingsley, but he hated waiting for Robards to respond to his

questions; it seemed to always take forever for him to come to a decision.

"And if I say no?"

Harry huffed. "You know that's not fair," he said as calmly as he could manage. "He has information that could lead me to—"

"And can you honestly say that you won't be tempted to take his head off if he does say something that upsets you?" Robards' question was a good one, and Harry couldn't answer straight away.

"I can't promise anything," he finally said. "But if he has information, this is our last chance to get it from him. Rumor is that he'll get the Dementor's Kiss. And then everything he knows will be gone."

Robards gave a sympathetic look which made Harry furious—Who the hell did this man think was standing in front of him? Yes, Harry hadn't wanted special treatment when he joined the Aurors, but Kingsley had promised the full weight of the Ministry in finding Ginny. This was Harry's last chance to see if there was something that Amycus Carrow was hiding. If there was any detail that he had that might lead to Harry finding Ginny, Harry had the right to pursue it.

"I understand your frustration, Potter. The Minister told us about your girlfriend."

Harry clenched his eyes shut against the anger the statement brought, and took a calming breath.

"It's not just that," Harry said. "You've tried to get more out of him, but he just rambles on and on. You're not using the right methods."

Robards' normally calm demeanor shifted and Harry knew he'd pushed the wrong button. The man wasn't the Head of the Magical Law Enforcement for nothing.

"And you think you know how to interrogate a Death Eater better than a dozen fully trained Aurors?"

Harry weighed his choices. If he backed down now, he might never get the chance to voice his opinion and the chance to question Carrow would disappear. Of course, if he pushed too far, Robards might physically throw Harry from his office and the chance would be gone all the same.

"I'm saying," Harry said quietly, "that he was brought in for three days, twelve hours a day last time, and he never told you more than you already know through witness statements. There has to be another way to get him to speak—Legillimency, Veritaserum... some other type of truth potion." He threw his hands up in exasperation.

"Let me see if I understand you." Robards' tone grew dangerous. "You want to punish these people for their illegal crimes, but to get them to admit those crimes you want to bend the rules of legality yourself?"

Harry's face heated and he spluttered, searching for an argument. But he wasn't Hermione. He didn't have a dozen cases to cite that would verify his position. All he had was the feeling that Carrow knew more than he was saying and the determination to find Ginny at all costs.

"Veritaserum and Legillimency were legal for use during the war," said Harry.

"So were the Unforgiveables," Robards countered, "including Avada Kedavra."

Harry flinched as the memory of the bright green spell coming at him flashed in his mind.

"Much was legal then that we won't use now." Robards rubbed his face in tiredness. "I didn't say we *can't* use them, Potter, just that we *won't*. There's a difference."

Harry clenched his teeth. "But if they know—"

"That's enough!" Robards commanded sharply. "Nothing will change. You are not invited to sit in on this questioning and you won't be invited to sit in on any of them if your attitude does not change. We all know you've been through—"

"Is that your final decision?" Harry asked stiffly.

Robards dark eyes appraised Harry slowly and he nodded once. "My final decision."

Harry spun on his heel and marched out of the office, ignoring Kirkin and Jackson's worried looks. He continued out of the offices of Magical Law Enforcement and nearly ran down the hallways in the Ministry. When he reached the men's bathroom, he burst into it, startling a tall, thin man who was just coming out.

His chest heaved and he turned on the faucet, letting the cold water run. He put his shaky hands under the stream of water and then lifted it to his face, splashing it over his glasses and skin.

He hadn't been this angry, felt this helpless, in weeks. Since the incident at Azkaban, Harry had been trying to focus more on what he was doing, rather than plodding through his life. He hadn't felt confident enough yet to try his Patronus—he didn't think he could take the shattered feeling when Prongs didn't gallop from his wand. But he'd been out to the pub with Ron and Neville just the other night. And he'd managed to stop by The Burrow once this week, also, and apologized to Molly for missing her weekly Sunday dinner.

Harry still felt hollow inside, but at least he was trying.

And no one was helping. He was hitting dead end after dead end. Kingsley's promise about using the Ministry to find Ginny was all but worthless. It seemed that everyone had forgotten Ginny existed—let alone forgotten that she was still out there somewhere, waiting to be found.

His nightmares weren't getting any better, although Harry was getting a little more sleep now that Kreacher had insisted on him sleeping in a bed, rather than the sofa. The old elf had been relentless in his determination to take care of Harry. The nights that Harry slept in the sitting room, Kreacher would wake him in the morning by insisting that the room needed to be cleaned. Mops would scurry across the floor, brooms would beat at the curtains until a fine haze of dust filled the air, and furniture would zoom around the room, making a clear path for all of the fervent cleaning. Harry knew he was beaten the third morning and consented to sleeping in the same room he and Ron had shared back before fifth year.

The dreams had morphed since he'd been at Azkaban, though. Instead of seeing flashes of the battles and Horcrux hunt, Harry was haunted with visions that his own demented mind had created of what Ginny might have gone through, what she might still be going through.

The dark images similar to what Hermione had suffered at Malfoy Manor crept in again and Harry closed his eyes against them. His hands shook and he rubbed them over his face once more. He dried his glasses on his robes—not caring that his uniform was getting wrinkled.

'Not now, not now,' he commanded himself. He couldn't dwell on the visions now, not when he was surrounded by so many people to witness his breakdown. He had to remain strong, to appear as the symbol of hope for the Wizarding World. Wasn't that what the Ministry had lauded him as? Wasn't that what *The Daily Prophet* headline had stated boldly?

Harry scoffed at his reflection in the mirror—thin face with dark rings around his eyes, hair wet around the edges, and black beard that was finally coming in thick.

"I look dead," he whispered, and marveled that it was more than a little true. His skin was white and almost transparent, and the dark hair only made the contrast seem worse. Harry closed his eyes and sucked in such a deep breath that his lungs actually ached. He let it out slowly and willed the air to steal away his anger and helplessness.

"I *feel* dead," he told the empty loo. The only time he felt somewhat alive was when he saw Teddy, but even that seemed tainted because Harry couldn't look at him without hearing Remus' words about wanting the world to be a better place for his son, even if Remus couldn't be there. It felt like a betrayal for Harry to be the one involved in raising Teddy, rather than Remus.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed in there, but when he trudged back to his office, Kirkin and Jackson weren't watching for him anymore. He had no doubt the whole office had heard his row with Robards—or had at least heard everyone talking about it. Nothing every stayed quiet in the MLE offices.

Harry was just about to duck into his cubicle and begin working on his paperwork again when commotion at the doorway stole his attention. Clarke and Bennett were escorting Amycus Carrow between them, their wands trained on the man who hobbled along in thick chains that clanked and dragged loudly on the floor.

Just one look at the lumpy wizard, dressed in the dirty, drab grey robes that all Azkaban prisoners wore made Harry's whole body fill with rage.

This man had tortured students—he'd allowed other students to perform the Cruciatus curse on helpless victims while he watched with glee. He'd locked students in dark rooms for days without food and water. He'd beat Neville so badly that there were still scars on the man's body. Harry had no doubts whatsoever that Carrow knew more about Ginny's disappearance than he'd ever admitted.

Harry watched as the two Aurors guided Carrow into one of the windowless offices where they could interrogate him. After a minute, Bennett came out and disappeared, leaving Clarke alone in the room with the Death Eater. Harry felt himself moving closer, even though he didn't consciously choose to do so.

Carrow's whining voice slipped out the partially open door as he confirmed the basic information about himself—it was standard interview procedure, even if it was completely inane.

"Dammit... I don't have the right form." Clarke's exasperated voice escaped and Harry turned his back toward the doorway as the Auror exited and frantically looked around.

"Potter! Come here and guard this door while I get the right form to complete this interview, will you?"

Harry measured his response, but it only took a moment. "Sure," he said. He pulled his wand and took up a position across from the open door, guarding the hallway that led deeper into the offices and the one that led out of Magical Law Enforcement.

"I'll be right back," Clarke huffed. "... never gets it right... sodding git..." He disappeared around the corner, leaving Harry alone in the corridor.

Harry clenched his teeth against the swelling urge to throw himself into the room and pin Carrow up against the wall until the effing bastard spilled every secret he knew. Logically, he knew that Clarke would be back before Harry got anything interesting out of the Death Eater, but Harry's mind wouldn't release the idea. The scene kept playing over and over in his mind until he took a step forward, and then another.

And before he knew it, he was fully inside the room, glaring at the short man who was magically bound to his chair. Eyes widened in recognition and Carrow wiggled in his spot, trying to escape.

"Hello, Amycus," Harry said. Now that he was inside the room, everything was very clear to him. He knew what he needed to do—it was all for the best, anyway. Carrow would sing like a canary, Harry could give the Wizengamot the evidence they needed to hand over a sentence of a Dementor's Kiss, he would finally know where Ginny was, and the world would be a better place.

"P-P-Potter," Carrow stuttered out. His eyes measured the distance between Harry and the door and Harry almost laughed at the irony of it all. Instead, he closed the door and sealed it with one of Hermione's favorite spells. It would take Clarke at least fifteen minutes to get through it. By then, Harry would have what he wanted.

"You're going to answer some questions, Amycus," Harry said in a very controlled voice. He couldn't show too much emotion too early, or Carrow wouldn't say a thing. "And you're going to be honest, or there will be consequences."

"I've already answered—" He hissed out a swear word as Harry struck him in the cheek with a stinging curse.

"Each curse will get more and more painful if you lie."

Carrow glared at Harry from his beady eyes, below bushy eyebrows. "What'd ya wanna know?"

Harry fought a smile and leaned against the edge of the table. "I want to know what happened to Ginny Weasley. You know what happened to her. You know who took her and I'm willing to bet you know where she's being kept."

Carrow looked genuinely surprised before a nasty smile spread across his face. "We heard she was yer girlfriend, Potter."

Harry clenched his teeth tighter and prayed the git would give up the information before Clarke came back.

"We tried and tried to get her to tell us where you was," Carrow said. The prick was enjoying how much each word was tearing Harry apart inside. He relished each syllable. "She was particularly... hard to *break*."

"She didn't tell you a thing," Harry bit out. "She wouldn't have."

Carrow's one eyebrow rose speculatively. "You have that much faith in her?"

"Tell me where she is." Harry moved closer. "Tell me where she is, now."

"I don't—"

The stinging hex Harry used had enough power that there was a mark on Carrow's neck now—a red, ugly welt.

"Do *not* lie to me. I know you and that bastard Snape punished her for—"

Carrow sneered. "Snape never let us touch them girls. He kept 'em all to his self." The disgusting leer he gave made Harry's insides roll. He remembered—all too well—the memory of Ginny looking so tiny in the chair as Snape called her names and ranted at her stupidity.

Harry clenched his teeth and moved so close that he was enveloped by the stench of Azkaban on the prisoner. "I know she was taken from the Forbidden Forest. Who took her?"

Carrow froze as the door handle rattled and someone pounded on the door—Harry knew his time was almost up.

"Last chance," Harry whispered. He lifted his wand and a deep slice appeared in Carrow's forearm and he squealed in pain. "Tell me where she is."

The pounding had turned to deep thuds that shook the whole room. The door groaned in protest and Harry knew it was only a matter of minutes until Clarke was through.

"I told ya—"

"Wrong answer!"

The curse was out of Harry's mouth before he even realized it. Carrow twitched and writhed in his restraints, screaming a horrid sound that made Harry's whole body rebel. He'd used the curse before—on Amycus, actually—when he spat on Minerva McGonagall. Harry's rage then was nothing compared to what was coursing through him right now. He actually felt like he might be capable of turning the quivering piece of rubbish into a mindless lump if he didn't let it up.

Carrow was panting when Harry lifted the Cruciatus. Harry leaned in closer as someone finally broke

through the door, sending bits of wood flying.

"Tell me."

"... no better'n us..." Carrow accused.

"Tell me," Harry growled. He pressed the tip of his wand into the fleshy part of Carrow's neck that was red from his earlier hex.

"Potter! Stand down!" Robards was blasting hexes at the door, trying to break away enough wood so that he could enter the room. Clarke shot a stunning spell at Harry, but missed.

"Cruc—"

"Only Snape knew!" Carrow squealed. He clenched his eyes against the coming curse.

Harry's heart dropped to the bottom of his stomach and he forced himself away from the prisoner. He turned just as his wand went flying and the red light from a stunner hit him square in the chest.

Chapter 10: All We Can Do Is Hope

Waking from being stunned, rather than having someone cast *Ennervate*, made the headache so much worse.

Harry stared up at the ornate ceiling with fuzzy vision. He knew where he was, but it wasn't where he wanted to be. Slowly, he let his eyes trace down the crown molding, down the fireplace. They settled on a dark shape sitting in a wingback chair across from him.

"I hope your head is pounding."

"Glasses?" Harry asked. His head *was* pounding and his mouth was dry. It tasted like he'd been sucking on wool for hours.

The Minister of Magic cleared his throat and held his hand out to Harry. On his finger dangled Harry's glasses.

"I should ask for an explanation," Kingsley said, "but I have a feeling I know what happened down there."

Harry blew out a breath and slid his glasses on while forcing his legs to swing over the side of the sofa. "Why did they bring me here?"

"You're lucky Robards has a soft spot for you, kid." Kingsley's tone might have been quiet, but Harry felt the bite in every one of the words. And he hated it when someone referred to him in terms that made him feel eleven years old. "We've managed to keep things quiet so far, but it won't last."

Harry winced at the idea of what he'd done today splashed all over the papers. He knew it would be. The press would kill for a story about Harry having some sort of flaw.

"I don't care," he finally breathed out. "Maybe if they do print something they'll leave me alone. I'm not a damned saint, you know."

Kingsley actually chuckled. "No, that's quite evident."

Harry scowled and pushed himself off the cushion. "I'll get back to work now. I have reports that—"

"You're on suspension, Auror Potter." Kingsley's tone changed and Harry stared at the large man who stood in front of him. "I ought to throw you in Azkaban for a few days for what you did."

Bile rose up in Harry's throat and his whole body tensed. If they put him in Azkaban he would die. He knew he would die. A sickening thought that he might just prefer that appeared, but it made him all the sicker.

"I... I can't make a Patronus," he said quietly while his fingers pulled at the hems on the cuffs of his uniform robes. "It would kill me."

The man's dark eyes appraised Harry closely.

"I didn't say I was going to do it, just that I *ought* to. You've really put me in a bind, Harry." He ran his hands over his face and across his bald head. "I know your history better than anyone in the Ministry—save the Weasleys, perhaps. I know what motivates you. I know why you've been acting the way you have."

"If you understood," Harry interrupted, "really understood, then you'd be out there doing something about it. She's... Ginny's out there, Minister." He gathered himself emotionally and tried not to let the panic he felt show. If Harry was suspended, he couldn't do anything to delay the trials of the Death Eaters he needed to question. "And everyone is so bloodthirsty to see these bastards given the kiss they're not considering the information that might be hidden."

"They have nothing, Harry," Kingsley said. "I made you a promise when you first came to me, and I've kept it—"

"Don't lie to me," said Harry. His whole body shook with exhaustion and anger. More than anything, he wanted to go home and crawl into bed so he could begin this day over again and not make the mistakes he'd made. Using the Cruciatus on Carrow was going too far; Harry knew that now. "Don't lie to me."

"I've had two Aurors scouring Britain," Kingsley continued as if Harry's harsh words hadn't been spoken. "They've been taking statements, searching old Death Eater hideouts, interviewing witnesses. They've been up at Azkaban enough that neither of them sleeps at night anymore for the things they've been dealing with. So don't you *dare* tell me that I haven't kept my promise."

Harry swallowed thickly. He felt very small and insignificant. And he felt angry. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you involve me? You know I have the right—"

"The right to do what?" Kingsley asked. His voice raised a notch and he seemed on the verge of losing his legendary cool. "The right to torture suspects to get information out of them? The right to break the law because it suits your purposes?!"

Harry's teeth clenched hard to keep his body from rebelling and forcibly vomiting all over the floor.

"I know what I did was wrong," he said.

"It's not the way we do things, Potter," Kingsley said. "And it's not the way we will ever do things."

Harry swallowed and gave a sharp nod. He knew he'd been wrong, but he still felt the end would justify his actions. Once he found Ginny—

"There will come a time when you will begin to accept that Ginny Weasley is gone."

"Never," Harry whispered harshly.

Kingsley went on. "Right now you're mourning. And I understand that. It's normal to cling to any shred of hope so that we don't have to accept the ones we love are really gone."

"She's not dead," Harry insisted. He snatched his wand off the Minister's desk and shoved it into his pocket. "I can't let go of that—it's all I have."

Kingsley gave a pained look but nodded once. "Three weeks suspension," he said after a long pause.

Harry ground his teeth together and looked away.

"The trials begin next week. If the Wizengamot needs more than you've already given they'll contact you. Don't go to Grimmauld Place, Harry," he said. "Go to The Burrow. Go someplace where you have friends, where your family can help you through this."

Harry forced himself not to explode in anger at the unsolicited advice. "Three weeks?"

Kingsley's mouth closed with a snap. "Three weeks, at least. If you do something equally barmy I'm reserving the right to make it longer—"

"I got it," Harry snapped and turned on his heel. As he swept down the hallways toward the Apparition point, people were giving him a wide berth, whispering behind their hands and pointing.

So much for keeping things quiet.

His face burned in shame but he kept his head held high. Let them say whatever they wanted. He'd been through the ridicule and speculation before; he'd survived it then and he would now.

"Drinking straight from the bottle now?"

Harry didn't look up at Ron, but took another slow drink of Firewhisky as he stared at the picture on the front page of *The Prophet*.

"You here to judge me or join me?" Harry asked. He couldn't even muster enough amusement for a smirk.

Ron was quiet and when Harry looked up he saw that his friend was staring at the paper as well.

"They gave him the kiss," Harry explained unnecessarily. Amycus Carrow's trial was over—guilty on all charges. He'd been given the Dementors Kiss the moment he stepped foot on the island that housed Azkaban prison.

"I know. Everyone's talking about it," Ron said.

"He knew, Ron. He knew and they... they didn't care. No one would listen to me. They just took away one of our chances to find out the truth."

"Is that why you got suspended?" Ron peered at Harry, who turned his face away and drank more from the bottle. He had a feeling Ron knew everything about what had happened last week. The press had been rather quiet about it, which surprised Harry. There had been an article about Harry taking some personal time due to the stress of the trials, and Kingsley had even made a statement pointing out that Harry hadn't taken any time after the Final Battle before he'd joined the Aurors

on the hunt for the remaining Death Eaters. He was due his holiday time.

"Something like that." Harry shrugged and peered at the amber liquid in the bottle. He hadn't moved from the sofa since the newspaper had been delivered this morning. He'd even banished Kreacher from the room when the elf began fussing about Harry drinking so early in the day.

Ron was quiet and Harry wondered if he was actually reading the story on the front page.

"Come on, we're going to The Burrow for dinner."

Harry bristled immediately. He didn't want to see anyone when he felt like this. His head spun—mostly from the alcohol, but partially from the emotional bubble building inside him. One day, very soon, it was going to explode and Harry wasn't sure if he could handle the consequences.

"No thanks. I'm fine here. Kreacher will make sure I eat something."

"It's not really an optional thing, Harry," Ron said. He pulled his wand and Harry waited for the stunning spell to hit him. Instead, he felt his head clear and his stomach roll from the effects of a sobering charm. "That'll hold long enough to get you past Mum's inspection. You're on your own when it wears off, though."

Harry felt the bottom drop out of his stomach at the thought of seeing the Weasleys. "I really don't think I can right now."

"Harry," Ron said as he leaned closer to his friend, "shut the fuck up, go put some clean pants on, and for Merlin's sake some trousers. Run a comb through the rat's nest on your head and brush your teeth. If you're not down here in five minutes I'll petrify your arse and take you as you are. George will take pictures. You'll never live it down."

Despite the fact that he didn't want to see the Weasleys and have them look at him knowing what had happened, Harry slowly stood. He owed them enough to warrant an appearance at supper now and again. He knew they loved him, and he loved them; he felt like he'd let them down, however. And that was a bitter potion to swallow.

"I'm not sure..."

"Just do it, Harry," Ron huffed. He ruffled his hair and Harry could feel the irritation seeping off his friend. "Normally I'd tell you to shave, too, but we don't have time."

Harry scratched his beard as he padded out of the room. Some days he forgot completely that he'd let it grow. He hadn't really meant to have a full beard, it had just sort of... happened.

A lot of things in his life were simply happening right now. Everything was spinning out of control and Harry had no idea what to do to stop it. He stared at himself in the mirror and tried to decide if he could even see the hopeful young boy he had once been—back when the world was a wonderfully exciting place and he'd just discovered that he was a wizard. So much had changed since then.

"Five minutes is almost up!"

Despite his dark mood, the corner of Harry's mouth lifted as Ron challenged him. What would he do without his friends?

"I'm coming, you bastard," Harry called out into the hallway. He pulled on clean clothing and removed an old Weasley jumper from the drawer. The wool was worn and faded, but he knew it would make Mrs. Weasley happy to see him wear it again.

"Took your time, Potter," Ron chided as Harry walked down the stairs. "I nearly flooded George to get the camera ready."

