

Harry Potter

The Weasley Tree

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Summary: I was five years old when I found my tree. Yes, it's *my* tree. It became mine the first moment I set my eyes on the glowing orange color, standing out like a candle in a dark room.

Warnings: None.

I was five years old when I found my tree. Yes, it's *my* tree. It became mine the first moment I set my eyes on the glowing orange color, standing out like a candle in a dark room.

"It's a *Weasley* tree, Mummy!" I pulled my hand from my mothers and ran toward the magnificent branches, cloaked in their garish autumn colors. It towered above me and I stood beneath the heavy boughs, staring up at the skeleton of it, marveling at how beautiful it really was.

Mum let me take a handful of leaves home with me and indulgently let me visit *my* tree often that year, probably hoping that once all the orange leaves turned to their muddy brown winter coating on the floor I would forget all about it. I never did. I loved my tree and I remember using up the supply of paints in the house that winter recreating it in pictures that decorated many walls at the Burrow.

It was beautiful in the Spring again, and the thick emerald coat it wore during the summer was heavenly, but nothing could ever compare to that first glimpse of those riotous colors. They were what made it *my* tree, and what kept me coming back to visit it time and time again. Some of my best memories are under, or in, or around that tree, and I've learned some of my most valuable lessons there.

Lesson #1: Be yourself, whoever that might be.

The thing about growing up with such a large family is that you're rarely alone. Sometimes that's a good thing, but not always. Sometimes all you want is some time to yourself to just *be*.

Big brothers are horrible. They always have to be right, they sometimes can be mean, and they always, always think you're too little to do anything fun. I learned that when I was young.

Doting mothers can be a pain, as well. I always loved my mother, but I was tired of giving in to her pleas to 'just wear the nice dress for a while, Ginny' and to 'act like a lady'. I wasn't allowed to climb trees and run around like a hooligan, as my brothers did, but it was all I really wanted to do.

Catching toads in the back pond was perfectly acceptable for the boys, but my mother's shrill voice would send me scurrying back to the house if I even thought of getting near the murky water in the dress that Great Aunt Muriel had given me for my seventh birthday. I watched Fred, George, and Ron romp in the mud for hours from the window of my room, all the while wishing I had more courage to buck my mother's strong will and do a little mud flinging of my own.

One late autumn afternoon we were in the back garden and Mum had agreed, reluctantly, to let us go a bit further from the house to the Quidditch clearing to play. I hastily agreed to all her rules (... no eating apples because you'll spoil your lunch, no using Charlie's Quaffle, no going above the tree line lest the Muggles see...) without listening much, just for the opportunity of a little freedom. After being bundled in far too many itchy woolen jumpers, I scampered out the door after my brothers. Fred and George had brooms resting on their shoulders and Ron was bouncing between them, begging for a go on Charlie's old Comet, or Bill's Shooting Star. I didn't figure I'd get any chance at all, but I had to ask anyway.

Fred looked at me skeptically, sizing up my skinny arms and short, stubby legs. "I don't know, Ginner, I think you'd probably float up to the clouds."

"Yeah, what would Mum do to us if we lost you?" George asked. He clucked his tongue and shook his head.

"Get lost, Ginny!" Ron said viciously. "They won't let me have a go if you're around." He added the last in a whisper, scowling at me.

"I can have a go, too!" I yelled, stomping my foot and determinedly matching them stride for stride, even though it meant I was nearly running. "I'll bet I'm a better flyer than any of you. And one day I'll play Quidditch for England!"

Fred ruffled my hair and I swiped at him, missing because his arms were longer than mine were. "Sure you will, munchkin. And Ronnie here will be Minister of Magic."

They all laughed and I felt my cheeks flame with rage. Tears burned the back of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I *refused* to let them think I was even more of a baby.

George pulled me to a stop and squatted down to my level. "What if you fall and get really hurt, Ginny?"

"I won't." I swiped my nose along the sleeve of my jumper, doing my best to hold in my tears. "I promise."

"I don't know..." he continued, his face scrunched in thought. "Mum would kill us if you did, and she'd take away our brooms!"

Ron huffed in annoyance. "Just go play with your dolls, Ginny. Flying is boy stuff!"

"Nuh-uh!" I yelled back. "Charlie told me about the Harpies. They're all girls and they play. Gwenog Jones is the best and one day I'm gonna play, just like her."

The boys nearly fell over laughing so hard and I glared at them.

"You can't play Quidditch!" Ron said. He was laughing so hard it was almost impossible to make out the words. "Just go sit and watch us."

"Yeah, Ginner. We'll let you have an apple and none of us will tell Mum." Fred mussed my hair up again and I pulled away from him before kicking his shin viciously. I ran away from them, determined that they would never see the tears running down my cheeks. I ignored their calls for me to stop and ran to the one place I knew I would be happy—my tree.

It didn't take me long to find it—the flame-orange leaves were like a glowing beacon in the grove and I sat at the base, resting my forehead on my knees. I called my brothers all sorts of names—words that I'd overheard them using when Mum wasn't around to *Scourgify* their mouths, and it helped. I wasn't sure how long I sat there, but my anger fizzled into determination.