Harry grumbled under his breath, but chuckled at Ron's persistence. "Come on, let's get this over with." He regretted the words the minute they slipped from his lips and an exasperated look settled on Ron's face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Go," Ron urged. "Just go. You can try all you want to ditch us, Harry, but it won't work. We're always going to be your friends, no matter how much of a prat you are."

A wave of emotion almost overcame Harry and he clenched his teeth against the urge to cry with relief. "Remind me of that now and again, will you?"

Ron clapped him on the shoulder. "That's what I'm here for."

The thought that Harry didn't really deserve friends so loyal entered his head the moment before he Apparated, but Harry was very grateful for them nevertheless.

The sight of The Burrow was physically painful. Harry felt his heart clench and couldn't decide whether he needed to hide himself away for allowing the shadows to encompass him, or run toward it and plead for his family to help him ward them off.

"No dragging your feet," said Ron. He tugged on the shoulder of Harry's jumper, dragging him slightly toward the house. "You know they don't think any different of you."

Harry bit his lip but gave a jerky nod. That was another thing he was afraid of. Deep down inside him, Harry knew that the Weasleys wouldn't judge him for everything he'd done to find Ginny, and that made him feel horrible inside.

The kitchen was just as warm as it had always been. Harry closed his eyes the minute it hit him and let the smell, the warmth, and the welcome envelope him.

"Harry!"

Mrs. Weasley's gasp startled him and he smiled sheepishly. "Er... hi." It looked like everyone, except Charlie, had come to dinner and Harry squirmed under their intense gazes.

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat and stood slowly from his spot at the table. "Welcome, Harry. There's a place for you."

Ron slapped Harry on the shoulder and took his place next to Hermione, who was dabbing at the

corners of her eyes suspiciously.

"Thank you," Harry said quietly. He pulled out the empty chair at the table, unable to avoid the memory that this spot had always been Ginny's when they ate together. It was the spot where he'd seen her put her elbow in the butter dish and had looked away, rather than embarrass her.

Once he was seated, it was as if someone had unfrozen the people surrounding the table; they began talking again, they began levitating dishes heaping with food again, and they smiled once more.

Harry let out a shaky breath and forced himself to take some of every type of food that passed him by, simply for something to focus on. His throat grew thick as they treated him as normally as ever. He wanted more than anything to look up from his plate and see Ginny across from him, catching his eye at some private joke, attempting to slip her boiled parsnips onto George's plate without him noticing, and laughing as her brothers teased her.

Her absence had always been poignant for Harry when he sat at this table, but tonight there was a gaping hole in this family, and in his heart, that he didn't think could ever be filled.

He almost pushed away from the table as the surge of pain hit him. His hands shook and he clutched the fork next to his plate.

"I like the beard, Harry," George complimented. "Hairy Harry Potter. Maybe we could come up with some sort of product, Ron."

Ron's eyes widened as he studied Harry and thought about George's idea. "Hmm, maybe," he said skeptically. "Doubt anyone would buy it, though."

A chuckle rippled around the table and Harry took a shaky breath and forced the pain into the back of his mind. He found he was doing that more and more often.

"Hadn't really planned on growing one," said Harry.

"Yes," George said, "it's amazing that one day you go to bed clean shaven, the next morning you wake up and POOF there's hair on your face."

Another laugh trickled along the table and Harry said a silent thank you to George for his ability and willingness to break the tension.

Dinner continued and Harry let himself relax, although he couldn't quite force himself to eat more than a few bites of anything. His stomach was still too unsettled. His appetite lately had been nonexistent; he ate when he felt weak, or when Kreacher stood in front of him with a plate of food and refused to leave until Harry had finished it.

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat and Harry knew she was staring at him. "You're not eating, Harry. Maybe there's something I could make you—"

"No," he burst out frantically. "The food is fine—great, even—I just... I just don't have much of an appetite lately. I'm sorry." He looked down at his plate and then pushed it away. Even the sight of

it made him feel sick.

She looked heartbroken and Harry felt bad, but he also didn't want to be sick all over her table and if he kept putting food into his mouth that he didn't taste, he was going to make a mess.

"You're just so thin," she said. "I don't think that house elf of yours has been taking care of—"

"Leave off, Mum," Ron scolded. "It's not Kreacher's fault that Harry won't take care of himself."

Harry bristled at the undertone in Ron's words. He might be teasing, but there was genuine hurt in his words, because there was truth in them.

"I'm sorry," Harry said again. He wiped his mouth and moved to stand, pushing the chair back from the table. "Maybe I shouldn't have come. I'm not feeling well..."

"Don't go, Harry," Hermione pleaded. She was echoed by several others and Harry felt guilty for needing an escape. Everything was pressing down on him, suffocating and making him want to cry out in pain: his friends—his family—trying to look after him, the guilt and shame of what he'd done, even though he felt it was necessary, the pressure of work, the loneliness and disappointment of his entire life currently, and the whole piece of his heart that was missing without Ginny here. It was all too much to deal with, and Harry felt he was on the rim of a cliff. One stiff wind, one more little step, and he'd be over the edge, gone completely.

"I..."

"We're worried about you, Harry," Bill said. He stood and put his hands on Fleur's shoulders. "You're never around anymore. You were working all the time and now..."

"Now I'm not," Harry finished. He felt his cheeks burn and wondered if he should try and explain what had happened, beyond what the papers had said. "I don't know what you heard—"

"Kingsley came and talked to us," Mr. Weasley said softly.

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat as he tried to decipher what that meant. They knew, and they hadn't said anything.

"I... I had to do it," he found himself saying, even though he hadn't planned to tell them. "Carrow... he knew about Ginny. I had to know. And now... now they've killed him, or just as good as."

Looks were exchanged across the table that Harry was too tired to figure out. Now that he had started, he wanted to tell them everything.

"Kingsley says he's looking, but he's not looking in the right places. And he's not involving any of us. We're the ones that should be looking." His anger built as he talked—righteous anger for Ginny's sake, for the sake of this family who had gone through so much. Harry slapped his hand on the table and everyone jumped.

"We should be out there. And I'm going. I'm going tonight." The decision entered his mind in a flash, and for the first time in a very long time, Harry felt peace with something. He could do this.

He could use his time away from the Ministry to do something good, to find Ginny.

"There are a few leads I can follow. And I'll bring her home. I know she's out there, probably getting very cross with us all for not finding her sooner." He lifted his head and searched their faces earnestly. His family would support him in this.

But all he saw was concern and alarm. Mrs. Weasley was openly crying.

"Harry..." Hermione looked like she was in pain, with her face scrunched up and her eyes bright with tears.

"No more," Mrs. Weasley stammered out. Her whole body was shaking. "I can't do it anymore."

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry said carefully. "I *know* she's out there." He weighed the decision to tell them what he had experienced in the Forbidden Forest before handing himself over to Voldemort—he hadn't even told Hermione and Ron about using the Resurrection Stone. "When I was—"

"You have to stop!" Mrs. Weasley screeched and put her hands over her ears. "I can't do this anymore. I lost two children, Harry. Two! And I can't cling to the thread that one of them might be out there, still just as lost to me. I just can't."

A pain so deep that it made his bones ache swelled up inside Harry and he stared at the sullen faces around the table. Faces which were pale and broken, exhausted and grieving. And, for the first time in a very long time—perhaps forever—he felt like he truly *saw* them.

"Are you... You can't give up, Mrs. Weasley," he pleaded.

"Why are you doing this?" she begged him. "Why can't you let it go? You need to... you need to let Ginny go, Harry. She's gone."

Rage like he hadn't felt since Voldemort had lived filled him and he stood abruptly, knocking over the chair behind him.

"Don't!" he bellowed. Everyone jumped and Ron stood, his hands held out placating.

"No one is telling you to forget her, Harry. We all know you loved her..."

Harry's whole body shook and he searched their faces, praying this was all just a horrible dream, that he would wake at any minute and find himself slumped over in the sitting room at Grimmauld Place with Kreacher standing in the corner watching him sleep.

"But we can't keep this up forever," Bill said. "It's killing Mum, Harry. It's eating away at us all."

"You should look at yourself, mate," George said. He stared at his fingers resting on the table and then up at Harry. "You look like shite. You can't be sleeping and it's obvious you're not eating."

"We're worried about you, Harry," said Hermione. "Look at what holding on is doing to you..."

"You're giving up." It wasn't a question, more of a realization that made Harry feel completely empty inside. "You... You're giving up."

"It's been a year, mate," Ron said. "Ginny's... she's gone, and she's not coming back. Everything Kingsley's men have found point to the fact that she..." He swallowed whatever he was going to say and sank into his seat. His shoulders shook and Hermione rested her forehead on one of them as she cried.

Harry stared at all of them, wondering how the world had flipped upside down since he'd last been in the presence of *his* Weasleys. These weren't the same people. These people were broken and hopeless.

"You're wrong," he spat out venomously. In that moment, he wanted to hurt them, to make them feel like he felt right now. Empty and full at the same time, angry that they were telling him to give up on the only thing he had hope for. "And I'll prove it. When I find her, I'm going to tell her that you didn't want to look. That you gave up."

Mrs. Weasley sobbed loudly and Mr. Weasley stood, his whole body shaking. "That's enough, Harry!"

"You don't deserve her!" Harry continued recklessly. "Ginny would never give up on any of you. She'd search until there was no more breath in her body, until her heart stopped beating!"

He lurched back and his stomach rolled threateningly. Harry glared in disgust at the people he'd once called his family. "And that's what I'm going to do."

Before anyone could stop him, Harry turned and bolted for the door. He wrenched it open and dove out into the cold October night.

A/N: Notice that I didn't say it ended in a good place? Yeah. Go ahead and hit me with your best shots. I'm wearing all my protective gear, waiting for the snowballs to come flying my way. (I practiced dodging them all morning just to get ready for this chapter, I'll have you know.)

Chapter 11: Where I'll Be Hiding, Waiting For You

The entire Weasley family stared in shock at the open door, letting the cold wind blow dead leaves across Mrs. Weasley's clean floors.

"I'll go," Hermione said through her tears.

"He's gone," said Ron. He sounded more broken than Hermione had heard in months. She knew this whole thing with Harry was taking a toll on everyone, but Ron felt the pain especially keen. He'd not only lost a brother and a sister, now he was losing Harry, as well.

"I'll go," she restated and gathered herself. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and made sure she had her wand.

Harry was walking down the lane, shoulders slumped against the cold and hands shoved into his pockets. Instead of running to catch up with him, Hermione Apparated straight from the back porch.

He didn't startle when she appeared four feet in front of him.

"You're not the one I expected," he said. There was a tone that she hadn't heard in his voice since he was fifteen and completely lost. It scared Hermione. Harry never did well when he was desperate and searching for hope. He made snap decisions that didn't always work out for the best.

"I thought one of them..." He jerked his head back toward The Burrow and grimaced.

"You really hurt them," Hermione said. She wrapped her arms around herself, but she still shook; from either the cold or the heartache, she couldn't be sure.

"I hurt *them*?" Harry scoffed. He swore violently and ran his hand through his hair until it stood on end and whipped in the wind. "They've given up, Hermione. They're... they're quitting because it's too hard."

"You can't judge them for clinging to sanity," Hermione scolded. "Not all of us can be like you, Harry."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean, Hermione?" He was in her face instantly and Hermione sucked in a breath at the waves of anger radiating off him.

"Nothing," said Hermione. Angering Harry further would get her nowhere. "I just mean... you're always so focused, Harry. And not everyone can be like that. Sometimes you have to let go to find what's best for you."

"I'm not ever letting go, Hermione," Harry said. His voice was quiet now and he sounded more tired than angry. "It's all I have."

"That's not true," said Hermione. She wrapped her hands into the cabling of his jumper, adhering

to him. "You have friends who love you, Harry. Cling to us! We can help you."

Harry looked like he almost believed her for just a flash of a second, and then his expression turned hard once more. "Only Ginny can help me, Hermione." He held her hands for a moment before he prised her fingers from him. "And until I find her..."

"If only..."

Harry studied her for a long minute, completely quiet. His hair whipped this way and that in the wind. "If only what?"

But Hermione never finished. There were so many things she could put at the end of that sentence. If only they knew what had happened to Ginny. If only the Weasley's clock hadn't been damaged beyond repair when they fled the Burrow during the war—then they could know if Ginny was still alive, if she was still out there; her hand would show them. If only there was some book out there that detailed the perfect way to handle a situation like this, where they were all being pulled apart at the seams; then Hermione would know what to do.

"You have to take better care of yourself, at least, Harry," Hermione pleaded. She felt him slipping away from her, both physically and emotionally. "Get some sleep—there are potions—"

"They don't work," Harry interrupted. He rubbed his face and stared up at the dark sky. "You grow immune to them after awhile." The bitterness in his voice hurt. He'd obviously been searching for solutions and Hermione felt helpless. She hadn't been watching him close enough, hadn't been there for him when he needed her. She'd been so busy trying to pull Ron through his grief that Harry had slipped through the cracks. He was far too good at hiding his pain, but everything was showing on his face now.

"You could try—"

"I've tried it all," Harry explained impatiently. "Don't you think I've tried?"

"Alcohol works?"

He seemed startled and Hermione peered at his eyes, wishing it wasn't so dark so she could tell what he was thinking.

"Don't deny it," she said, "Ron's told me, and I can smell it on you tonight."

Harry turned to the side and stared off into the dark night that was enveloping Ottery St. Catchpole. "I sit there and wait for the nightmares to come every night, so I'm afraid to close my eyes. They... they're horrible. And all I see is Ginny, being tortured, being hurt."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said. She reached out and almost laid her hand on his shoulder, but couldn't bring herself to touch him. He looked so hard, so distant right now.

"And at the same time, dreams are the only thing I have, you know. She's *there* in the dreams. And the worst part about it is that I'll have to wake up. I'll have to open my eyes and watch her disappear, and what I'm waking up to is the real nightmare. So, yes, alcohol works sometimes. It

makes the pain seem... not so real."

Hermione's heart broke again and, vaguely, she wondered how many times in one night it could shatter.

"I have to end this, Hermione," he said, half-pleading. "I have to find her and bring her back here. I have to show them."

"Don't do it in anger," Hermione said. She knew he was leaving; changing Harry's mind wasn't something that was going to happen right now. "They don't mean to hurt anyone; they're just... just doing whatever they can to survive."

Harry's face twisted and Hermione thought he might be disgusted with their choices. With *her* choice. But clinging to false hope wasn't allowing any of them to really live anymore.

"I hope you find what you're looking for, Harry," she whispered and pressed her lips to his whiskery cheek. "I really do."

Tears fell down her face and soaked into the front of her shirt as she watched him walk away. He Apparated and Hermione felt Ron's arms close around her.

"Let him go," he whispered into her hair. "He... he's not going to rest until he knows for himself."

Hermione buried her face into his shoulder and let the tears fall. "What if... what if we're wrong, Ron? What if we've given up and she's really out there?"

Ron was quiet for a long minute. "I hope we are, but I can't live like this anymore. I can't stare at every face that walks by in Diagon Alley, wondering if they know something about where my sister went. I can't question everybody, and I can't live with the anger that it all brings. It... it's killing me, Hermione, just like it's killing him. And I can't do that to you."

She nodded, understanding what he was saying, even as she felt incredibly insignificant for letting Harry leave without them.

"He's been on his own for a long time," Ron said coldly. "He's shutting everyone out. Maybe... maybe it's time we let him get on with it."

"You can't mean that, Ron." Hermione jerked her head up to stare at him. "We can't give up on him."

"I don't know what to believe anymore, Hermione," Ron said. He slid his hand down into hers and began to walk back toward the house. "I really don't."

Hermione turned her head and stared at the spot that Harry had disappeared from. It felt so wrong to do this, to move on without Harry, but Ron was right. Ginny's death was tearing this family apart and moving on together was the only thing that would make it right.

There was no rhyme or reason to his searching. As much as Harry tried to be methodical about it all,

he found himself Apparating to strange locations and doing everything he could, knowing that finding a lead would be next to impossible.

It got to a point where he no longer even knew what day it was. Time had little meaning when all he could think about was finding Ginny.

His search started at Hogwarts and spiraled out from there, but weeks of searching Scotland turned up nothing and he abandoned that. The list of known Death Eater hideouts he'd compiled from memory was exhausted and Harry often found himself sitting at restaurants or on park benches, simply watching the crowds go by.

People avoided him, and he couldn't blame them. Who wanted anything to do with the scruffy, bearded man who stared off into nothing all day or pestered them to look at the picture of the young woman he carried around? He heard the whispers that people thought he was muddled or some sort of vagrant, but it didn't matter.

Kingsley sent notice when Harry's three weeks of suspension were over, but Harry didn't respond. Another note arrived by owl when Harry was walking somewhere in Wales, telling Harry to take all the time he needed.

Hermione wrote often but Harry never responded. The anger at the Weasleys still lived inside him, although most of the bite had faded over time. Now he simply wanted to prove to them that they were wrong.

Andromeda wrote about Teddy and Harry did answer her back, begging her to understand. He simply couldn't see the boy right now, not when his head was so messed up. Once Harry found Ginny, he'd be in a better place to be the sort of godfather he was meant to be.

Harry stared at the people milling about Friargate in the heart of Preston. He sipped at his cup of coffee and watched bundled-up shoppers scurry across the roads, duck into doorways and emerge with colorful bags. It was all so routine, so mundane and boring. These people went on about their lives, never paying attention to the strange man among them who carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Harry was torn about what to think of that. A part of him wanted to shout his pain to the world, scream at the top of his lungs for someone to help him, but he knew he never would. It was easier to keep it all locked inside and keep searching.

The anonymity was good, though. Occasionally someone would look twice at him and Harry wondered if they were magical. No doubt there were stories filling the gossip columns of the Wizarding papers about how Mad Harry Potter had been spotted again.

The idea made him smile and he took another sip, letting the heat from his drink fog his glasses. Maybe he *was* mad.

A laugh caught his attention and Harry turned in his seat, eyes frantically searching for the sound of it. The crowd around the corner of the street was thick, waiting to cross, but Harry was sure the

sound came from in there.

The laugh.

Ginny's laugh.

It rang out again and Harry lurched forward off the bench, ignoring the coffee that spilled everywhere. He dove into the crowd, elbowing people aside. They protested and some even backed away, but Harry continued to search.

Ginny wasn't here. He looked in every woman's face, frightening more than one of them. He'd plainly heard her, though. No one else had a laugh like Ginny's.

The crowd parted around him as they crossed, leaving Harry standing alone in the gutter. He cursed loudly and glared at a woman who gasped at his foul language. Harry stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat and trudged down the street, calling himself all sorts of names.

The laugh came once more and Harry's heart thundered. It was there, in a group of young women walking up the street before him. Harry began to run to catch up to them. Ginny was with them. His mind reeled, trying to explain things. Perhaps something horrible had happened to her memory and she couldn't remember who she was. She'd been left to fend for herself.

His imagination ran wild as he darted between shoppers. The woman who had laughed was small, like Ginny. She walked like Ginny did. He couldn't tell the color of her hair because it was stuffed up under a knit hat.

He'd found her! After all this time, Harry had found her. He wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms, tell her how much he loved her, and press their lips together.

"Ginny, it's me!"

His hand closed over her shoulder and the woman gasped. She turned and stared at him before pulling away.

Harry blinked at her pale face and blue eyes. It wasn't Ginny.

"Get your hands off her!" One of the women she was with shoved Harry away. He stumbled down to the pavement and then stood up, still staring at the horrified expression on the girl with the Ginny laugh.

"I thought you were—"

"Oi, bugger off!"

The whole group of women scurried away from him and Harry took half a step in their direction before someone restrained him.

"Enough of that. Let's have a look at yeh, shall we?"

The large man was wearing a policeman's uniform and Harry groaned.

"I didn't mean anything by it," he said. "I thought she was someone else."

The man muscled Harry to the side of the street, between two shops where there was a narrow space. "Been having a rough time of it, haven't yeh?"

Harry blinked at the man, trying to decide what he meant. "Er..."

"People been complaining about yeh fer days now. Figured yeh was drunk." He took a deep sniff toward Harry's face and leaned back, surprised.

"I haven't had anything to drink except coffee," said Harry.

"Got any identification?"

Harry helplessly patted his pockets, knowing he could conjure some if needed, but the small dark eyes of the policeman were intently watching. There was no way he could get away with it.

"Er... I left it at the hotel?"

There was no amusement in the policeman's face and Harry let his shoulders slump.

"Well, then, let's see what they make of yeh at the—"

Harry took a chance and pulled his wand. There was nothing for it; he had to modify the policeman's memory. If he was taken in, they would have no record of him existing for the past twelve years and he had no way of explaining where he'd disappeared to after leaving school at age ten.

The spell was quick and made the policeman's eyes slide out of focus. He shook his head and peered down at Harry.

"Thank you for the directions, sir." Harry stepped away with a forced smile and began walking quickly in the opposite direction.

The policeman stammered something about watching himself and shook his head once more. Harry didn't hang around to find out if his memory charm was detected or even if it really took before he weaved his way into the crowd and disappeared.

Back at the small hotel he'd been staying at, Harry cursed his reflection in the mirror.

"That was close," he said. "You've got to stop acting like a nutter!"

The mirror didn't comment back and Harry found that he missed having someone—anyone—to talk to.

Maybe he was going insane. He certainly felt like his mind was slipping. He could have sworn that woman today was Ginny. She'd sounded just like Ginny—the way her laugh was full and deep.

It felt like ages since he'd heard Ginny laugh that way, since they were together the Spring before Dumbledore had died.

"Time to move on." Harry packed his few meager belongings and stared at Hermione's latest letter. She'd stopped asking him to return and was simply reminding him to take care now. The change in tactic wasn't lost on Harry. He'd been gone long enough that Hermione knew he wasn't going to come back easily. Thankfully, she and Ron hadn't set out to track him down. Harry needed the time away to get his head on straight while he continued to look for Ginny.

Maybe one day he'd be ready to go back, but not until he found her.

Four weeks.

One month.

Thirty days.

It felt like so much longer since Harry had been allowed a glimmer of hope that Ginny might still be out there. He felt like he'd walked over every mile of Britain in his search and was still no closer to where he wanted to be.

He had taken Hermione's advice and made sure he was taking better care of himself. His beard was trimmed neatly now and he'd gotten a haircut just the other day. At least no other policemen had come sniffing around lately.

For the past few days, Harry had been fighting off a bitter feeling that crept in during the quiet moments. And there were a lot of quiet moments.

It whispered as he watched crowds of shoppers bustling about. It nudged him into sleeping in late rather than climbing out of bed to continue the search. And it guilted him into hiding the picture of Ginny he had in his pocket, rather than asking passers-by if they had seen the young woman.

He felt lost, and not just in a geographical sense, although he honestly wasn't positive the name of the town he was in right now. And he felt that strong, ever-present hope he'd held onto slip further and further away.

"Another cuppa?"

Harry barely looked up as the waitress stopped by his table. He hesitated and then pushed his empty cup and saucer to the edge, waiting for her to fill it up.

"You look like someone just ran over your pet." She laughed and Harry glanced up to find that she was smiling at him.

"No, just... just trying to find a bit of purpose," he said. It startled him that he was being honest. He didn't talk to many people lately, and he rarely thought of opening up to anyone.

"Well, I hate to tell you, but you won't find it in there." She motioned toward the plate of food in front of him and Harry chuckled. He'd picked at the meal a little, but hadn't had an appetite for a very long time. Food wasn't a comfort, it merely sustained life.

"You're right."

The small café wasn't crowded at all, not this late at night. There was a young couple sitting on the same bench, sipping at cups of something, talking in low voices. A man in the back—probably the cook—sang along to the radio. And Harry.

The waitress—Lindy was on her nametag—looked to be about Harry's age. She was pleasant to look at: plain with only a little makeup to enhance her large blue eyes.

"Anything I can help with?"

Harry had the distinct impression she was trying to flirt with him, but he blinked helplessly at her. He was rubbish at talking with girls, and flirting was out of the question. He was flattered in a way that she was even bothering considering how despondent he must look, but the idea of talking to a girl who wasn't Ginny made his stomach roll.

"Doubtful," he murmured.

"I'm a very good listener," Lindy said as she sank down into the seat across from him. "Lots of people have told me that."

"I have no doubt," Harry said. He smiled and felt himself relax slightly. There was nothing wrong with talking, was there? Besides, he could admit he was horribly lonely right now.

"It's a long story."

"Start with what's bothering you right now," said Lindy. "I wouldn't blame you if it's the food. Indigestion and all."

Harry actually laughed. The sound felt foreign to his ears. "I've had much worse."

"Poor you, then," Lindy said. "You didn't go to school around here. I think I would remember you. It's a pretty small town."

Harry shook his head. "I went to a boarding school. I'm not... not from around here."

"Just passing through," Lindy said thoughtfully. "Have a girlfriend?"

He was shocked at how forward she was, but her playful smile helped to ease his surprise. "Er... that's sort of the issue."

Lindy sat quietly, watching him intently.

"I do," he said. "But..." He pulled the picture of Ginny from his pocket and let his eyes trace over it once more. Colin had taken it just after she and Harry started going out. He had always meant to charm it to move, he said, but Harry liked it the way it was. She was laughing, smiling widely at something Harry said as they sat in the shade of the Beech tree near the Black Lake.

"But she's been missing for over a year now."

Lindy gasped and took the picture from him, examining it closely. "She's very pretty." He heard the dejected sound of her voice but thanked her all the same.

"Missing?"

"Kidnapped, we think. She was at school and I was... away. She disappeared and... and no one has heard from her since."

Lindy said something soothing, but Harry was focused on Ginny's face in the photograph she handed back.

"I've been searching and... and sometimes I wonder if I should give up." It felt like betrayal saying it aloud, but it slipped out and Harry couldn't find it in himself to take it back. All of the tiredness of the past year—of every past year—weighed him down.

"I wish I knew what to say," Lindy said. "I came over here to see if I could cheer you up, maybe get a date in the meantime..."

Harry smiled at her honesty. "I'm afraid I'm not much for company."

Lindy sighed dejectedly. "I always know how to pick them."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Lindy watching the snow fall outside the window and Harry watching the steam curl up from his coffee cup.

"Can I see the photograph again?"

Harry handed it over and Lindy studied it. "She looks really happy here."

"She was," Harry said. "We were. That was taken when we were together."

"Then you can't give up," Lindy said simply. "If you make her that happy, and she makes you feel that way, then you can't give up."

She reached across and took Harry's hand, giving it a squeeze. Her touch meant something far different now than when she'd first come over, Harry knew.

"It's been a long time. There are no leads."

"I just think that the world's bad enough out there without giving up on hope. Without hope you have nothing."

Her words startled Harry and he took a deep breath. "I was told, once, not to give up hope."

"Then you shouldn't." Lindy forced a smile, but it became genuine after a moment. "And when you find her, you'll know it was all worth it."

"What if I don't?" Harry whispered. "What if I never know what happened to her?"

Lindy looked lost and played with the empty coffee cup in front of her. "I don't know," she said.

“But I think you should keep trying. And maybe one day you’ll figure out where to go next. One day at a time.”

“One day at a time.”

It was strange that a chance encounter at a cafe, late on a snowy night in the middle of nowhere should infuse such hope into Harry. The words didn’t give him a burst of energy, or assure him that everything would work out right. But they did give him the strength to agree to keep looking for one more day.

Maybe one more day would be enough.

“Thank you, Lindy.”

“I hope you find her,” she said quietly as she rose and walked away.

Harry stared out at the falling snow and made a promise. One more day.

The string of ‘one more day’s’ led Harry through November and into December. He wandered from town to town, showing Ginny’s picture to vendors and people who were walking down the streets. Occasionally someone would ask him about his story, but most people barely gave the picture a look before they went on about their business.

Harry traveled all up the eastern coast of England, through tourist towns that were deserted in the winter, the cities that dotted the map, and the tiny villages that looked over the ocean, before venturing west once more.

It was almost Christmas and Harry was growing tired of living out of his small rucksack, wandering haplessly for days before collapsing into some hotel somewhere. He convinced himself that he needed to take a break, even if it was for only a few days, to rest and plan his next course of action.

When he reached Elland, not far outside of Leeds, Harry checked into a quaint little bed and breakfast. The woman there asked what he was doing all alone at this time of year, but Harry was out of excuses.

“Just wandering,” he told her. She didn’t recognize Ginny’s picture, but promised to keep her eyes open.

Harry thanked her and went to his room. He slept for the whole rest of the day and only ventured out when his stomach rumbled in the late afternoon. The sun was bright and most of the snow had melted, leaving puddles of slushy mess that Harry tried to avoid as he walked down the street.

The town was nice. It wasn’t huge, but had a simple feel to it. The houses were modest and Harry amused himself by picturing it as the sort of place he might want to live one day.

The open-air market that he stumbled upon only added to his enjoyment of the area. He bought a

spicy sausage and watched the people passing by. This time, however, he wasn't studying them wondering if they'd seen Ginny, he simply watched their expressions and let himself enjoy being outdoors on a lovely day.

He made small talk with the vendor selling fruit at the end of the row and bought a couple of oranges from him. The girl with purple hair selling scarves told him he should really try the homemade ice cream that Grovner's Down The Way sold. But then she lamented that it would probably be better if it were actually warm outside. Harry promised to try it anyway and walked on.

It was a relief not to focus on the search for one day, and Harry found that he enjoyed the afternoon. Just as he was leaving the market to walk back to the bed and breakfast, he saw a flash of red out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't help but look for it after all this time—the perfect shade of red.

A woman was walking away from the market, pushing a pram and leading two other small children by the hands. They were far enough away that Harry couldn't hear what she was saying, but the children were laughing.

'It's not her,' he assured himself. The encounter with the woman in Preston was still fresh in his mind from weeks before. Harry knew he couldn't go off chasing after strange women because they had the same hair color, or laughed the same, or even smelled the same as Ginny.

It would only land him in jail, or worse.

He watched the mother and her children as they walked down the sidewalk and turned down another street. The longing for a family of his own hit Harry hard and he walked away with a churning stomach.

Ron's words from months ago came back to him and Harry found himself wondering if it was all in vain. He loved Ginny—he always would—but was he still looking for her, sifting through millions of people, simply to prove that love or did he truly believe she was still out there?

The question drove him crazy for the next few days. He packed up his things to Apparate back to London three times, only to stare at the bags and feel like a coward.

One more day.

It had been his mantra for weeks now; something he woke up each morning and told himself, and something he repeated again every night before he slept.

Just one more day might make the difference.

After spending almost a week exploring the countryside and returning to the market every day, Harry felt close to the cusp of a change. He couldn't decide just what it might be. Did he go home and try to piece his life back together again? Did he disappear and start over somewhere different, completely free from the tethers of the past? Or did he keep hanging on to that small sliver of hope that Ginny might be just around the corner, living in the next town, spotted by the next person he showed her picture to?

"It's almost the holidays," the woman who ran the bed and breakfast reminded Harry before he left for the market a few days later. "Have you got a place to be?"

He had avoided thinking about Christmas as much as possible, truthfully. He knew he'd be welcome at The Burrow—Ron had sent an owl with a stiffly written invitation—but that was part of the problem. He'd been so angry when he left, so determined to hurt them that he didn't feel he should be allowed to walk back in.

"Are you planning on staying around here?"

"Not sure yet," Harry told her. "I'll probably move on."

She looked thoughtful, but nodded. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

Royce, the fruit stand man, had some freshly sliced pineapple for Harry and they stood in the bright sunlight and shared it. Royce told Harry all the secrets of the vendors—the market was like its own little community within Elland. Apparently, there was a possible coup down at the far end of the road. Rajesh, the man who did the spicy curry kebabs was angling for the spot where Nikolas sold hand carved statues. Their arguments were legendary and the gossip up and down the market was that Rajesh had bribed the city officials to let him have Nikolas' spot in January. Fiona, the purple-haired scarf woman, said she'd believe it when Nikolas took down his sign. She was far more interested in the romance brewing between Hyun, the flower salesgirl, and Felix, the baker. Harry forgot most of the juicy details that Royce insisted on imparting, but enjoyed the company.

After getting a cup of coffee from Mrs. Grovner, Harry slowly walked the length of the market once more. He would miss this place, but it was time to move on.

Fiona let out a barking laugh and Harry turned to watch as she helped a woman wearing a scarf over her hair. She was bundled up against the cold weather but wore dark sunglasses. Harry watched her finger a bright green scarf and then shake her head. Fiona made some comment back and the woman smiled.

Harry's heart stopped beating as he stared at her. She turned his way and Harry's stomach gave a jolt as a bright piece of red hair escaped the scarf and fell along her cheek. The woman swept it aside and Harry was transported, having watched Ginny make the same gesture a hundred times.

"Ginny."

Chapter 12: Take My Hand

"You should get out, dearie."

Ginny looked up from feeding James and peered at Prue. "I planned on staying in today. Mrs. Fleming didn't need me. Nigel has a cold and she wanted to stay home with him."

Prue nodded. "I know. I still think you should get out. You barely leave the house anymore. You could use a bit of fresh air and sunshine on your cheeks."

Ginny shook her head and fed James another bite, dodging his quick hands. He smacked his lips happily and babbled for another spoonful. She *had* been staying in a lot lately. Other than a few small trips with the children now and again, Ginny hadn't been outside the house since early fall. She didn't want to admit to Prue that it was her own dark mood, not necessarily the weather, that kept her in.

Over a year now.

Tonks' visit was just before Christmas last year. Ginny had to admit that a deep fear had taken hold inside her. She fought against it as hard as she could, but the image of Voldemort reigning over the Wizarding world haunted her nightmares. It was the worst possible outcome but something that Ginny told herself she needed to consider. If it were true then she could never return; she and James would have to disappear, deeper into Muggle society and give up any hope of ever being who they were supposed to be. Harry would never stop fighting until there was no more breath in him, and the Weasleys would follow. The Order of the Phoenix was the same.

"I'm insisting," Prue said finally. She might have seen the despair on Ginny's face, because she took over feeding James. "You go have a nice shower and get yourself dressed up. Wear something nice and wander around by yourself for a few hours. And I want you to spend some of that money you have stashed away on something just for you. There's no sense in working for it if you can't spend a little now and again."

Ginny laughed and shook her head. She really shouldn't... but that didn't mean that she didn't want to.

"Are you sure?"

"I'll give you a list of things I could use, if it makes you feel better about going," Prue said.

Ginny finally agreed and got herself ready. She tucked her wand into her coat pocket and wrapped one of Prue's silky scarves over her head. It wouldn't do much against the cold, but it would hold her hair back out of her face.

The day was perfect. It was cold, but bright. Ginny took her time getting to the market and pondered how long it had been since she'd taken a bit of time just for herself—five minutes in the shower while Jamie slept did not count.

Royce filled Prue's order and handed Ginny a plastic bag of oranges and bananas, which she tucked

into her large shopping bag.

She splurged on a pair of sunglasses—something horribly impractical, but she liked the way they looked in the mirror. Fiona tried to tempt her into buying a beautiful green scarf and Ginny fondled the soft, fuzzy material fondly.

“My mother knits things like this,” she mused. “Not quite this fancy, but warm and wonderful.”

“Shame on you for not wearing one,” Fiona scolded. “Although that scarf you have is fabulous.”

Ginny laughed and decided to pass on the purchase. It would remind her too much of her family when she wore it. It was going to be another Christmas without a Weasley jumper, something that made the ache inside Ginny grow deeper. Maybe she should get some yarn and try making one for James. He certainly deserved his own Weasley—no, *Potter*—jumper. The idea made her smile and she turned to go. There was a knitting shop a few streets over that sold beautiful skeins of yarn.

As Ginny walked, mentally debating the perfect color to buy, she felt eyes on her. Across the street and down a ways, a man wearing all black stood watching Ginny. He held a cup of coffee in his hands, but ignored it in favor of staring at her. He had a dark beard covering his face and his glasses reflected the sunlight.

Her heart raced and she sped up her step. Ginny shifted her bag to her left side to make it easier to pull her wand. She glanced back over her shoulder to see him following her.

She started to jog, but the sidewalk was wet and icy, making it impossible to escape quickly. It had to be a Death Eater. They’d found her after all this time.

Dozens of scenarios sped through her mind, making her dizzy. Whatever she did, she couldn’t lead him back to James. She would have to direct him away and fight. Once she overpowered him, she’d take James and they would disappear. It was the only thing she could do.

The man was catching up to her, ducking through the same streets, dodging people as he ran with heavy steps.

“Wait!”

Ginny turned into a blind alley and tossed her bag and glasses aside. She pulled her wand and waited for the man to turn the corner.

He followed, skidding on the icy entrance, and she nearly dropped her wand when she got a good look at him.

The face that she’d dreamed about for years, covered in black whiskers, stared back at her.

The brilliant green eyes behind glasses.

He seemed just as stunned to see her as she was him. Ginny shook the terror away. She had to protect James.

“Why are you following me?” She pressed the tip of her wand further into the flesh of his neck and

tried not to look at his startlingly bright eyes. It had to be polyjuice the Death Eaters had used to impersonate Harry because the eyes were too perfect to be simple transfiguration or charms.

"Ginny?"

The awe in the whisper made goosebumps stand out all over her skin, but she held her position, prepared to flee if necessary. Her heart pounded against her ribs. All this time she'd been safe, hidden away here in Elland, but now the war was here, standing in front of her, and tearing at her heart.

"You... you're not him. You can't be," she answered.

The man with the black beard stared at her with wide eyes. His hand lifted as if he wanted to touch her, but she shoved her wand at him once more and he froze.

"It's me, Gin," he said.

"Prove it," she growled through her teeth. "I assure you I'm more than capable of killing you." It might have been a lie, but she felt the truth of the statement down deep inside her. She had to protect James, and if killing this imitator was the only way... She knew it was within her to protect her child.

"Prove it," she dared him again.

The man was still staring with penetrating eyes. She watched his Adam's apple bob up and down, and his hand dropped to his side.

"What was the last thing I told you?" Ginny asked. She and Harry had been completely alone, well within the wards at The Burrow. Only the real Harry would know the answer to her question.

He swallowed again and when he spoke his voice quivered. "You told me not to say goodbye. So I didn't. I said goodnight."

Her hand shook and her wand lowered just an inch. "You..."

"Is it you?" he asked her. He leaned toward her and his hand came up to wrap around a lock of her hair that was escaping the scarf she wore. Her heart thumped louder, but for a far different reason now.

"You... you were hovering outside my window, when you said goodnight," she whispered, "on Ron's broom that you had stolen."

His lips were on hers in the next breath. He crushed her to his chest, holding her until neither of them could breathe any longer.

"It's you," he whispered. "Ginny. My Ginny."

Her whole body hitched and a loud sob exploded from her. She wound her hands into his coat as tears poured down her face.

"It's really over?" she begged. "I kept waiting for some word, some message, but Tonks never came... And then the weeks grew into months and I still had no idea... No contact at all... It's been hell, Harry, simply hell!"

She knew she was babbling, but it didn't matter; Harry was here. He was here in her arms.

"Shhh," he soothed. He tugged her scarf off and her hair spilled down over her shoulders and stuck to her wet cheeks. Harry buried his hands in it and lifted her face to kiss him once more.

It was strange to kiss him through the thick whiskers—scratchy and distracting. Ginny pulled back and stared at him. Her hand rose and she traced his cheeks and nose with her fingertip before lifting it to his scar. It was far fainter than she remembered.

"Where have you been?" Harry demanded. His face was wet as well, Ginny noticed, and tears clung to the edges of his glasses, dripping down into the black beard that covered his face. "I... I've been looking for months!"

The idea jolted Ginny and she pulled back from him, trying to catch her breath. Months?

"The war," she said faintly. "It's... it's over?"

Harry peered at her and moved closer, trying to pull her to him again. "Yes. Over."

"But..." Ginny's head whirled and her knees shook, threatening to send her crashing to the dirty pavement. "Tonks..."

"Ginny," Harry said quietly. His hands clasped hers tightly. "Tonks is... I'm so sorry."

A keening wail filled the alley and Ginny realized it was coming from her. Tonks' vibrant face appeared in her mind—the bright smile that rarely disappeared, the pink tipped hair and cheeky attitude. "Her... her baby?"

"Teddy," Harry said. His arm wrapped around Ginny and she leaned heavily on him. "He's fine. Well, as fine as he can be with two dead parents. But Andromeda is raising him. Remus asked me to be his Godfather. I have no idea what the hell I'm doing but..."

The small bit of breath she'd managed to gather left her once more. How many times during the last year had she looked down at her growing belly, and then at James' face after he was born, and wondered if he would end up an orphan at the end of all of this? Far too many.

"You were taken by Death Eaters and I... I didn't know..."

Ginny's head snapped up as Harry rambled on and on. It seemed as if he had no idea what he was saying, but the words were spilling out, tripping over each other and making very little sense.

"No," she corrected distractedly. Harry let her go and Ginny pressed her hand to her forehead. "I wasn't taken. I... I left."

The smile fell away from Harry's face and his eyes hardened until there was nothing there. It was like staring at a blank wall.

"You... you *left*?" he asked.

Ginny shivered at the coldness of his tone and bit her lip. She'd rehearsed this reunion so many times in the dark of the night as James slept nestled up next to her. She imagined this moment and exactly how she would tell Harry about his son, about their months apart, and all that had happened. But as they stood in the cold December air, the words melted away from her.

"I had to leave, Harry," she said. "I... I had a very important reason."

Harry took a step away from her and then another. His whole body tensed and she couldn't decide if he was going to run out of the alley or strike her.

"We... we didn't know where you were," he said in a shaky voice. "For more than a year we thought you... And you *left*."

Ginny moved toward him and reached for his hand. "Harry—"

"Don't touch me!" Harry jerked his whole body away from her and she gasped at the sting of the slight.

"If you knew..." She glared at him. "If you *really* knew, Harry..."

"Tell me," he demanded. "Tell me what fucking reason is good enough to let your family think you were dead! What reason justifies disappearing in the middle of a war, Ginny? Unless you're just a *coward*!"

Her whole body trembled and she prepared to yell back at him, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't tell him like this. She couldn't throw his son into his face this way.

Instead, she gathered herself, straightened her coat and pushed Prue's scarf into her pocket.

"Come with me," she said. She held out her hand in an invitation and Harry stared at it. "I'll show you."

Harry glared at her but there was enough hesitation in his stance that she knew he was curious. They needed to talk. They needed to sit down and work everything out, but first he needed to understand or he wouldn't listen to her at all.

"I don't want to—"

"You wanted my reasoning," Ginny spat. "It's just a handful of streets away." She turned on her heel after snatching her bag off the pavement and walked away. Harry didn't follow immediately and her heart pounded in worry.

This was all going horribly wrong. She didn't want this moment to be about anger, or about hurt. She didn't want to feel more guilt than she already did about why she'd ended up here, hiding during the war while everyone suffered. She didn't want Harry to feel more pain than he already had.

And there was everything else to consider as well. Tonks and Remus... gone. And what of her family?

Had any of them survived? Harry hadn't said anything about it.

She didn't look back over her shoulder as she walked—probably faster than she normally would—but she could feel him there, hear his steps on the pavement, crunching bits of ice that lingered.

"Ginny... Just... just wait, please!" Harry pleaded when he caught up to her.

She spun on her heel, ready to scream at him, but he looked so lost, so broken, that she swallowed back her anger.

"Where are we going?" he asked quietly.

"I told you—"

He looked frustrated and ran his hand through his hair, making it stand up in odd angles. "I just..."

"You said the war was over," she said.

They looked at each other for a long moment before he nodded jerkily. "In May."

"And you..." Ginny didn't know exactly what she was asking—or, really, she did, but she didn't know how to voice it. Could she really come right out and ask Harry if he'd killed Tom Riddle? It seemed so crass, so accusing.

"It's complicated," Harry dismissed as he looked away from her. "But just know that... that it's over." The emotional wall was up again and Ginny briefly wondered if this was the best idea, taking him to see James. She knew the Harry she'd known last year wouldn't want to wait to meet his only family, but this Harry was different. He was hard and colder than she imagined Harry could ever be. What must he have gone through to end up like this?

"And... my family?"

His eyes snapped back toward her and she could read the pain there. It somehow crossed the space between them like a physical force, slithering its way into her soul until it wrapped so tightly around her heart that her chest ached.

"Fred... at Hogwarts during the fighting," said Harry.

Ginny wrapped her arms around herself and crumpled. Her throat burned with the sob of grief and only Harry's grip kept her from hitting the ground.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered over and over, into her hair, into the space between her neck and shoulder, into the skin on her cheek.

And just like that, whatever anger he'd been feeling with her over leaving seemed to melt away.

"I shouldn't have called you a coward," he whispered. His hands cupped her face as tears poured down her cheeks. "I was... being a git. I was angry. Whatever reason you had... it was enough. You had to do it. I trust that."

They must have been making quite the spectacle of themselves, embracing and crying in the middle of the path while people watched, but Ginny didn't care.

"Everyone else..."

"Grieving, but alive," Harry assured her. "They... they've been searching for you, as well." There was enough hesitation in his words to assure Ginny that there was more to the story, but she would get to that later.

She closed her eyes tightly and pushed Fred's death to the end of the list of things to deal with. "Come on," she said. "We have... a lot to talk about."

Harry nodded and wiped her eyes with his thumbs before he scanned the street ahead of them. "Is it far? We could Apparate."

The question struck Ginny as amusing and she chuckled. "I can't," she said.

"You're of age," he corrected.

"Harry, I haven't used magic in more than a year."

Harry stared down at Ginny with her blotchy cheeks and red, swollen eyes. "What do you..." His mind whirled as he tried to figure out what she meant. Nothing she was saying was making any sense. She'd *left* voluntarily, and spent the last year not doing magic? And how was Tonks involved in all of this?

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "I think it will be easier to show you rather than explain."

Harry wanted to protest, but he simply nodded instead. Despite calling her a coward for leaving—something he felt horrible for doing in his anger—he knew she had to have a good reason for leaving her family behind, for hiding so long.

"All right," he said. Hesitantly, he slid his hand into hers. He hated himself for telling her so abruptly about Fred, and Remus and Tonks, but nothing seemed to be coming out of his mouth right today.

Wrapping his head around the fact that this was his Ginny right next to him, alive and well, was too much. And the idea that she had been safe all this time, in hiding... It made his head spin.

After they had made a sharp turn onto another street that was lined with houses all crammed together, Ginny turned to him. "I want to ask you so much more but... but this needs to come first. You need to understand."

"All right," he said. There was a determination about her that both calmed him and made his heart race. The way she locked her jaw, the stiff way she held her shoulders and that blazing look—the one that melted him every time he saw it—all of it made each step they took toward their destination, wherever it may be, heavier.

Finally, Ginny stopped in front of a worn house with chipped white paint. The door had once been black but was now faded into a sun-bleached grey.

Harry opened his mouth to ask if this was it, but the way Ginny's hand shook in his convinced him that he needed to wait.

"Come in," she urged needlessly. Harry wouldn't have left right now if someone held a wand to his head.

The living room in the house was unremarkable, but then again, Harry had no idea what to expect. He had no idea what Ginny was mixed up in.

"Just... just wait here," she said as she let her hand drop from his. She looked nervous—more nervous than he could remember seeing her in a very long time. The look in her eyes reminded him of the time when she was eleven and had tried to tell him and Ron about the diary but Percy had interrupted.

Harry stood in the center of the narrow room while Ginny walked through a doorway and disappeared. His mind reeled as he tried to piece together this strange puzzle, but nothing made sense. There were too many pieces that he simply didn't understand, too many that didn't fit. He sat down on the edge of the faded floral sofa and rubbed his tired eyes. So much had happened over the past months—he'd nearly given up on finding Ginny, and then stumbled on her in the most unlikely place in the world. The emotional swing was horribly draining.

Voices drifted from the other room—one of them Ginny's—but Harry couldn't make out what they were saying; they were too low.

Ginny.

She was alive and here, so very real that Harry's skin tingled at the thought of her. She looked older and there were smudges of grey beneath her eyes that testified that whatever she was doing in this strange house in Elland, it hadn't been restful and relaxing. She also looked thinner and older; much like Harry assumed he looked to her.

But that didn't matter. Her eyes were still that beautiful, bright brown that had haunted his memories and dreams. Her touch still burned his skin and her kiss still lit a fire in him that demanded more. Memories of their last moments together before they were separated made Harry's cheeks heat now. He tugged his coat open and then finally took it completely off.

In his head he rehearsed what he was going to say when Ginny came back—the reason she'd left didn't matter, because after fearing the worst for so long, she was here. She was alive and well, and that was all that Harry really cared about. She still held him and kissed him like she had before. He needed to tell her that he loved her, that he had never given up on her—not ever.

A movement at the door startled him from his silently rehearsed conversation and he stood slowly as Ginny walked back in, a child in her arms. Her cheeks were flushed from more than just the warmth of the house and she approached slowly.

"This was my reason," she whispered and shifted the baby until he was looking at Harry.

All thought left him. All breath exited his lungs, leaving them burning until he thought he might crumble away into dust.

The baby's large brown eyes were unmistakably Ginny's, but his face held enough features that Harry knew instantly who he was.

"I..."

"He's your son," Ginny said. She fussed with the baby's little shirt and smiled down at him.

Harry took a step toward them; his feet felt as if someone had filled them with lead. "You..."

"It's my fault," Ginny said. She didn't look at Harry, but continued to look at the baby who was squirming in her arms and staring at Harry curiously. "I started everything that night and..."

"He's mine," Harry said. A tight fist of emotion wrapped around his heart and his eyes filled with tears. He was a father.

Ginny nodded and smiled up at him tentatively. "Are you angry?"

Harry shook his head immediately and took another step forward until he was right in front of them. This close he could see so many other similarities in the baby's face to Ginny's. He might have had Harry's wild black hair and a similar nose, but his mouth was all Ginny's, along with his eyes.

"I named him James."

The grip on Harry's heart tightened again and he reached for the boy, holding his hands out even though they shook horribly. James shied away, leaning into Ginny and burying his face beneath her chin.

"He's a bit shy until he warms up to you." She shifted him into Harry's arms and the boy whimpered slightly.

"It's Daddy, James," Ginny soothed. She pulled completely back and Harry swallowed thickly as he looked down at the uncertain look on his son's face.

His son.

"I..."

"You don't know how many times I wanted to tell you, to write you, or find you," Ginny said. A quiver in her voice made the first tear fall from Harry's eyes. He closed them tightly and pressed his lips against James' head as he reached for Ginny.

"You're really not angry? That I left?" Ginny asked in a muffled voice as she held him. "That I didn't tell you, or anyone else?"

Harry cleared his throat. "You left to protect our child, Ginny. You sacrificed everything..."

Their eyes met and he knew she understood what he was saying, what he was feeling.

"It's okay," he said. "It's... it's all okay now."

And it was. All the fear, all the pain of the last year was swept away in the moment—Harry knew it wasn't gone completely, just held at bay by the hope and overwhelming hugeness of this second.

Ginny looked up at him and slowly smiled the most genuine smile he could remember seeing. "Is it?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh softly. James' chubby hand snatched his glasses, getting the earpiece caught and making Harry laugh louder.

"It is," Harry assured her.

His glasses went right into James' mouth and Harry leaned over to press a kiss to Ginny's forehead.

"It is."

Chapter 13: The Space We'll Fill With Time

James babbled on and on, hitting his plastic keys against the tray of his little chair and squealing with happiness when they clattered loudly. Normally, the noise would drive Ginny barmy, but she barely heard it today.

The morning had started out so normal—Mrs. Fleming hadn't needed Ginny to childmind today, so Ginny was planning to spend the whole day with James. And then Prue had insisted that Ginny take the morning for herself.

Horror struck her when she considered what might have happened if she hadn't wanted the fresh air. Harry wouldn't have seen her, he wouldn't have followed her. She would be sitting here in her rooms with James, unaware that the war was over and still separated from the people she loved.

A choked sound escaped her lips and James looked up from his toy, wide eyes concerned. A large trail of drool slid down his chin.

"I'm sorry, Jamie," she soothed. "Don't worry about Mummy. I'm just..." She trailed off and ruffled his hair lightly before turning and wiping her eyes.

"Daddy will be back soon and then..." Words failed her one more time, because she honestly had no idea what would happen next. Harry hadn't wanted to leave them, but when Ginny hinted that he might stay with them rather than the place he'd been staying, he'd decided to retrieve his things.

His absence allowed Ginny a moment to breathe and to try and make sense of everything in her head.

The war ended in May, but with Tonks gone, no one had known where Ginny was. They all thought she was dead, or taken by Death Eaters. And then there were the deaths to consider. So many people gone. Fred's face swam to the front of her mind and she knew she was going to have to deal with that soon, but not right now. Not when there was so much else to wrap her mind around.

"We should get you some lunch, little one," Ginny said absently. She removed a small jar of apples from the cupboard and opened it. James quickly abandoned his toy over the side of the chair and kicked his legs in anticipation.

"This is your favorite, isn't it? Your grandma used to make all of our food, but I wouldn't know where to begin, so you're stuck with these little things," she said as she peered critically at the jar.

James smacked his lips in satisfaction as she spooned the mushy apples into his mouth. He grinned up at her, showing off his bright white teeth in the front.

Ginny's eyes filled with tears as she watched her son. "You look so much like him. I'd almost forgotten..."

James grabbed for the spoon impatiently and Ginny swerved it out of the way just in time to avoid his fingers.

"It's coming, it's coming." She slid the spoon between his eager lips. Focusing only on James and the routine movements of feeding him helped Ginny to get her emotions in check. By the time he was finished with the apples, and was happily chewing on his sticky fingers, she felt like she would not be completely overwhelmed.

"It's nap time, Jamie." Ginny wiped his hands and removed him from his chair. As if he understood her words, James cuddled into her and put his fingers into his mouth once more. The soft sucking sound was comforting to them both, but Ginny reached up and gently pried his thumb from his mouth. "That's a horrid habit, love."

Ginny slid him down into position and adjusted him so he could nurse. She sat in the old rocking chair that Prue had given her just before James was born and nudged it into motion with her toes. As they rocked, Ginny hummed a song that her mother had sung to all the Weasley children. Ginny's earliest memory was of cuddling with her mother in the early gray-dawn light and hearing this same song.

Her eyes slipped closed just as James relaxed against her. They only opened when the stairs down into the basement creaked. Harry was frozen there—clean shaven with a bag slung over one shoulder. He stared at her with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"What?" she asked, feeling self-conscious. "Did I get baby food all over me?"

A slow smile spread across his face and he shook his head before descending the remaining stairs.

"I just... it still feels so unreal. Seeing you again... and James."

Ginny knew exactly what he meant, even if his words were awkwardly put. She took a moment to really study him and marveled at how different, and yet the same, he looked. His face was so thin—even more noticeable now that he'd shaved—and he'd grown at least another two inches since she'd seen him in August. His eyes were darker, much more wary, and yet there was something in them that was unmistakably 'Harry' to her.

"I know," she said softly. "I really do know."

Harry let his bag slump to the floor and continued to close the distance between them. He stood in front of them and let his eyes linger on James, seemingly memorizing each feature.

"I never dreamed... Not even in my best dreams," he whispered.

"Let me put him down and we can... we can talk," Ginny said. As much as she wanted to stay right here in this enchanted, quiet moment, she knew there was so much to discuss. They'd spent more than a year apart and so much had happened.

Harry gave a reluctant, tired look, but nodded. He took James into his arms and held the baby for a long minute while Ginny cleaned herself up. A soft look came over his face and Ginny swore she saw his chest hitch with a sob, but no sound escaped him.

Knowing that she was going to have to take control to get anything more than cuddling with James accomplished—not that she blamed Harry, at all—Ginny urged him to place the baby on the bed.

"He'll be fine here," she assured him once she'd placed pillows around James. "He's used to sleeping on the bed."

Harry seemed reluctant to leave and stared at his son. "He won't... crawl off, or anything? Teddy's crawling all over the place. Or... he was the last time I saw him."

"He'll be fine," Ginny said once more. "We'll be right over there." She nudged Harry toward the short sofa and they sat next to each other. A wave of anxiety and awkwardness built between them as she searched for a place to begin.

"I, er... when I found out that I was pregnant I knew I had to leave Hogwarts. Things were too unstable. If the Carrows had discovered..." She trailed off and shuddered at the thought.

"It was the right choice," Harry said. "For both of you. I just wish..."

Ginny rubbed her forehead. "I know. I thought I could trust Tonks—and she proved me right, but..."

"So many mistakes," Harry whispered. "So many moments that could have turned any which way, changing everything." He rubbed his face harshly and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "What if she'd told someone, what if the wrong people had found out..."

"It's over now," Ginny said. The awe of that statement took a moment to sink in. "Tell me... everything."

Harry's head jerked around toward her and she could see the hesitation on his face, but then his hand slid into hers and he nodded.

As she listened to him haltingly tell her about everything that had happened through the past year, Ginny couldn't help but be grateful that she was hidden away here with James. And, yet, that made her feel horribly selfish and cowardly. If she hadn't been pregnant, if things had been different, Ginny knew that she would have been in the middle of everything, fighting to keep their world safe.

"A part of me wishes I would have been there," she admitted as she stared down at their fingers intertwined on Harry's leg.

"As much as I hate that you were here alone, dealing with all of this," Harry said, "I can't even imagine what I would have felt knowing that you and James were in that much danger. It would have killed me, Gin."

She studied his face and knew he was being completely serious. "I know." Ginny gave his hand a squeeze and sighed. "But everything was different."

They were quiet for a long time and Harry finally wrapped his arm over her shoulders. "Is it all right that I have no idea what to do next?"

Ginny nodded against his shoulder. "Tell me about Fred."

His whole body jerked and stiffened underneath her head. "Gin, I..."

"I need to know, Harry. And Tonks and Remus. Everyone."

He was hesitant to start, and Ginny understood that. But the story came, one uncertain phrase at a time until they were both in tears.

"I wish I could have..." Harry smoothed the hair away from Ginny's face and wiped her tears while his own cheeks remained wet. "If I could have..."

Ginny shook her head. "No, don't say that. I know what you're thinking and... and none of them would trade places with you, especially not with him here." She glanced over at James sleeping on the bed and closed her eyes tight against the idea that he could have, so easily, never known his father.

Harry looked stricken and shook his head. "No, you're right. They wouldn't. And I... I can't even imagine..."

She sucked in a deep breath and composed herself. "There's so much more to talk about, so much more to deal with."

"I... I need to tell you one more thing," Harry said quietly. His voice sounded hallow and haunted, and Ginny worried at what could possibly make his emotional walls come up again so quickly. "I told you that Voldemort was killed by his own curse rebounding."

"Like before," Ginny nodded.

Harry swallowed and nodded. "I didn't... I didn't tell you about before that. After we got to the castle and I watched Snape die—"

"And he gave you the memories," Ginny said, remembering that much of the story.

His eyes were glassy, but his jaw set determinedly. "Voldemort gave an ultimatum. He told me to hand myself over and he would stop the killing."

Ginny's hand shook and she swallowed the urge to gasp. There was no way Voldemort would allow witches and wizards to live who had so violently opposed him, no matter if Harry turned himself over or not.

"You... you did it." The truth was written all over his face, but Ginny knew him well enough to know that Harry would have walked right into Voldemort's lair, arms held high, defenseless, if it meant he could spare one innocent person.

"I did." He nodded stiffly. "I walked into the forest alone. But... I wasn't really alone. I had the Resurrection Stone with me. I thought..." His voice wavered and his fingers played with hers. "I thought that if I used it, I might see you. There wasn't much hope at that point that..."

Ginny's insides twisted and she lifted her hand to lie along his cheek.

"But you didn't come. Sirius, Remus... my parents..."

"Oh, Harry." Ginny sighed and curled tighter into him. "I... I'm glad you got to see them, at least."

"When you didn't come, I... It gave me hope that maybe we were wrong, maybe you weren't... My

Mum told me never to lose hope."

Ginny kissed him then, but it wasn't an out of control kiss like the ones they'd shared earlier in the alley. This one was all about comfort and assurance that they were both here, and both had suffered through being apart.

"She was a smart witch," Ginny complimented. Their foreheads rested together.

"There's more," Harry said when he pulled back.

"Not sure how much more I can take," Ginny said honestly. She felt completely drained, like a wet rag that had been wrung out and left to dry stretched on a line somewhere.

Harry hesitated. "I don't have to—"

"Like a Muggle plaster, yeah?" Ginny said with a wry little laugh. "Rip it off all at once." She took a deep breath and gave a nod.

Harry bit his lip and contemplated. He stared at his hands as he continued. "I offered myself up to him, didn't even consider fighting back. I had to," he explained. "One of the memories that Snape gave me was Dumbledore telling him that I... that I was a Horcrux. I had to die, Gin."

Everything inside her rebelled at the idea and her stomach rolled threateningly. "You... no. No."

The earnestness on his face was overwhelming. "I did it for you," he whispered. "And for the others, too, but mostly for you. If you were out there somewhere, I had to give you a chance at living. I don't regret it. Not one moment of it."

Ginny pushed off the sofa and launched herself into the small open space. The whole idea was madness. It was the most insane, sickening thought that she could imagine having.

"Right before the spell hit me, I saw your face," Harry whispered. "And I knew it was worth it."

She felt sick. Her head reeled and her stomach rebelled violently. She lurched toward the small kitchen and leaned over the sink, afraid her breakfast was going to come back up.

Harry's hand wrapped around her from behind and he gently grasped her hair out of the way, holding her as she wretched.

Even though it sickened her to think of Harry offering himself as a sacrifice, she understood it. And he'd thought of her. Hadn't she seen Harry's face in her mind while giving birth to James? Hadn't she heard his voice in her ear, whispering encouragement and words of love?

Wasn't that the same thing?

Ginny remembered overhearing her mother speaking to another woman from the village when she was quite little, and hearing her mother say that giving birth was the closest most women come to dying during their lives without actually doing so.

In a way, it was the same thing.

"I shouldn't have told you," Harry said. He summoned a glass from the cupboard and filled it with a splash of water, which he offered to her. "I'm sorry, I just..."

"I'm not disgusted," Ginny said as she stared down at the bottom of the sink. "I just... the idea that he could do that, could actually..." She couldn't even say the words.

"I came back," Harry said. "I had to find you. I had to... to keep that hope."

Ginny swished the water around in her mouth and then spit it into the sink. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked up at him through watery eyes.

"I don't know what to say, honestly."

Harry gave her a sad look. "I just wanted you to know. That's why I kept looking all this time when others..." As if he'd realized what he'd said, Harry broke off, looking stricken.

Ginny pondered the thought even as another wave of sick struggled to make its way up her throat. "They... they stopped looking?"

"I can't speak for them," he said stiffly. "I don't know what was going on in their minds. Your Mum... she was so broken, Ginny. So very broken. When I left... I said horrible things to her. To them all."

Hesitantly, Ginny laid her hand on his chest and then curled into him, accepting the embrace he gave. "We'll fix it," she promised. And that was what she wanted, but deep inside her there was pain at the idea that her family could actually walk away from her like he was implying.

"We will," Harry said. He leaned down to kiss her, but Ginny flinched away.

"I was just sick; I should brush my teeth." She pressed her lips to his cheek instead and then hurried to the bathroom.

Inside, once the door was closed, Ginny stared critically at herself in the mirror. Her hair was a mess, ruffled and stringy. Her face was pale, other than around her eyes which were blotchy red.

"Deal with it later," she scolded herself quietly as she squeezed toothpaste onto her brush. "Now isn't the time."

When she finished and took a few minutes to compose herself, Ginny left the little room only to find Harry lying on the bed next to James. The baby was sitting up, grinning and babbling to his favorite stuffed bear, which Harry was levitating in front of him.

Ginny's heart twisted at the sight of the two of them interacting and she realized that no matter how much she missed her family, no matter if they had given up on her or not, Ginny's family was right here. She would always have a connection to her parents and siblings that couldn't be replaced, but she and Harry now had a child to raise together. They had, unknowingly, created the start of their own little family back on that hot summer night so long ago. It wasn't perfect, but it was a beginning of a life again.

"Looks like someone woke up happy," she said as she climbed onto the end of the bed. James threw himself toward her, getting tangled in the blankets before reaching her. Ginny held him tightly and her eyes met Harry's over the baby's thatch of black hair.

Their own little family; and it was going to be amazing.

They sat together on the floor and watched their son. Harry's fingers were wrapped in Ginny's and he couldn't force himself to pull away from her. She seemed inclined to be touching him just as much, though, and held his hand tightly.

"I've missed so much," he whispered.

He remembered how different Teddy was each time Harry would visit—one day he was just a newborn with wide eyes, watching the world go by, the next he was cutting teeth and drooling all over everything. Babies changed quickly, Andromeda told him.

"Tell me everything?"

Ginny leaned her head against his shoulder and watched James roll from his belly to his back, playing with his toys.

"Everything? There's a lot to cover."

"Don't leave anything out," said Harry earnestly. "I feel... guilty for missing it."

"Don't." Ginny's fingers tightened on his and she reached out to smooth James' wild hair. "We can't change the past, there's no use feeling guilty over it."

Harry thought about that as James grinned up at them. His eyes sparkled with life and Harry wondered if his parents had ever sat on the floor, just like he and Ginny were, and watched him discover the world around him.

"When was he born?"

"May second," Ginny said. "Early in the morning."

Harry sat up straight and stared down at her. "May second?"

She seemed alarmed at his question and peered at him. "Yeah. Early. I think Prue said it was nearly two."

Harry stared down at James then, who was tugging at Ginny's shoelaces, trying to get the end into his mouth.

"I can't believe..."

"Harry?"

"That's the day," he said. An overwhelming wave of something washed over Harry. It was incredible that on that day, the day he'd been prepared to die and had finally defeated the monster who wanted him dead, a new chapter in his life was being written. His future was intrinsically intertwined with his past.

"The battle..."

Ginny's eyes grew wide as she finally understood his rambling words. "Are you... May second?"

Harry pursed his lips as flashes of the day came back to him. The sound of the castle walls crumbling, the acrid smell of smoke, the taste of blood in the air, the crunch of the leaves and twigs under his feet as he walked into the forest. And, above all, the blinding green light as the Avada Kedavra raced toward him.

He shook the dark thoughts away and forced himself to see only the small face of his future. "It seems too much to be coincidence, you know."

"I was past my due date," Ginny muttered. "And I'd been in labor for hours but didn't realize it. I was panicked. Prue... she did it all. If she hadn't been here..." She trailed off and Harry pressed his lips to her forehead. His throat closed around the idea of what might have happened if Prudence hadn't taken Ginny in, if she hadn't offered shelter for a young, scared girl. He would never stop owing her; that much he knew.

"I wish I could have been here," Harry said once more. "I know we can't change things, but..."

Ginny cupped his cheek in her hand and looked up at him. "I know. And I wish I could have been there for you, given you a kiss before you walked into the forest, fought side by side with you, held you after."

James squealed in excitement as he finally pulled the shoelace enough to wind around his fingers. Harry chuckled and lifted him off the floor. The baby seemed disappointed at the loss of his toy, until he snatched Harry's glasses off his face.

"I can't believe it," Harry said. He didn't bother to retrieve the slimy glasses now, but just looked down at this little miracle in his lap. "May second."

"The day that everything changed," Ginny murmured.

The light of the room was low and came mostly from the red glow of the alarm clock on the small bedside table. A small bit of light from the street lamp outside filtered into the window.

Even though he could only see an outline of their features, Harry still stared at Ginny and James. He couldn't bring himself to look away in case they disappeared, in case he opened his eyes and they drifted into that hazy dream state where Harry couldn't be sure they really existed.

James gave a shuddering sigh, his small chest hitching before he snuggled in toward his mother.

He was beautiful—the most amazing thing Harry had ever seen in his life. He had Ginny’s mouth and small jaw, but his nose was Harry’s, thin and straight. He had Ginny’s deep brown eyes, but his hair was dark and wild. A thick mane of the softest fuzz Harry had ever touched. He ran his hand along it now and felt the tips of the longest part tickle his fingers. It was downy and danced like a feather when Harry lowered to press a kiss to his son’s head.

His son.

The reality of that phrase hadn’t sunk in just yet and Harry wasn’t sure if it ever would. Would he always see this tiny bit of himself and Ginny mixed and feel his chest get so tight with emotion that he couldn’t speak for fear of breaking down?

And Ginny.

Having her back was nothing short of a miracle. Harry felt his eyes burn and forced himself to blink back tears. Not only was she alive and well, but she’d sacrificed everything to protect their son.

She was the strongest person he’d ever known.

He couldn’t hold back the tears any longer and watched them both with watery eyes.

This was his family. The one thing he’d wanted just for himself for as long as he could remember. His finger brushed along the back of James’ hand and the baby flexed his fingers and wrapped them tightly around Harry’s. Harry rested his face right in James’ hair and reached out to touch Ginny with his other hand.

Her eyes fluttered open and she lifted her head slowly, automatically straightening James’ blankets. She seemed startled to see Harry there, but then her surprise melted into a smile that sent a spark through Harry.

“All right?”

“Never been better,” he whispered. “Ever.”

She kissed the baby’s forehead and then lay her head down so that she could look at Harry.

“This is what I was missing all those months. I would wake with James snuggled into me and I would always look for you, knowing you weren’t there. But you were in my dreams.”

Harry winced and lifted up onto his elbow. “Ginny—”

“It’s okay,” she assured him. “I understood, but I couldn’t control my dreams. You were always there, in that place just before I was really awake and fully asleep.”

“It was the same for me,” Harry said. He leaned over, careful not to crush James, and let his lips rest on hers gently. “I can’t go to sleep.”

“You have issues with sleeping, don’t you?” She chuckled and Harry had to smile. They were here now, with an unplanned child nestled between them, precisely for the fact that Harry couldn’t sleep.

"If I recall, you were just as awake as I was."

Ginny's eyes flashed and she bit her bottom lip. "I was."

Harry's whole insides flamed to life, burning with passion that had been derailed since the moment she'd walked out carrying the baby with the black hair just like his. It coursed through his veins now and thundered in his ears.

He kissed her again, more urgently, and buried his hand in her hair, holding her neck firmly. Ginny gave herself over to the kiss and moaned low in her throat.

Between them, James wiggled and gave a whimper that brought them crashing back to reality.

"Sorry," Harry said. He watched Ginny sheepishly straighten James and pull his little thumb from his mouth.

"S'okay." Ginny lay her head back down, but the fire was still in her gaze.

Harry felt helpless where he lay. He wanted nothing more than to gather her into his arms, kiss her, and touch her. They'd been apart for far too long to simply let a few kisses satisfy them. He wanted to make love to her, not out of desperation and the heat of a stolen moment, but out of affirmation of life and recognition of a miracle.

She was here and alive, and she'd given him a son.

"Gin, I..."

The blazing look on her face set him alight even more and Harry swallowed, knowing there was nothing they could do with James asleep here between them.

"Come here." Her hand closed around his and she sat up. Harry followed and they scooted off the bed together. Ginny made a barrier of pillows along the edge of the mattress so that James wouldn't roll off.

When she was finished, Harry pulled her into his arms. She gasped softly, but gave in to his embrace immediately.

"You have no idea how much I... how much I missed you," he whispered into the soft skin of her neck, placing kisses on every inch of skin he could find.

"I think I can imagine," she answered back cheekily.

"I actually... I'd come to the point where I was forcing myself to accept that..." Harry swallowed the admission and the thickness in his throat. A tear slipped from his eye and ran unchecked down to his jaw. "I swore I'd never lose hope, but..."

She kissed him, strong and demanding. "I had no news," she said. "No one to comfort me—I only had James."

And he knew that she had him beat. Nothing he had endured could ever compare to what she'd

given up to protect their child. He didn't count when he'd watched Voldemort's curse fly toward him—that had been a relief, in a way, because Harry knew he was sacrificing to give Ginny a chance at life.

"No more leaving," he scolded her softly. His hands slid down her sides and he lifted her into his embrace in one sure move. Ginny gasped and wrapped her legs around his waist, still holding tightly to him and kissing his face.

"No more leaving," she chided back.

They both chuckled and Harry walked the few steps toward the sofa. He laid her down gently and sighed in complete contentment when she pulled him on top of her.

The sofa was too short—Harry's feet hung over the far end—and it wasn't very comfortable, but Harry didn't pay attention to minor annoyances. His Ginny was here again, in his arms after so long apart. She loved him and he loved her.

He whispered the words and Ginny smoothed her hands over his face. "I know, Harry," she answered back. "I've known since that night—maybe before."

"I didn't know," he said sheepishly. "I didn't understand what it meant."

"But now you do."

He thought of the amazing woman in his arms, all the Weasleys who had been so concerned about him when he left, and the tiny little boy asleep just feet away.

"Now I know," he said surely. "I know."

They kissed again and Harry undid the buttons on Ginny's nightgown. She'd been the one to initiate their encounter last time and Harry was determined to show her how he felt this time. They were still inexperienced and new to this whole thing, but Harry knew it didn't matter.

Last time had been out of desperation; this time was about celebration. There was still a frantic feel to everything and Harry found himself holding her a bit too tightly, kissing her a bit too soundly. But Ginny's touch was just as frenzied, just as firm.

"I want to make love to you," he admitted with a groan into her exposed chest. "I want to recreate what we did last time." He sighed and then let himself rest fully against her.

"We can," she assured him. "We just have to be quiet. James is a good sleeper."

Harry's head lifted and he glanced at the bed skeptically. "That's not... weird, or anything?"

Ginny chuckled softly and ran her hands up his sides, bringing his shirt with her fingers until it was bunched right under his arms.

"Not at all," she said. "He won't know. Plus, we're celebrating him."

A smile blossomed over Harry's face and he quickly pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it to

the floor. He hadn't worn trousers to bed, preferring to sleep just in his boxers. Ginny's hands pushed those off his hips as well, and Harry's fumbling fingers removed her knickers.

"I can't believe you're here." Harry held himself over her and stared down at Ginny. His throat felt tight again and he didn't want to cry while he made love to her, but he felt like he might not have a choice.

"I'm here. I'm not leaving again."

Harry took charge of the kiss. His hands explored the buttery soft flesh of her breasts, her rounded hips, and the smooth skin on her thighs. He rubbed into her and clutched her hips as they rocked together. He remembered when they'd been together before and his heart raced in anticipation.

"I love you, Ginny. And I love James. You're... you're my family and we're going to be together for always."

She ran her fingernails lightly along his scalp. "I love you, Harry. I need you do to something for me... a favor."

"Anything," he promised, knowing he meant it. Anything she needed was hers without doing more than simply asking for it.

Her cheeks flushed and Harry stopped all motion. "What is it?"

"Do the contraceptive charm?" she asked. "I haven't done magic in a very long time."

He laughed softly and searched on the back of the sofa for his jeans. His wand was in the pocket. Harry had to concentrate hard to remember the words of the charm that Sirius had taught him the summer before his fifth year, but once he remembered them, the charm was easy.

"I'm sorry that I didn't... last time." He felt his face heat and set his wand onto the back of the sofa.

"Don't be sorry," she said softly. "I wouldn't trade James for anything in the world."

Harry felt his face drain when he thought of being without the baby—he'd only known his son for a few hours and already he couldn't imagine his life without him. Hadn't he always been a part of Harry's life? It felt that way.

"I wouldn't either," he said, punctuating it with a kiss.

He slid inside her on the second try—the first attempt had gone awry with nervous laughter and shifting bodies—and Harry clenched his jaw against the overwhelming agony of pleasure. Ginny winced and lay still before she moved against him.

Harry sighed in satisfaction and held his forehead against hers as they moved. The old sofa shook and creaked against the floorboards. That and their heavy breathing were the only sounds. Occasionally one of them would whisper the other's name and plead for more, but Harry felt so overwhelmed by the whole moment that he couldn't do more than hold on and move. He thought he

might be crying, or maybe it was Ginny's tears on his skin.

Ginny's hands held him to her and Harry found it hard to breath, but he didn't pull away. He moved with strong thrusts and kissed her sometimes.

"Love you so much," he finally grunted out as he climaxed. Immediately, Harry slid his hand between them and touched Ginny there, where they were joined. He fumbled for a moment, but must have found the right place because Ginny arched into him.

"I read that book Ron gave me for my birthday," he told her once they lay together, sweaty and exhausted. "Don't want you to think I'd *been* with anyone else, or anything." He felt foolish admitting any successful transformations in their love making were all due to a book her brother had given him, but he wanted to make her understand.

Ginny laughed softly. "I never thought you would," she said. "I... sometimes I worried that you might... after the war."

"What?!" Harry lifted his face and peered at her. "How could I... I know I didn't tell you I loved you before, but..."

"It was stupid," said Ginny. She ran her fingers through his hair again and shook her head side to side gently. "I suppose I always wondered what you saw in little Ginny Weasley that made you—"

"That made me fall in love with *little Ginny Weasley*," Harry finished firmly. "Merlin, Gin, I can't even list all of the reasons I love you. This is one." He smirked and rolled his hips into her. "I can't imagine not loving this part of us. But you understand me better than anyone ever has. You... you make me a better person just by being here. And James is another reason." The tightness returned to his throat and Harry rested his head on her chest. "You... you've given me everything, Ginny."

She didn't answer, but he could hear her crying softly. Every so often her chest would hitch.

They didn't say anything more, but just clung to each other on the little sofa. Harry's toes were growing numb from hanging over the end when Ginny finally wiped her face with her hand.

"Let's get back into bed," she suggested. "I want to hold him again."

"I want to hold you both," Harry said softly. "If that's all right."

Ginny gave his shoulder a nudge. "That's not something you need to ever ask, Harry."

"Right." He lifted his head to look at her. "I'm sort of new at all of this love stuff. You'll have to help me out."

"I think I can manage," Ginny said. "I've always wanted to boss you around."

Harry laughed loudly and then swallowed the sound as James began to cry.

She groped for her nightgown and kissed him quickly. "Rule number one: let the baby sleep."

Harry got dressed again and watched as Ginny curled around James. The baby made little choking

gasps but finally settled in when Ginny let him latch on to her breast. He nursed greedily for several minutes and Harry watched in fascination.

"He's mostly weaned," Ginny explained as she lay on her side. James had a tight grip on her finger but his sucking was becoming less urgent as his eyes slipped closed. "But sometimes he needs a little comfort at night."

"I can't blame him," said Harry. He felt his face heat as he considered what he was watching. Ginny gave him a knowing look.

"I suppose he's a lot like his father in that regard."

"Cheeky witch," Harry scolded. He lay down next to her, nestling James between them.

"You love me that way," Ginny answered around a yawn.

"Of course I do," Harry said. "He's almost asleep."

Ginny gave a small nod and prompted James' chin. He grunted lightly and gave a great sigh before his mouth fell away from her breast. Harry wiped the pale milk from his chin as Ginny did up the button on her gown.

"Go to sleep, love," Harry whispered. He kissed James' head and then kissed Ginny. "I'll watch over the both of you."

Ginny smiled sleepily and twined her hand with his before closing her eyes.

Chapter 14: All The Time For You, Love

"Are you sure you don't want to go?" Harry asked one more time, even though he knew what Ginny's answer would be.

She gave him a look that was a mixture of annoyance and exasperation. If he hadn't known well enough, he might have thought she was angry about it.

"No," she answered firmly. "I'm just not... not ready." She looked back down at James who was sitting in her lap turning a toy over and over in his hands before he prepared to assault it with slobber.

The small rooms they had made their temporary home over the past two weeks were festively decorated for Christmas with bright paper chains and conjured ornaments. In the corner, up on top of a short table to keep it away from James' reach was a rather spindly looking tree, draped in Prue's leftover decorations.

It was two days before Christmas, and Harry was determined to make this holiday special. He had even offered to take Ginny home, but she insisted she wasn't ready yet. It made Harry feel bad for admitting that her family had doubts about whether she was alive or not, because he could see the pain every time he mentioned one of them.

In truth, he still held his own reservations about returning to The Burrow, but most of them had melted away when he found Ginny and James. The hurt of the past didn't matter as much when there was such a treasure sitting in front of him.

Ginny was still dealing with everything—grief over the losses, anger at being locked away even though she knew it was best considering what she'd been protecting, adjusting to having Harry back, and even a bit of selfishness at keeping their little family locked away here in Elland.

Harry could relate to all of those emotions. He knew, eventually, they would go back, but waiting was all right for now.

"I'll be back before you know it." He bent to give Ginny a quick kiss.

She made a noncommittal noise in the back of her throat and Harry Apparated away.

He appeared in Diagon Alley and couldn't help but smile at the holiday feel around him. The first Christmas after the war, and witches and wizards were out in full force. He hesitated slightly at venturing out into the main stream of shoppers; no doubt he'd be recognized. The press would kill for a photo or, Merlin forbid, a glimpse at what he was purchasing. Thankfully, he could hide most of his purchases for James in with what he bought for Teddy. Everyone would just think he spoiled his godson horribly. There was no way in hell Harry would expose Ginny and James just yet. He wasn't ready to share them.

His resolve was tested in Quality Quidditch Supplies when he brought two small, child brooms to the counter.

“Two, Mr. Potter?”

Harry’s brain whirled when the clerk questioned him. “Er... my godson, he’s a little... rambunctious.” The excuse sounded lame in his ears, but the young man gave a nod and wrapped them up the same, both with pale blue bows.

“Anything else for you?”

“Er... I think I’m fine,” Harry stammered. The store was becoming crowded as a fresh wave of shoppers poured in the door. He pulled the collar up on his jacket and tucked the wrapped parcels under his arm firmly. It had started to snow while he was in the shop and Harry looked up at the white sky, blinking when the flecks of white landed on his face.

A picture flashed in his mind of taking little James out into the snow—oh, the things they would do together! How James would giggle and laugh as Harry pulled him on a sled, or helped his chubby little hands form a snow ball to toss at Ginny. There were so many memories that needed to be made!

The crowd brushed into him and several people stared wide-eyed before moving on. Harry expected a flash in his face at any minute. He made it into Madam Malkin’s without attracting too much attention. The grey haired lady startled at seeing him, but schooled her features well when he asked to see the infant robes.

Harry purchased a variety and felt his cheeks heat when Madam Malkin commented how spoiled little Teddy was. He laughed it off and worried that he wouldn’t be able to balance the two brooms with the large bag of wrapped parcels he now had. Perhaps he *had* gone overboard.

But James was his *son*, and it was his first Christmas. Harry didn’t remember his first Christmas. He didn’t know if his father used magic to float bobbles onto the tree while his mother made his hands clap. He didn’t know if his mother had made ginger biscuits and slipped little crumbs between Harry’s toothless gums. He didn’t remember the packages and presents.

Perhaps it was foolish, but this holiday was for Harry just as much as it was for James. And who was to judge if there were a pile of gifts towering well above the baby on Christmas morning? Harry knew Ginny would be just as indulgent for their little boy.

It wasn’t until Harry was standing across the street from Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes that he felt the doubt and coldness of the past year creep into his bones.

He was torn between clinging to the anger he felt over how they had acted before his departure and knowing that he held the key to their happiness. A part of him wanted nothing more than to burst into the store and tell them every detail of finding Ginny and James.

But a darker part of him wanted to keep the secret locked away in his heart. In a way, he supposed, he wanted to hurt them like they’d hurt him with their giving up. He wanted them to feel the pain that he felt when they asked him to stop looking for Ginny. It was a very small part of him, but he couldn’t ignore it.

The instinct to cross the alley and simply open the door to the garishly bright store advertising the

latest holiday Wheezes in the decorated window was almost overwhelming. The Weasleys had been a part of Harry's life since he was eleven and it felt very wrong to leave them out, especially since they really had every right to know about Ginny and James.

In the end, Harry forced himself to turn away from both the desire and the bitterness. It obviously wasn't the right time to cross the lane and attempt to rebuild what his harsh words had shattered. And Harry also didn't feel right talking to the Weasleys until he had Ginny with him, anyway. Ginny certainly wasn't ready to leave Elland yet, and Harry understood that.

He pulled his collar up higher. It seemed colder now than before and the light snow falling was more of an annoyance than something magical.

"Are you *insane*?"

Ginny goggled at the massive pile of gifts that Harry removed the disillusionment charms from. The innocent and sheepish look on Harry's face as he bounced James lightly melted her heart, though. They both looked so young, although James was far more interested in chewing on the ear of his teddy bear than noticing the gifts that were all for him.

"Well..."

She sighed and slid her hand into Harry's warm one. "I suppose it *is* his first Christmas." Something deep inside her told Ginny that she was going to have to be the one that reined Harry in when it came to spoiling their son. She understood the need completely—Harry's own miserable childhood along with the year he'd spent thinking she might be dead was enough justification in Ginny's mind. As long as it didn't get too out of hand, who was she to refuse a little indulgence?

"Not all of them are for James, you know," Harry said slyly. "I may have found a few things for you."

"How ever did you manage that in Diagon Alley?" Ginny asked. She gave up her internal fight and began to shift through the boxes, searching for something with her name on it. "The press surely got a picture of you."

"They might have," Harry said. He sank to his knees and tried to entice James with a package that could only be a child's broom. "Thankfully, I was able to hide some of the purchases by saying they were for Teddy. And some... well, I went into London."

Ginny's throat closed as she found a small box with a bright red bow on it. Her heart thundered against her ribs and she glanced up to see Harry's flushed face. He was intently watching James chew on the paper surrounding his new broom.

"Harry..."

Slowly, she opened the box and found a gorgeous ring inside. It wasn't elaborate, but it was quite clear to Ginny what he meant by buying it.

"We don't have to, you know," Harry said. "Get married, I mean. It doesn't bother me, or anything. I just... I want you to know that I'm serious about what I feel for you. You and James are my family no matter what, but I just... I pictured us getting married one day, you know."

Ginny's hand trembled as she lifted the ring from the box. In all the months they had been apart, this moment hadn't crossed her mind. She'd never envisioned the moment when Harry would propose. She hadn't dreamed of how the ring would look, how he would ask, or even what she would say when he asked. Things were so jumbled in her head then that she could only focus on the immediate future.

She looked up straight into his bright eyes. "Are you asking me?"

A smile lit up his face. "Are you answering?"

James happily tore a piece of paper off and stuffed it in his mouth. Ginny pulled it out quickly and handed him a toy that was instantly abandoned for more paper.

Harry took a shaky breath. "Will you marry me?"

Ginny laughed and nodded at the same time. She slid the ring on her finger and leaned over to kiss Harry. "I'm answering."

The kiss went on longer than she planned and Ginny wove her fingers—decorated by the new ring—into Harry's hair. James squawked in protest at being sandwiched between his parents, and tugged on Ginny's pyjama top.

They broke apart with a laugh and Ginny pulled James into her arms. He nuzzled her neck and Ginny watched Harry smile even wider—if that was even possible.

"This is the perfect Christmas."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, a shadow crossed his face. Ginny knew what it meant—her family was not here, so the holiday wasn't perfect. They were both still dealing with far too much for everything to be instantly wonderful.

"It is," she lied and forced a smile on her face. "Look, Jamie, Daddy got you a new broom. Too bad you'll have to wait for awhile to use it."

Harry chuckled and Ginny knew that he was forcing the darkness away, just as she was.

They chatted and opened gifts, neither mentioning her family or their other friends. When they were finished, the room looked like a small tornado had hit; empty boxes were strewn about, wrapping paper in shreds and Harry even had a bit of ribbon stuck to his jumper.

Ginny was just about to say they needed to clean it all up when a tapping came from the small window that looked up to the street from the basement.

"An owl?" Harry asked. He looked helplessly down at James, sleeping in his lap.

"I'll get it," Ginny said. "It's probably Ron, demanding to know where you are and why you didn't

get him the customary horde of chocolate frogs for Christmas.”

Harry chuckled and stood slowly. “Doubtful. Our parting was a bit more than shirty.” Ginny could see the regret in Harry’s eyes, and it hurt to know that his oldest friendship had been so damaged. She watched him settle James into his cot and curl a blanket around the baby.

When the owl tapped the window once more, Ginny jumped toward the latch. “Sorry, you impatient thing!” She could have sworn the large brown bird glared at her before dropping its parcel at her feet and soaring back out.

“Hope it wasn’t anything breakable.” Harry chuckled and scooped up the lumpy package. His hand hesitated on Ginny’s back as they both stared at the plain brown paper with a familiar scrawl across the top.

Ginny’s heart careened inside of her. There hadn’t been an owl here at the house ever; Tonks’ charm work was sure. So of course this package was for Harry. It hurt to see her mother’s writing and *know* what was in the package wasn’t for her. She didn’t have a Weasley jumper. Not this year, and not last year.

“Oh, love.” Harry must have guessed what she was thinking because he pressed his lips to her head and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I’ll put it away.”

“No.” Tears stung the back of her eyes and her throat became thick as she shook her head. “No, open it. She made it and sent it for you.” Logically, she knew there wouldn’t be a jumper for her; she’d been missing for a long time, for Merlin’s sake. But that didn’t change the fact that it hurt being apart from her family. Even with the doubts and worry that she’d been dealing with since Harry had stumbled upon them in Elland, Ginny could readily admit today—Christmas Day—that she missed her parents and brothers: the whole rowdy, blustering, and irreverent lot of them.

Harry fumbled the package and his fingers hesitated before the Spell-o-taped fold. “Are you sure you don’t want to—”

“No.” Ginny shook her head. As much as she longed for the familiarity and warmth of The Burrow, she really wasn’t ready to go back just yet. “Maybe soon, but not today.”

Harry nodded and kissed her once more before he tore into the package. A jumper with intricate cabling in a dark gray was wrapped around a single letter. His fingertips ran along the patterns and Ginny could see the doubt and hurt clear from his expression. There was still pain at the thought of her family giving up on her inside Harry, but she knew he was ready to go back. She knew he had forgiven them the harsh words and momentary lapse of faith.

“You can have it, you know—”

“It’s yours.” Ginny closed her fingers around his on the wool, holding them there. “I couldn’t take it from you.”

His eyes clouded as he looked at her and Ginny forced herself to take a calming breath. “Gin, I’m sorry. I’m the one that caused—”

"You're not," she said. "I'm perfectly capable of holding on to my own pain, believe me. I tend to revel in it, I'm afraid."

"That doesn't make it easy," he said.

Ginny took her hand from his and away from the jumper. Her eyes traced the wool, woven intricately and with love, just for Harry. "No, it doesn't. Just..." Her eyes filled with tears once more and she threw herself into Harry's arms. "Just don't give up on me yet, please."

Harry abandoned the package to the side and wrapped her in a hug. "Never, Ginny. I'll never give up on you."

The sadness was held at bay while she was in Harry's arms. Ginny knew it wasn't gone forever—only one thing could take it completely away—but she wasn't quite ready to face that just yet. Going back meant living in a world where her brother and friends had died. It meant showing the world proof of her and Harry's impetuous moment in the garden that August. It meant sharing James with everyone.

"We got up early," Harry said, "let's have a quick kip before we go up to dinner with Prudence."

Ginny didn't say anything when he guided her over to their cramped little bed. They lay curled together and Ginny soaked in the warmth and acceptance that Harry offered. She knew their time in Elland would be ending soon. As much as she wanted to stay in their little bubble, it wasn't right. They both had a family outside these walls that were in pain without them. It was selfish and horribly indulgent of her to want this time just for them.

"Soon, Harry," she whispered. "I'll be ready soon."

He didn't answer, but shifted beneath her. His lips pressed to her head and he tightened his arm around her.

Ginny closed her eyes and tried to picture what it would be like when they went back, but nothing could fill that image in her mind. She didn't know what her family would think when she and Harry arrived, bringing a baby that bore remarkable resemblance to his parents along.

Harry woke to the light brush of skin on his shoulder. He blinked up at the dark ceiling for a minute and waited for James' cry, but it was silent. Ginny's fingers moved again, pressing into his skin and then lifting.

"All right?" he mumbled and felt for her fingers. She clasped her hand around his and sniffled. Harry's eyes shot open and he sat up. "What's wrong? Jamie?"

"No, he's fine," she whispered. "I..."

Harry wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his lap. Her face was wet and she buried it against his neck, clinging to him.

“Bad dream?”

She didn't answer and Harry smoothed his hand down the back of her head, taming her hair away from her face. They both often woke after having nightmares. Harry's were a garbled mixture of the terrors he'd faced in real life mixed with his fears of losing both Ginny and James. At times he woke and needed to just hold them both to assure himself that they were still there, still within reach.

“Want to talk about it?”

She shook her head and wiped her eyes with her fingers.

“I want to go home, Harry.”

The whisper was faint, but it startled Harry. Since Christmas morning, when the jumper had come from the Weasleys, neither of them had said a word about her family. It just seemed easier to avoid it than to deal with the hurt thinking about them brought. And now, several days later, Harry didn't expect to hear the words from her.

“Are you...”

“Soon, Harry, it needs to be soon. I can't do this anymore. I need them in my life. They need to know James, they need to be there.”

He nodded jerkily and pressed his lips to her head. “I know. We'll go. I'll take you tomorrow.”

Ginny kissed his neck and seemed to settle more. They lay back down, curled into each other, both lost in their thoughts.

“I dreamed that we waited,” said Ginny, “but when we finally went, it was too late, they didn't love us anymore.”

“Oh, love, that won't happen. I know it won't.” Harry said the words, but he knew it was the same fear he held deep within his heart. Would they reject him after all the horrible things he'd said and done? Would they turn him out before he could even explain to them what he had found? And, finally, would they judge him and Ginny for an impetuous act that had changed everyone's lives so much?

“It terrifies me to leave, though,” Ginny said. “I... I feel selfish for wanting to keep James hidden away.”

“It's natural,” Harry said. “A part of me wants it, as well. If we stay here forever then he doesn't have to deal with people looking at him, he doesn't have to deal with the press—who are going to be horrible, you know—or people knowing he's my son and expecting... something from him.”

“I hadn't thought about that,” Ginny admitted. “I just worry about how they'll judge us. Getting pregnant before marriage... it's not really...”

“We did nothing wrong,” Harry said, a little too sharply. James stirred in his cot across the room, kicking at his blankets. They heard the sound of him sucking on his thumb again and were quiet until

he died down. "We didn't," Harry whispered. "Merlin, Ginny, I don't think I would have survived any of it without having that memory to draw on. I knew someone out there loved me, someone who didn't think of me as just... the Chosen One, you know."

"I wouldn't have lasted not knowing how you felt." Her lips brushed his shoulder and Harry shivered at the softness of the touch.

"I didn't tell you," he said. In his mind, the moment played out. "I should have. I can't believe I didn't know then."

"You did," Ginny said. "I knew you did. You wouldn't have let me get as far as I did without knowing, but saying it out loud was too much. I know. We were there, just about to be parted for who knew how long, and you had this... enormous, impossible task before you..." Ginny shook her head and shuddered. Harry tightened his grip and rolled them so that he was curled around her back, both arms holding her to him.

"I know now," he said. "I was a prat then, but I think I've gotten better."

Ginny chuckled and ran her fingers along his arm, soothing. "A bit, yes."

"And we're going to be all right. When we go back, I mean. I... I'll go first and explain. Then I'll come back for you."

Ginny thought about that for a long, silent minute before nodding. "That might be best, even though I don't like the idea of you going away."

"Five minutes," Harry promised. "No one could keep me away longer than that."

He knew Ginny smiled at that, he could feel it in the way she relaxed against him. "It'll take longer than that," she said. "This is *my* family we're talking about. It'll take longer than five minutes for Mum to stop wailing her head off, Ron to stop yelling, Hermione to stop fussing, George to stop threatening..."

Harry laughed and tickled her sides. "Okay. Ten."

The quiet of the winter night settled back on them and Harry thought Ginny might have drifted back off, until she moved once more.

"We're going to be all right, yeah?"

There was so much more implied in her question than just what they'd talked about, and Harry understood. Out there the world was... it was still a mess. But each day they woke to James, got to see his smiles, got to watch him learn and grow. Each day Harry woke next to Ginny and she loved him. They were going to get married, maybe have a few more kids one day, and things were going to be good.

"Yeah," he said, "we're going to be fine." As he said it, a smile came to his face and he knew it was the truth.

"You're sure you're going to be all right?"

Ginny stared out the window, but wasn't seeing anything. Her hand was constantly in motion, although it was a soft, reassuring movement of patting James on the back as he snuggled against her shoulder.

"It's only for a few minutes, yeah?"

Harry shifted in place and gave a sort of nod. "Might take more than a few, but I'll be back for you as soon as I can. Unless your brothers kill me."

She gave a little smirk at his insecurities, but Harry could see the nervousness that it hid. More than anything she wanted to go home, but everything was changed now. It was okay to be scared of what might happen, Harry decided, but it was time for both of them—*all* of them—to go home.

"Don't worry," he said and pressed a kiss to her head. His fingers brushed the thick black hair on James' head and the baby gave a happy little sigh against his mother's neck. "Everything is going to be fine."

Her fingers caught his and held them almost painfully tight for a moment. "As long as we're together, I believe that. It's just..."

"It's just that you don't know where to begin to explain things," Harry said when Ginny's words failed. "And you know you're going to have to deal with the grief and pain when you get back. In a way, it was easier here, hidden away from it, because you didn't have to see it every single day, deal with it every single hour."

She gave a small nod. "Does that make me selfish?"

Harry smiled wryly. "Only if it means I'm selfish, as well. I left. I couldn't handle it any longer without you."

They were quiet and Harry felt the energy around them: the energy of change, the energy of a choice about to be made. They were right on the edge of something that was going to change their lives forever. Again.

He stood, even though his legs shook, and kissed her before pressing his nose against James' head and taking a deep breath of the sweet baby smell.

"I'll be back soon," he promised. Ginny didn't respond and he was glad. If she kept talking to him, Harry would never be able to leave. This needed to be done, even though Harry wasn't relishing the task at hand. He wanted to bring them home, to restore Ginny to her family, introduce the Weasleys to James, and attempt to fix at least one hole that had been torn through them by the war. But it meant facing them after walking out, after leaving them with virtually no word for months.

'It won't matter,' he kept telling himself, 'they love you just as much as any of their children. They

welcomed Percy back with no explanation, surely they won't reject you.'

The Burrow materialized in front of him, just as crooked as ever; just as endearing as the first time Harry had seen it. And something inside him twinged painfully. He'd been wrong to leave the way he had. His heart was just as broken as he knew theirs would be. But he was here now and his feet were already carrying him home, toward the house where the smell of bacon was permeating the crisp morning air.

The door rattled when he knocked and all sound from inside—Molly's chattering, Ron's deep voice asking to be passed something, Hermione's soft answer—ceased.

"Yeah?" Ron's eye was the first thing Harry saw, peering at him from the crack in the door. Harry heard Mrs. Weasley chide her son for his rudeness and it was hard not to smile, but Ron was just *looking* at him. "Didn't expect you."

Slowly, the door opened and Harry swallowed back the lump that had formed in his throat, making it impossible to say anything in response.

"Harry!" Hermione was at Ron's side instantly—perhaps she had Apparated, because Harry didn't think she could run that quickly, even across a small room. She pressed her hand to her lips and he watched her eyes fill with tears.

"Sorry..." Harry started, meaning to apologise for interrupting their meal, but he meant so much more, as well. "I, er..."

"Come in, Harry." Mr. Weasley settled his hand on Ron's shoulder and gave a hesitant smile.

"Dad," Ron scolded softly, "hadn't we better verify—"

"The wards are still up, Ron," Mr. Weasley said.

Harry's face burned with shame and regret. They hadn't changed the wards after he'd said horrible, awful things to them, after he'd accused them of giving up on Ginny and threatened to tell her how awful they were for losing hope.

He stepped into the overly warm kitchen and took in a shuddering breath. "I..."

It wasn't Ron, or even Hermione, who confronted him, though. It was Mrs. Weasley who came to stand in front of him, fierce as a dragon.

"You left," she accused in a shrill sort of voice that hinted of tears near the surface. "And... and you missed *Christmas*."

Harry looked down, away from her hurt face. "I know. I'm sorry." The pain in her voice was more than he'd expected, especially since he was carrying such a huge secret inside him that would make them all so happy. He needed to make this right first, though.

"I sent your jumper—"

"I'm wearing it now," he said and pulled at the zipper on his coat. He tugged at the warm wool that

was still scratchy from being new.

And then her arms were around him, tightened like a vice around his chest. And all Harry could do was squeeze her back. He felt tears fall from his own eyes and drip into her hair, and there was a quiver in her voice when she spoke against him, scolding him for leaving his family.

"I know," he kept saying over and over. There were no excuses for why he'd left, even if he felt he had the best reasons in the world. If he hadn't left, hadn't gone just a bit mental about being without Ginny... He blocked out that thought from his mind. He wouldn't contemplate not having Ginny and James in his life. It was too raw, too close to what he'd gone through for the past year.

Harry's eyes met Ron's and he could see the conflict there in his best mate.

"All right?" Ron finally asked.

Harry slowly smiled and gave a small nod. "Better than before."

Hermione was crying too, and fussing with things at the table. She was levitating food onto a plate, but was so distracted that things were haphazardly wobbling onto the dish. Two eggs made it safely there, but then eight pieces of bacon and enough toast to feed a small army—or just Ron—appeared also. Pumpkin juice overflowed the glass when Hermione looked up with teary eyes.

"Come and have some breakfast. Then you can tell us all about where you've been."

She tried to say it brightly, as if Harry had been on some wonderful holiday somewhere, rather than wallowing in guilt and self-hatred for months.

He shook his head at her attempt to be positive and moved toward her, intending to hug her. But Ron's arms wrapped around him first.

"You're an arse," Ron mumbled, but there was little heat in the accusation.

"I know," Harry sighed. He clapped Ron firmly on the back and they stayed embracing for a long minute. "I have a lot to tell you."

"Boys," Hermione huffed. Her cheeks were glossy-wet now and she flailed her hand in front of her face, dabbing at the flow of tears leaking from her eyes with a crumpled serviette. "Let me have a turn, Ronald!"

Harry chuckled and brought Hermione into the embrace. When his arms were around both of them, Harry felt his heart hitch painfully. How had he ever walked away from their friendship? Logically, Harry knew he wouldn't have stayed away for too long—he *had* written a letter—but it wasn't the same. They'd stood by him through so much.

Ron pulled back, but Hermione still clung to Harry, wetting his coat and jumper with her tears.

"Did you find what you were looking for, son?" Mr. Weasley sounded as if he might break down as well and Harry blinked at him over Hermione's head.

Of course, he had no idea what his words meant in connection with what Harry knew, but Harry

understood what he meant.

"I found what I needed," he said quietly.

Hermione and Mrs. Weasley took turns fussing over him. They forced him to sit at the table and pushed the enormous plate of food his way.

"At least you look healthier than... than before," Mrs. Weasley finished awkwardly and poked at his ribs. "You've been eating. And that awful beard is gone."

Harry squirmed away from her probing and picked up his fork, but he couldn't eat. His mind kept returning to the image of Ginny, waiting nervously at the little house in Elland, worrying as she held James.

"I... I can't eat this right now," he said. Hermione spluttered and Mrs. Weasley began fretting, but it was Ron's scowl that caught his full attention.

"O'course you can," he proclaimed. "We're not mad at you, prat."

Harry smiled; even being called a prat by his friend made him feel warm inside. There was a time just after he'd left when Harry wondered if he'd ruined his friendship with Ron forever.

"No," Harry answered with a quick shake of his head. "That's not what I mean. I... I have to tell you something."

A heavy silence echoed in the kitchen and he shifted as they all stared at him.

"N-nothing bad," he said. "In fact, it's... rather..." But he didn't want to give it all away without first helping them to understand what had happened. If he suddenly proclaimed to have found Ginny, they'd all stare at him again, like they had the last time he'd been sitting at this table, in this kitchen.

"I know you have things to do today, but... could you all just... stay? And maybe get everyone else?"

No one moved and Harry pushed back from the table. "I owe everyone an apology, and... and I have something to tell you."

Finally, Mr. Weasley stood and wiped the corners of his mouth. "I'm sure we can arrange something."

"I'll Apparate to the shop," Ron said quickly. "It'll be faster than trying to rouse George through the floo. He never wakes well when we do that." With a turn, he was gone.

Hermione stood slowly. Her bright eyes studied Harry and he could tell she was trying to mentally put puzzle pieces into place. "I can get Percy. I know he'll be up."

"I'll floo Shell Cottage," Mr. Weasley said.

Mrs. Weasley and Harry watched the others leave the room. "Are you sure you won't have just a little?" She gestured to the plate and Harry wanted to please her. He contemplated simply taking a

piece of toast or bacon.

"I've... I've already eaten," he protested. "Been up for hours." It was the truth. James had woken both of his parents with a squalling protest when he realized he was sleeping in the small cot and not cuddled up with either Ginny or Harry. He wasn't taking this new sleeping arrangement well. A fond smile broke on Harry's face, but he smothered it down. He still had no idea how he was going to break the news to the Weasleys, and allowing his mind to wander wasn't helping.

"I'll just go wake Charlie," Mrs. Weasley said. "He came for Christmas and won't leave for another few days."

Harry thought he caught an edge of hurt when she talked about the holiday, and made a note to talk to her privately about it. He hadn't left to hurt her—not really, even if it had been a flash of a thought in his mind at the time—and what he was bringing home would, no doubt, erase any bad feelings completely. But it would be best to smooth things over with her.

And then Harry was alone in the kitchen. He stared around at the warm, cramped place and tried to count the number of memories he had in this very spot. There were simply too many—not all of them good—and he knew without a doubt he would always be able to call this place home.

Ron was the first to return, Apparating right into the kitchen with a pyjama-clad, sleepy-eyed George.

"Geroff!" George grumbled. "Do I come into your bedroom and snatch you from the jaws of... Merlin's pants!" He trailed off when he saw Harry sitting there.

"George." Harry smiled and tilted his head in greeting.

George blinked and then comically rubbed his eyes, as if he were seeing visions. "I know I didn't drink *that* much last night."

All three of them chuckled. "I'm no vision," Harry said, "drunk or not."

"Good," George pronounced. He ruffled Harry's hair and took the plate Harry hadn't touched, digging in. "I told you he couldn't stay away for long, Ronnie. No one can resist the Weasley Family once they get to know us."

Harry chuckled and watched George devour the breakfast. A commotion at the back door signaled the arrival of Percy and Hermione, Bill and Fleur. They all goggled at Harry once they were fully in the kitchen. He gave a weak wave and swallowed thickly.

"I'm coming, Mum," Charlie grumbled and stomped heavily down the stairs. His face was creased with marks from the blankets. "Blimey, a bloke would think you..." He froze in place upon seeing Harry and the rest of his family at the table.

"Er... hi," Harry said. "I, er... Thanks for coming."

"Good to see you, Harry," Percy said. His words were light but there was a definite edge to them. Harry wondered if he was in danger of being lectured to death. But Percy's demeanor softened and

he turned to his mother.

"I hate to bother you, but I didn't get a chance to eat before—"

"Of course," Mrs. Weasley crowed. Her wand was out and ingredients for a huge breakfast feast were whizzing through the air.

"Brilliant," Bill said. He guided Fleur into a seat and helped her fix a cup of tea.

Harry watched all of this unfold and wondered how he was going to manage to tell them what he needed to if they were in the middle of eating. When he and Ginny had talked about returning and decided that Harry would be the first to talk to the family, Harry had always envisioned this little chat taking place in the living room. He should have known better; everything important in this house took place in the kitchen. With a wry smile and shrug of resignation, he continued.

"First I need to apologize for—"

George snorted. "Course you don't. None of us ever judged you for being mental."

"It's a requirement to be a part of the family," Bill said.

Charlie and Ron both cheered and the rest of them laughed.

"Listen, Harry," Bill said. He turned in his chair and pinned Harry with a steely, strong gaze. "It's us who need to apologize to you. You were right when you said we were being thick about Ginny."

"Agreed," Percy said firmly. "You had every right to say—"

"Stop, please," Harry pleaded. He pushed back from the table and stood, feeling confined in the crowded kitchen. "Don't excuse what I did. I hurt all of you, and I did it on purpose. What sort of person does that to their... to their family?"

"One who is torn up inside," Hermione said.

"Don't make this all about me." Harry tried to bring the conversation back around. "I need to tell you something... something that I hope will make up for all that I've done, all the words I said that hurt—"

"You don't need to apologize!" Mrs. Weasley froze in her motion, ignoring the scone batter dripping from the side of the bowl she was whisking.

"And you certainly don't have anything to make up for," Mr. Weasley finished.

Harry huffed in frustration. Would they let him speak? He shook away the annoyance and reminded himself what their words actually meant. They loved him. They accepted him and weren't going to let him take the blame for anything. That might change when the story finally spilled out of him, but Harry had it to cling to for a minute.

"I need to start at the beginning," he went on. "Well, not the *very* beginning, but..." Hermione gave him a look that he translated to 'quit waffling and get on with it', and it helped.

"I don't know how many of you know that Ginny and I... before I had to leave, we were together."

"Course we know," George said through a mouthful of bacon. Several heads nodded and it gave Harry the courage to go on.

"I loved her," he said simply. "And she loved me. I didn't want to hurt her, but I needed her to be safe. We... we said our goodbyes the night before the wedding and... and then we left."

Harry chanced a glance at Ron who was mentally calculating. "I know I promised you earlier that day that it was over between us, but after telling you that I had to see her, I had to talk to her."

Ron scowled but it melted away. "I think I understand."

"And then she was gone," Harry said shakily. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that at the end of all of this hurt there was hope, there was a miracle. "And I think I went a bit mental." He smiled when George laughed. Everyone else was awkwardly silent.

"I did things I'm not proud of," Harry admitted. "I just needed... closure. I couldn't believe she was gone until I *knew*, you know. I wanted to question every Death Eater that was still alive, and when I couldn't I read every report from every Auror that did. I grilled the ones I questioned, and threatened them, and... and made an idiot of myself." He ruffled his hair and winced at the memory of Kingsley confronting him.

"And in the end I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I had to do *something* because if I let myself think of how she was... how she was gone, I would have been lost completely. I didn't even realize until she was gone that I..." His voice caught and he looked down at his hands, twisting together in remembered pain.

"We know, Harry," Hermione said. She was crying again and leaning on Ron's shoulder.

"I know," he answered with a sad smile. "You loved her, too. I wouldn't let myself see past my own anger and grief long enough to consider that.

"When I left, I just needed to get away from everything. I was drowning in it all. I was becoming a person I hated," he continued. "I left to hurt you, I left to hurt myself. But I couldn't give up on Ginny. I couldn't make myself let go. It felt too raw, too soon."

"There is no time limit on grief," Mrs. Weasley said quietly. She was crying too, dripping tears into the pan she was putting the scones onto.

"I know." Harry almost went to her then, but restrained. He needed to get to the part they were all waiting for. The miracle. "I still kept looking. There were a few leads I followed up on—Kingsley's going to have my hide since I was suspended—but nothing came of them. I followed random Muggle women around. Even got in trouble with police once for it," he added wryly.

Several of the Weasleys chuckled and Hermione sniffed in distaste, but Harry kept going. He couldn't stop now.

"I found myself near Leeds, staying at this little place, and I... I could feel myself slowly giving up. It

was a horrible feeling. I felt like I was betraying Ginny's memory by not continuing to look, for not holding onto the feelings, even though it was mostly grief by that point."

"She wouldn't want you to be broken, Harry," Fleur said softly.

Harry smiled. "I know. I spent about a week struggling with that feeling. I almost came back then, but... but one day I took a walk to this little open air market in town. I wasn't even watching where I was going and saw this flash of red. I knew it wasn't Ginny, you know, but my heart still..." Harry clenched his hands at the feeling. It was still so fresh in his mind that he could feel his chest compress tightly.

"I still do that," Mr. Weasley said. "Think I see her from time to time."

"I almost followed her, but stopped," Harry said. "Wouldn't want to get tossed in jail, you know." He gave a wry smile and Ron laughed, as did George and Charlie.

Harry's heart thundered against his ribs. "I saw the same red again the next week and this time I followed her. It was... it was her."

Ron stared at him. "Damn, Harry. You've gone completely—"

"I'm not!" Harry responded quickly. "It was Ginny. She pulled her wand on me and... and made me answer a bunch of questions to prove it was me."

Mr. Weasley stood shakily and his stare pounded into Harry. "Are you telling me that my daughter—"

"She's alive," Harry said with relief. "I don't know how I managed to find her—sheer dumb luck, more than anything—but I did it. I told you I would and... and I did."

An aching silence filled the room and Harry wasn't sure what he could say to convince them. He needed to go and get Ginny, but they had to be ready before she arrived, carrying James.

"There's a lot more to the story, but..."

"There better be," Charlie scoffed. "Why was she taken? Does she remember anything or is she—"

"It's impossible," Bill said softly. "If she knew, why would she stay away?" The two brothers began arguing, joined in by Fleur, who was so flustered half her words were in French.

Mrs. Weasley had dropped the platter of food she was holding and Percy was helping her clean it up, but Harry could see them both shaking with anger, or grief, or disbelief. And he understood all of those emotions.

"I believe Harry," George said firmly. "If Harry says it's her, then it's Ginny."

"I do, as well," Hermione said.

Ron's eyes met Harry's and the two friends stared at each other for a long minute. "Yeah?" Ron asked quietly; Harry wasn't even sure he'd said the word aloud.

"Yeah." Harry answered with a smile that was quickly turning into a grin. "She's safe. She's... alive."

"What the hell?!" Ron burst out. "Why didn't she come home with you?!"

Harry couldn't help but laugh. "Er... we weren't sure about..." He gestured to the family vaguely. "And she's still dealing with... everything. She didn't know about Fred, or Remus and Tonks, or anyone who died. She didn't know the war had ended."

They believed him! Harry's lungs burned with the realization that, once again, this wonderful family trusted him. After all he'd done to hurt them—causing the events that stole their daughter from her, dragging them into the war that cost them their son and many friends, flung words at them like knives—they still believed in him.

"I'm getting ahead of myself here," Harry said and ruffled his hair. "Let me just... let me just go and get her. All right?"

"You can... she's..." Mrs. Weasley stared at the back door, as if waiting for Ginny to arrive through it in a flurry of energy. She pressed her fingers to her lips and Harry felt the palpable pain from her heart.

"I can get her," Harry said. "She's waiting for me to bring her. We wanted to be sure everyone was here, and let me explain a bit before..."

"Go," Bill commanded. "Just go!"

Harry grinned and turned on his heel to leave the house. Just before he ran out the door, Harry realized who he was bringing and turned to look over his shoulder. His eyes scanned the entire family, lingering on Ginny's largest, oldest brothers.

"Just don't... Promise me you won't kill me?" He gave a nervous little laugh but ducked out the door before they could answer.

Chapter 15: Between Your Heart And Mine

Everything about her was taut, like a string pulled too tight, ready to break at any minute. Ginny had chewed through all of her fingernails until they were a painful mess. Every time one of them throbbed she would vow to stop and force her hands into the pockets of her jeans, only to find that one of her fingers had made its way back between her teeth a few minutes later.

"You'll wear a hole in my floor," Prue scolded. She had James on her knee and was singing a silly little song about riding a pony. The baby giggled and cooed at her adoringly.

"Sorry," Ginny answered automatically. She felt a pang of sadness at leaving, but knew that she needed to be with her family. This wonderful woman and this little house in Elland had been her safe haven for more than a year. She'd found not only safety, but friendship and wise counsel in this odd Muggle woman.

"I hate to see you go," Prue said. "This little man has been a blessing to me, you know. And you, as well, Missy."

Ginny smiled and abandoned her frantic pacing. She sat on the sofa next to Prue and James, and poked at the baby's pudgy belly. He giggled joyfully and squirmed.

"I can't thank you enough," Ginny said. "You saved our lives—I know it."

"Och," Prue huffed. "Sometimes I think all of this is part of some plan, you know. Nymphadora was meant to bring you here, not only because it was a place to hide, but because I needed a bit of company. And I can't imagine that her death..." She trailed off and Ginny felt the loss of her friend sharply.

"It's not real to me," Ginny said with a shake of her head. "I know Harry wouldn't lie about it, but..."

"It's part of the process," Prue said. "When Morty went it was easier to understand, I think, because I watched him go. Others... it's harder to see the plan in it all."

Ginny swallowed back the sick that rose in her throat at the thought of Fred. She still couldn't picture the gregarious, wild boy that he'd been as gone completely. It was such a foreign concept that there could be one twin without the other that she had a hard time accepting it. And she knew the moment she was home the grief would hit even harder than it had when Harry had told her of his death, but that moment was being held at bay by distance and circumstance.

"You don't think something has happened?" Ginny asked as she stared at the clock on the mantel once more. The minute hand had inched onward—twelve whole minutes since she'd last checked.

"I think," Prue said, "that Harry just needed time to explain. It's not easy, admitting your mistakes—not that I see this little man as a mistake, at all—but Harry told me about leaving, about the things he'd said."

Ginny chewed her lip and nodded distractedly. Harry always took too much responsibility for things.

It was all down to that damned prophecy and the choices Dumbledore had made, mainly placing Harry with his Muggle relatives. He'd become so used to being blamed for things that his mind automatically calculated his culpability in every thing.

"Or he's told them about James and my brothers are having words with him," Ginny said. The idea actually made her chuckle as she pictured Harry having to defend himself. The fact that he and Ginny had had sex was going to be very evident soon; bringing home a baby was a dead giveaway.

"Perhaps," Prue said with a chuckle. "But I'm sure once they meet this littl'un they'll forget all about that point."

"Maybe," Ginny said doubtfully. James reached for her and she gathered him in her arms, pressing helpless kisses against his round cheeks and little nose. "Be sure to wrap your grandmother around your finger, Jamie," she instructed. "She may be our best chance at survival. And she's fierce enough to protect even your daddy."

"One day I'll have to meet your mother," Prue said. She smoothed James' hair down on his head. "I think she and I would get along well."

"I'm sure you would," Ginny said fondly.

"Now, I'm going to make us both a cup of tea. It may be a bit longer until—"

The crack of Harry's Apparition startled them both.

"I'll never, ever get used to that," Prue said as she pressed her hand to her heart.

"Sorry," Harry said. "I forgot to use the back porch."

"Och, no worries, duck. It just seems strange to have people popping out of thin air."

Harry laughed and leaned down to press a kiss to James' head. The baby turned and grinned up at him.

"Shall we take you home, my little lad?" Harry asked softly.

"Really?" Ginny asked as she sat up straight. She handed James over to Harry's arms and took his offered hand to help her stand.

Harry smiled serenely. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes," Ginny answered automatically, "but... You told them?"

"Your whole family is there, waiting for you. Although, they might not let me live much longer when they suss out what I meant when I begged them not to kill me." He nuzzled in the space of James' neck and the baby laughed. The sound was like a splash of sunshine on a rainy day; it filled Ginny with hope and love. Just watching Harry interact with his son made her heart ache with love, and Ginny knew she'd instantly go through it all a hundred times to share these little moments with Harry.

"You didn't tell them?" Ginny chuckled at Harry's grimace.

"It was rather... complicated. We barely made it to the point where I told them about you. I couldn't quite admit that I'd gotten you in trouble." His cheeks flamed brightly and Ginny kissed him.

"It was rather mutual, if I remember right," Ginny said. She brushed her fingers down James' cheek and smiled as he made a grab for Harry's glasses. Harry was getting better at dodging his fast hands, though, and hadn't needed to repair his glasses in a few days, at least.

James was the miracle in all of this and she couldn't wait to introduce him to his family. He belonged with them just as much as Ginny and Harry did. He deserved to grow up in a loud, obnoxious family where everyone was in everyone else's business and he had to hide to find peace and quiet. He deserved to be adored by uncles and aunts, spoiled by his grandparents, and surrounded by dozens of cousins.

"Ready?" Harry asked.

Ginny nodded and then cast one last glance at Prue, who was watching wistfully. "We'll be back soon," she promised.

"Go," Prue said. "It's where you belong."

Ginny let out a nervous breath and gave Harry one more nod. "You're sure you can take us both?"

"Sure," Harry said. "Just hold onto my arm."

"Let me get James' bag." She slid the strap on her shoulder and took hold of Harry's arm. "Bit of a squeeze, love," she explained to James, "but Mummy and Daddy are right here with you."

"He's not going to like this," Harry said. He chuckled softly and wrapped the baby's blanket around him tightly.

"I don't blame him." Ginny closed her eyes and let Harry guide her through the Apparition. James fussed when they appeared in Devon and sucked noisily on his thumb.

"He did better than I expected," Harry said.

Ginny stared at The Burrow and felt a well of emotion inside her. "I... There were times I honestly didn't know if I'd see this place again."

Harry squeezed her hand. "I had moments like that too. But it's real, I promise." They walked slowly and Ginny traced every familiar thing with her eyes—the clearing where they'd played Quidditch, the garden where she'd picked flowers as a child and walked barefoot in the mud, the flutterby bush near the kitchen window—all of it was beautiful. Even the old Wellington boots that had been moved for Bill and Fleur's wedding but somehow managed to make their way home to rest on the porch.

"It's so much the same that it almost hurts," Ginny said softly. Harry didn't respond, but repeated

his squeeze on her hand.

When they were at the door, all sound ceased in the kitchen and Ginny's hand hovered over the door handle. She took in a deep breath and pressed a quick kiss to Harry's cheek.

"All you need is enough nerve, right?" he whispered.

Ginny smiled and opened the door.

The sight of it all—her family surrounding the table, the warmth of the kitchen, her mother hovering near the oven—almost overwhelmed Ginny. She opened her mouth to say something cheeky, but a whimper came out instead. Harry placed his hand at her back and gave a little nudge that Ginny needed to propel her forward.

"My Ginny!"

Her mother's arms gathered her home and Ginny melted into the embrace. "Mum... I'm sorry."

"None of that," her mother scolded softly. Her hands smoothed Ginny's hair and then lifted Ginny's face to study her. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"Erm..."

Ginny turned to see the rest of her family staring wide-eyed at Harry, who was holding a miniature of himself.

"This is James," Harry said with a nervous little laugh.

"Blimey," Ron mumbled. He stood and took a step toward Harry. Surely Ron wouldn't hit Harry while he was holding the baby!

"Mum, I..." Ginny turned and looked at her mother, who was staring gobsmacked at Harry. "You understand why I had to hide, now. I *had* to."

"He's... he's *yours*?" George asked. His eyebrows were compressed together as he tried to figure everything out. He looked a bit silly standing in his pyjamas, but it only made Ginny's heart clench because Fred wasn't there in a matching set, making jokes about Harry being a father.

"No, George," Ginny said dryly. "I found him on the side of the road."

"But he's Harry's?" George clarified.

"Who else would give a kid that mop of hair?" Ron snorted.

"He's beautiful," Hermione said softly. She was standing next to Harry and trying to coax James into her arms, but the baby was being bashful. He nuzzled his face into Harry's neck and sucked on his finger harder while staring with wide eyes at the strange people around him.

"This is why you left?" Ginny's father stood next to her now, looking torn. "To protect your child?"

Ginny nodded and moved to embrace him. "I had to, Dad. When I found out I was pregnant... I knew I had to get away. It wasn't ever supposed to be permanent, but the war..."

"Shhh. It's all right." Her father soothed her fears with his arms around her. "We do anything we can for our children," he whispered softly.

"I have your jumper!" Her mother's exclamation startled everyone in the kitchen. "I just... remembered. I made one for you last year, as well, but..."

Ginny's throat closed as she realized the implications of the statement. There were two Weasley jumpers for her. No matter how sad her family had been, no matter what they'd told Harry about giving up, they never really had. Her mother had made her a jumper last Christmas, after she'd gone missing, and this year, when she'd been absent from their lives for so long.

"But I suppose I need another one now." Her mother's eyes went wide as she considered James.

"I think he'd like that, Mum," Ginny said. Tears ran down her cheeks and she hugged her mother once more.

Ginny knew there would be more tears later, and explanations needed, but right now she was home.

"Blimey, Harry," Ron said again as he stared at James.

"You look about like I felt when I found out," Harry said. He tried to shift James forward, but the baby was climbing further and further up onto Harry's shoulder, hiding. "He's being a little shy, I suppose."

"Don't blame him," Ron said as he surveyed the room. Now that Ginny had greeted both of her parents, the rest of her family was queuing up to welcome her, doling out hugs and wiping away tears.

"Let me see that little one," Molly said from right next to Harry. She waved a small bit of biscuit in front of the baby, who perked up immediately and smiled.

"Mum! That's entirely unfair," Charlie roared. "You'll bribe him to like you best?"

Everyone laughed and Harry guided James into his grandmother's arms. James watched her somewhat warily, but gnawed away on the sweet treat.

"He's..." Ron trailed off and stared at the baby. "I'm not sure what to say, actually. You have a kid."

Harry felt his face heat, but his chest welled with pride also. "Yeah, sort of wild, isn't it?"

"Er, yeah," Ron said. "I can't..."

"It is rather hard to process," said Hermione said.

Harry watched the whole scene with a sort of awe. Everything seemed surreal, and like he was viewing it through some sort of hazy, wavy glass. And yet the emotion of the moment was so poignant and true that his chest hurt.

He was just about to try to explain that to his friends when Ginny barreled into his arms.

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered. "Thank you for bringing me home, for finding *us* and bringing us home."

Everything seemed to freeze—Harry didn't pay attention to the chatter of Ginny's family, or watch them all trying to coax James from his grandmother's arms, or tease Ron when he leaned down to whisper something to Hermione—there was only Ginny.

He wiped a tear from her cheek. "You're very, very welcome, Gin." They'd had this conversation before, but he understood that Ginny simply needed to say it. She needed to voice it to keep it from bursting out of her skin. He felt that way too.

They clung to each other and Harry dipped his head low to press a light kiss on her lips. "Thank you," he echoed back, but he didn't specify for what. Ginny would know.

"Enough of that." Ron's voice cut into their bubble of complete happiness and Ginny smiled.

"Hi, Ron," she said, turning to look at him, but she didn't release Harry from her hold. "You kept your promise, although I hear it was a close thing."

Harry blinked at the byplay. He had no idea what she was talking about, but Ron seemed to. Ron's ears flamed and he glanced around the kitchen before settling his gaze back on his sister.

"I told you I would."

No one elaborated. Harry and Hermione shared a confused look and Hermione was going to ask when James made a loud giggling sound. He'd just snatched Mr. Weasley's glasses from his grandfather's face and held them up in triumph.

"He's definitely a Seeker," George complimented.

"I named him James Ronald," Ginny said. She was watching Ron, and Harry let his arms slide away from her. She took a step toward her brother until they were almost touching.

Ron stared at the baby and then at his sister. There was a crease between his brows as he contemplated that. "Yeah? Why?"

"Because I knew you'd keep your promise," Ginny said. "I knew you'd take care of Harry and bring him home safe."

Hermione gave a choked sort of sob; similar to the one Ron gave when he grabbed Ginny in a huge embrace, lifting her completely off the floor. Hermione leaned on Harry and he wrapped an arm over her shoulders.

"I hope you know that entitles me to buy him his first broom," Ron said. His voice was raw with

emotion but he wasn't crying. Ginny gave him a gentle cuff on the back of the head.

"We'll see," she said. "I make no promises." She shared a small smile and wink with Harry. Neither of them mentioned the tiny broom that Harry had given James for his first Christmas just days ago.

"Are you hungry, love?" Mrs. Weasley returned to fussing at Ginny now that James was happily making the rounds, charming his uncles. The baby seemed to have warmed up now that he had his little treat and was melting the hearts of everyone in the room. Harry chuckled at how quickly a baby could transform grown adults into cooing, gooey sort of people.

"I'm fine," Ginny said. She clasped her hands over her mother's, stilling them from straightening the shirt she wore. "Harry got up and made us a big breakfast this morning." She shot a smile at Harry over her shoulder. "And brought it to me in bed."

The room froze and Harry felt every eye directed on him. He wanted to nudge Ginny for putting him in the spotlight, for refocusing all attention in the way he didn't want it directed.

'Hi, I'm Harry, and I've slept with your sister. Apparently several times.'

Yeah, that would go over *really* well.

He cleared his throat, trying to find some way of explaining. 'Lie,' his mind whispered. 'Lie like you've never lied before.'

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat uncomfortably. "Well, then," she said. "Come and tell me all about James. When was he born? How was the pregnancy? Surely you didn't deliver him on your own?"

Harry sighed in relief and rubbed the back of his neck. While the tension hadn't completely dissipated, at least not everyone was staring at him—just George, with a rather wicked sort of look on his face.

Ron's shoulder brushed his and he nudged Harry with his elbow.

"You got my sister pregnant," he said, "after you'd promised me that it was over between the two of you."

Harry bit his lip and tried to decide what to say. "Er... yeah."

Ron looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "Relax, Harry, I'm not going to kill you."

"Just maim me?" Harry quipped cheekily.

The corner of Ron's mouth turned up in a smirk. "No," he admitted, "but this does give me the right to take the piss for a long time. A *very* long time."

Harry winced, but gave a resigned nod. "Fair enough. Then I'll just remind you that if you hadn't made me make that promise when I was angry and frustrated, I wouldn't have a son right now."

Ron glared at him and Harry continued.

"If I hadn't made that promise, I wouldn't have needed to see her. I wouldn't have needed to talk to her. And I wouldn't have pulled her out of her window—while hovering on *your* broom, by the way—and we wouldn't have..." He trailed off, letting Ron fill in the rest. "So, thank you, Ron."

Ron grumbled and muttered under his breath, but Harry didn't listen. No doubt there would be payback and teasing, but it wouldn't be malicious or hurtful. And Harry supposed he was due a bit of teasing, considering the circumstances. But he wasn't going to take it lying down. He and Ron were too good of friends to allow that.

"It's rather amazing that she named him after you, don't you think?" Hermione asked Ron. She curled into his side.

"It's a bit humbling," Ron said after he thought about it. "But don't worry, love, I'm sure if James had been a girl Ginny would have named him after you. No need to be jealous."

Harry laughed when Hermione glared up at Ron and pinched his side.

"That's not what I meant at all, Ronald Weasley," Hermione huffed. "I just meant that it's remarkable that she loves you so much."

Ron grinned down at her. "I'm sure that's what you meant. Oi, Harry, make sure you name the next one after her, yeah? We wouldn't want Auntie Hermione to get jealous now, would we?" He paled slightly as the amusement fell away from his expression. Harry assumed Ron had just realized he'd given his permission for Harry and Ginny to have another child, which meant they'd be having sex again. "But not, you know, for a long time. A really long time."

Harry laughed at the interaction and let the emotion of the last few hours wash over him. Despite his nervousness this morning, he should have known not to underestimate how much love healed wounds. While they may tease him and Ginny, the Weasleys fully accepted them back with no judgment and no blame.

It was just like Dumbledore always said: love was the most powerful force in the world.

Interlude 2: The Rain That Falls

It was raining again; fat drops splattered on the roof of the greenhouse and then ran down the sides. The whole garden was going to be a muddy mess, Neville knew, but it didn't really matter. He'd be sure to take his boots off before going into the house. He wouldn't want to anger his Gran, she might just bash him in the head with something.

The joke made him smile as he transplanted another plant, spilling soil onto the potting table. His Gran hated that he brought it up, but he knew she was quite proud of besting an Auror.

Nobody messed with a Longbottom and came off better for it.

He lost himself in the monotonous movements of replanting. Right now it seemed one of his only comforts. He didn't get out hardly at all—something his Gran was quick to scold him about—and rarely met friends. Occasionally, Ron Weasley would come around and force him to come and have a pint. Sometimes Seamus would flog, or Dean would send a quick note or an amusing sketch. Harry came sometimes, but that was before he'd disappeared.

The dark subject made Neville falter and he stared down at the plant he'd just mangled with his careless hands. Slowly, methodically, he did what he could to repair the poor thing: bracing the stem, wrapping the broken branch back onto it with Herbologists's Spello-tape, and carefully tucking it into the waiting soil.

Before long, he'd transplanted all of the small plants that were ready. The rain stopped beating a tempo and he watched the last few drops roll down the glass.

"It'll warm up soon," he promised the small plants. "And then I can put all of you in the garden. Gran will be pleased."

It felt a bit silly talking to his plants, but Neville knew it helped. They grew better when he showed them affection, treated them like friends.

And he was lonely. It was all right to admit that, Neville reminded himself. He'd isolated himself after the end of the war, not completely on purpose, but it had happened all the same.

The truth was, he still felt guilty for Ginny's disappearance, and for Luna having spent months in the basement at Malfoy Manor being tortured, and the lost look on Harry's face when he visited. Months removed from it all, Neville could freely admit that he had no clue what he might have done differently, but there was still so much in his mind to work through. Being alone seemed the best way to do that.

"Maybe Professor Sprout could arrange for me to go up to Hogwarts to get some new starts. We could use some more color in here. Don't worry, I won't get some venomous breeds, just a few—"

"Talking to yourself is a sure sign of needing the loony bin, you know."

Neville froze and turned slowly, almost afraid to look. The voice was unmistakable and his heart careened around his chest, banging into his ribs it was beating so hard.

"Ginny? You..."

"It's really me, Neville."

She was standing at the door of his greenhouse, leaning casually on the side and looking so very real that she couldn't be a ghost, or a figment of his imagination. Neville's fingers closed on the skin of his arm. He had to be sure.

"Ouch."

Ginny's smile widened and she chuckled. "I suppose I don't blame you for thinking you're sleeping, or gone completely barmy. I owe you an explanation and an apology."

Neville took a step forward, intent on gathering her into his arms, but hesitated. "You... you're all right? Not hurt or... mental or anything?"

She laughed and threw herself into his arms. "I'm good, I promise."

Neville wrapped his arms around her after a slight hesitation because his hands were completely muddy. Ginny didn't seem to mind and she clung to him with abandon.

"I'm so very sorry, Neville."

"'S not your fault."

None of this seemed real, even though his arm hurt where he'd pinched it. There was definitely dirt under his fingernails and the cool winter air from the doorway made goosebumps rise on his skin. Ginny felt real in his arms—warm and solid.

"It is, Neville, it really is my fault." She was crying now, sniffing as she pulled back and swiped angrily at her eyes. "And I feel horrible for all that I put you through."

He shook his head, intent on making her understand that it *wasn't* her fault. She couldn't be blamed for being taken. And as long as she was here and fine, what did it matter anyway?

"Ginny—"

"Can you do me a favor? Just... just yell at me, okay? I just came from Hagrid's and he... he forgave me for everything. I just need someone to yell at me!"

He peered at her. She looked so much older, yet still had the fiery personality that he'd missed for so long. "Why would I—"

"Because it's my *fault*, Neville," she said. Her hands slipped into his and she clasped his fingers tightly. "I left. I wasn't taken. I... I'm getting ahead of myself. When I came back to Hogwarts, Neville, I knew something was off about me. I knew something was... wrong."

His mind whirled trying to keep up with her quick words, but all he could do was nod and try to make sense of it all. Ginny was here. She was safe and alive and *here*.

"I was pregnant, Neville."

His musings were dashed to pieces on her words and he gaped at her. "Er..."

She gave a sheepish smirk. "I probably should have told you, but in hindsight it's always easier to see the mistakes we've made, yeah?"

"Preg..."

"With Harry's baby," Ginny said. "You can see why I needed to get out of there. If the Carrows had discovered my secret..." She shuddered and Neville felt the chill of the idea take hold on him as well.

"You made the right choice, then."

Ginny's hold on him finally relaxed. "I did, but I hurt so many people in the process. I... I don't know what I'll do to ever win your forgiveness."

"You have it," he answered automatically. If there was a child involved then protecting the baby was the most important thing.

"You're far too easy," Ginny said. She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're supposed to get mad at me and tell me how horribly selfish I was to disappear like that."

He couldn't help it, Neville smiled. "Would it be easier?"

Ginny leaned against the potting table and smiled. "Harry even yelled at me. He called me a coward. Of course, that was before he met his son." She laughed and Neville's head nearly exploded.

Harry had a son. Harry and Ginny had a son.

"So... the baby... he's all right?"

"Perfect," said Ginny. "Harry and he are up at the house entertaining your Gran. No doubt James has the whole place torn up. He's getting quite fast on his knees, the little buggler."

A chuckle started low in Neville's belly, gurgled up his throat and burst out between them. "You really...?"

"Unbelievable, isn't it?"

Neville stared at her. He flushed when he realized he was looking right at her middle, imagining her growing big with Harry's baby inside her. "I er... never imagined that in all the times I tried to figure out what happened."

"Why would you?" Ginny asked. "It's not like there are pregnant girls around you every day. The signs wouldn't have made sense to you."

A hundred questions came to mind—where had she been, why didn't she tell him, how had Harry

found her, how had she gotten away from the forest—but Neville suddenly realized they didn't matter. All he could do was grin stupidly at her and thank every deity out there in the world that she'd been found and was well.

"And... since I haven't asked enough of you," Ginny said with a roll of her eyes, "I came to ask a favor."

"As long as it doesn't involve yelling at you. I don't think I could do that."

"I don't know, from what I hear you're pretty brave these days." She smirked at him and Neville felt his whole face flame.

"Didn't do anything you wouldn't have done anyway," he mumbled.

"Harry and I are getting married and we want you to be there."

Neville's head spun. Ginny held her hand out to him, showing the engagement ring and her beaming smile.

He gaped at her. "You're taking the piss." She laughed at his word choice. "Sorry. Too much time around Seamus, I suppose."

"You can swear all you want around me, just watch your mouth around my son."

"You have a kid." The idea started out startling in his mind, but then, as it took hold, he liked it more and more. "Harry has a kid."

"Oh, believe me my brothers are completely barmy over it. Harry can't say a word without someone bringing it up, taking the mickey about it. He'll never live it down. Ron, in particular, seems intent on making sure Harry turns red at least once every meal."

Neville laughed. "I still can't believe this is real."

Ginny's amusement faded away and she came in close to hug him once more. "I should have told you, Neville. I did trust you; I just didn't want to add to your burden. So much fell on your shoulders... And I was terrified, scared out of my mind, truthfully."

"I can only imagine."

"In the end, it worked out. I wish I could have spared everyone the pain, but it's in the past now. I'm trying to get better about staying positive and looking toward the future."

"It's a good idea."

"Come with me to meet James?" Ginny held her hand out to him and Neville forgot all about the dirt under his nails and the green stains from the plants. He took her hand firmly in his and nodded. They walked up the wet, sloping grass together and Neville found he was growing more and more nervous the closer they got to the back door. He had no idea what to do with a baby. What if they wanted him to hold it?!

He toed off his muddy boots on the steps and opened the door. "Does he... does he look like you or Harry?"

"He's a good mixture of both," Ginny said thoughtfully. "There's certainly no denying who his father is, though."

Neville turned to Ginny just before they entered the living room, where he could hear his Gran giving child-rearing advice. "I'm really glad you're home, Ginny."

She pressed a kiss to his cheek, making him blush, and smiled. "I am, as well, Neville."

Epilogue: The Space Between

"Ginny?" Harry peered into the window of Ginny's old room at The Burrow, hoping he wouldn't wake James with his visit.

It was all Hermione's fault that he had to do this.

"Shh, you'll wake the whole house." Ginny grinned at him as she climbed out the window and right onto the waiting broom.

Harry's hands found her hips automatically and he let her steer the broom this time. "James?"

"I told Mum I needed a full night's rest, so she offered to take him."

He could hear the smirk in her tone and thanked Merlin she thought ahead better than he did. When he'd slipped the note to her today suggesting the midnight rendezvous, he hadn't imagined what they'd do with James.

Again, it was Hermione's fault for insisting that they stay apart until tomorrow.

"I love wedding marquees," he said in a thoughtful way. "I can honestly say I never contemplated them before. But I do; I love them."

Ginny chuckled and led the broom right through the doors and into the darkness of the corner. "I thought Ron was going to choke to death when you said you'd get married in January as long as we had a marquee. He knew exactly what was going through your head."

Harry laughed and pulled Ginny to him. The broom fell away from them and he kissed her cold collarbone. "I *know* he knew. He gave me a book about the contraceptive charm the other day."

Ginny melted against him. "Smart man."

"He's fine with being an uncle, he said, as long as he doesn't have to think about us having sex in our wedding marquee. And he'll know if you end up in the pudding club again. He told me he has no problem counting, so it would be best if I were more careful."

"Cast a warming charm, Harry."

He did as Ginny asked him and then conjured a blanket just in case. They lay down together. Harry brushed the hair from her face.

"It doesn't feel real yet."

"It won't, I don't think, not until you wake up one morning, roll over and see the mess I am and think 'wow, I got stuck with her'."

"I'd be a damned fool to think that," Harry said. He kissed the tip of her nose and pulled her closer. "I'd be a damned fool to think anything but you're the most beautiful woman in the world and that I'm the luckiest bloke alive."

"Harry," Ginny said through a smile, "you're going to get laid, no need to flatter me."

He pinned her arms above her head and tickled her ribs through her dressing gown. "Cheeky witch."

"Hermione's going to catch us out here if you don't hurry."

"Would serve her right."

"Imagine the therapy she'd have to endure." Ginny nuzzled his neck and Harry hummed in ecstasy. It felt forever since they'd made love—four whole days while Hermione and Mrs. Weasley planned the quickest wedding on the planet.

"I'm surprised she didn't set wards to stop us." He chuckled and kissed her. Their clothing disappeared quickly, shed as their bodies moved together.

"She wouldn't," Ginny said. "I told her it's our good luck charm to have sex the night before a wedding."

"It certainly worked last time," said Harry. He reached between them and caressed her breasts, fumbling through the movements in his haste. "We should make it a tradition."

"Couldn't agree more." Ginny's hands were just as urgent, rubbing him erect and moaning at his touch. "But we'll need to use Ron's precautions; otherwise we'll have a ton of kids. With all the weddings in my family..."

Harry laughed and rolled them onto their sides. They didn't stop touching, sharing mutual caresses and bringing pleasure. When he was sure he couldn't take anymore, Ginny nudged him onto his back and moved over him. She whispered the contraceptive spell and tossed her wand to the side before sliding down on him.

He moaned in satisfaction and Ginny smirked from atop him. "Just think, we'll get a few days of this all to ourselves very soon. No one to interrupt."

Harry guided her hips up and down, setting a slow, torturous pace. "No one wanting to be fed. Or changed." He loved James, but personal time between he and Ginny had taken the back seat on the broom lately. And then there was all of her family, constantly flooding to get approval for some part of the wedding.

"And that's just Ron," Ginny joked as she arched over him. The amusement melted away as they moved together.

Harry watched her move and felt hypnotized by how gorgeous she was. Her body was perfect and it fit so well with his every time they were together. It never ceased to amaze him. And although he knew they had all the time in the world, a part of him couldn't wait to get her pregnant again. He wanted to see her grow big with their baby inside. He wanted to make love to her to celebrate their connection bringing about another life. He wanted to place his hand on her belly and feel the baby move inside. And, more than anything, he wanted to be there with her for every moment of it.

"Say we can have another baby," he whispered as he sat up and stilled Ginny's movements.

She barked out a laugh and stared at him incredulously. "I thought we were going to wait."

"I mean eventually," Harry explained as he rocked up into her. "I want to be there, Gin, for all of it."

Her face softened and she nodded. "We will. One day."

Harry's face split into a huge smile and he kissed her urgently, wrapping his arms around her so tightly she gasped.

"I love you, Ginny."

"You're a nutter," she said as she nudged him back down. "And it's now past midnight, so we're breaking every rule in the book."

"We're good like that," Harry said. Their movements began again, growing more frantic as they both climbed toward completion. Harry climaxed before Ginny did, but then fumbled with his fingers to assist her release.

"Hmmm, Mrs. Potter," Harry whispered as he kissed her deeply. "I like the sound of that."

Ginny curled into him and kissed his chest. "It's been a long time coming."

"Far too long," Harry said. "I should have just given up the minute I saw you. It would have saved me a lot of fight, you know."

"You're learning," Ginny said with a wink. "I'll have you trained up in no time."

Harry pulled the blanket around them and rolled so that they were side by side. "No regrets?"

"Things turned out far different than I expected," Ginny said. "I never finished Hogwarts."

"Me either," said Harry. He kissed her palm and trailed soft, nipping kisses down her arm.

"And I always wanted to play Quidditch."

"You still can, if you want. I can stay home with James, or we can arrange something."

She smiled widely. "We'll see."

"But other than that?" Harry rose up on his elbow and smoothed her hair back. "You don't regret making love with me, having our baby, or marrying me?"

"Never," Ginny said. "Things may not have turned out the way I expected them, but I can't regret a minute of any of it. Everything we did, every choice we made, made us who we are. If I regret loving you, then I can't be me. If I regret having James—well, I simply can't regret that. And marrying you... I've dreamed about that for *years!*"

"Good."

"You don't regret being stuck with me?" Ginny asked. There was a hint of self-doubt in her tone that Harry kissed away.

"Not a minute of it. And I like to think that you're the one who is stuck. After all, I'm quite happy to be a Weasley now."

Ginny laughed and mock-wailed. "I knew it! You only married me for my family!"

"Of course," Harry said simply. "And your body. And our son. And a few other things." He rubbed against her provocatively and kissed her as they both laughed.

The tabloids had been horrible when they discovered the upcoming wedding, and even worse when they caught sight of James and began to assemble pieces of the story. Ginny had been accused of trapping Harry by having his baby and all manner of underhanded schemes to land herself with the hero of the Wizarding world.

"I knew it wouldn't take long for the press to figure out."

Harry sighed against Ginny's shoulder and laughed softly. "That's what you get for going with your mother into Diagon Alley, waving that ring around, and letting grandma show James off."

Ginny laughed unrepentantly. She cuddled into his arms and rested her head on his shoulder. "I didn't exactly plan on getting mobbed by reporters, you know."

They were quiet, savoring the stillness of the night.

"I can't believe we're getting married tomorrow."

Harry smiled at the satisfaction in her voice. "It's been quite the journey, hasn't it?"

"One for the romance novels," she said. "In fact, I heard Romilda Vane writes them. Maybe we could give her an interview."

Harry groaned and blew a raspberry on Ginny's chest. "Not on your life. She'll have it twisted a million different ways before having me end up with her, rather than you. That's a fate worse than death."

Someone huffed from the entrance to the tent and they both froze.

"I should have known."

"It's tradition, Hermione," Ginny protested. Harry tried to hold in a laugh, but it escaped.

"Thank Merlin it's dark. I don't think I could handle seeing that." Harry's eyes flew open wide as Ron muttered about sisters and best mates.

"You hypocrite!" Harry yelled after laughing. "You were coming out here to do the same thing!"

Ron didn't answer but both Ginny and Hermione laughed.

"Yeah, well we were going to use protection at least," Ron finally said. "I love your kid, Harry, but I certainly don't want one of my own."

"Not ever?" they heard Hermione ask.

Harry looked down at Ginny and shook his head. "Your family is barmy."

"I thought you wanted to be a Weasley, Harry?" she asked.

He leaned down and kissed her, ignoring Ron's gagging sounds and Hermione's pleading that they shift the blanket to cover Harry's bare bum. "Only when I'm mental. I'm told it's a requirement, after all."