"I'll show them," I said forcefully, telling the trees around me. "One day they'll be sorry. I'll fly

better and faster than any of them, better and faster than Charlie even.”

I rested my head back on the gnarly bark of the tree and watched the amber leaves glitter in the afternoon sun. I wanted nothing more than to lose myself in them, hide away until I was big enough to be the best at everything. My eyes traced the branches and I wondered if I really could...

I wasn't supposed to climb trees, but I wasn't wearing one of Mum's frilly dresses right now, and there was no one around. I wanted nothing more than to chance it. The lowest branch was still taller than me, even if I stood on my tiptoes. I tried to jump, but could only brush some of the leaves, coming away with a handful.

“Dammit!”

I giggled a little when the word slipped out, but since nothing happened when it did, I tried again, just a little louder. A guilty thrill shivered through me and I repeated it over and over again every time I would try to climb the rough bark and slip back down to the ground. Finally, I got an idea. A storm a few weeks back had broken a few branches from surrounding trees, thankfully leaving my Weasley tree unharmed. It took everything I had to tug one of them over and my hands and clothing were covered in dirt and debris from the ground, but I was satisfied when I climbed up on the tip and was able to wrap my hands around the lowest branch.

I crowed in delight and swung my legs upward, wrapping around it fully and dangling. The bark dug into my palms and I felt the sting, but I was far too happy to worry about that now. I wasn't sure how to move, but slowly I figured it out, scooting my body along the branch until I could flip over and then pulling myself upright. Once the first branch was conquered, I looked back down, thrilled with what I'd done, all on my own.

The next one wasn't nearly as hard, and the third one was easier still. Finally, I found the perfect perch for myself—not so high that I worried I would fall out, high enough that if the gits came along they wouldn't see me right away.

I rested my legs on either side of the thick branch and pressed my back against the trunk, surveying my accomplishments.

I had done it, all on my own. Little Ginny, who was too little to fly brooms, and too weak to wrestle with the boys, and too girly to catch toads, had climbed a tree. I felt like I was on top of the world.

And that's when I realized that I could do anything I wanted if I really tried hard enough. If I wanted to fly, I could be the best flier in the world. I didn't have to wait for my brothers to give me a chance, I just had to do it myself. If I wanted to catch toads, I would make Mum see that I hated her dresses and pretty things, and that I only wanted to be doing what I wanted. And if I wanted to wrestle with the boys, I would just have to make myself meaner than any of them, or find other ways to best them.

I believed in me.

Lesson #2: Some things are right, no matter the cost.

“Harry’s gone,” I told my tree. I was well past tears, so I hadn’t come out here to cry, even though my chest still felt tight and a little bit hollow. “Ron and Hermione too, but I always knew they’d be with him.”

My tree had grown through the years, but there was still a spot that I fit in perfectly, a cradle of branches where I could lounge about, reading a book or just thinking.

“I’m not supposed to be out here.” I felt guilty for slipping away, and I knew I couldn’t spend more than a few stolen minutes here before Mum would become frantic. I was supposed to be packing to leave for Hogwarts. The train would be pulling out of Kings Cross in just a few short hours and I had told Mum I still needed to pack a few things before sliding out my window and escaping on my broom.

Maybe it was stupid and dangerous, but a part of me didn’t care. I hadn’t been to see my tree all summer with the wedding and everything on high alert all the time. I hated being cooped up, even if I understood why Mum was so barmy about it.

And now with Harry, Ron and Hermione gone, she was more frantic than ever. The Ministry had already sent a witch—although she looked more like a hag to me—to check why Ron wouldn’t be reporting to Hogwarts as demanded by Educational Decree #267. Mum had been forced to fill out two feet of parchment describing Ron’s sudden and deadly spattergroit affliction while the witch peered at the ghoul distastefully.

I had played my part perfectly, showing just the right amount of concern for my ‘brother’ while still keeping my distance, lest I be infected with the same disgusting illness. I honestly think if we’d had access to another ghoul, Mum would have hexed the thing herself to get me out of going.

But I wanted to go back. I wanted to do my part in the war, no matter how small it was. Harry was out there fighting and while I knew I couldn’t be with him (no matter how much I wanted to) I had to be strong and do everything I could. I’d already been in touch with both Neville and Luna, making our plans.

Dumbledore’s Army was going to have a strong resurgence and those ruddy Death Eaters wouldn’t know what hit them. Slimy Snape would be crying when we were done with him.

“I wish I could see your colors this autumn,” I said. I’m not sure when I began thinking of my tree as a living being, my friend, but I did. I truly believed it could hear me and while it might not be able to respond, it gave me the comfort and understanding I sought in its boughs.

I brushed my fingers along the still-green leaves. “No Weasley orange this year, I suppose.” I plucked one particularly perfect leaf and pressed it against the knee of my trousers. Every year I pulled a leaf and took it with me to use as a bookmark, and I kept it as long as I could before it either fell apart or wilted away completely. When I was young, the crispy orange leaves would break off bit by bit all over my books, but I hadn’t been home in the autumn for years now. To me it was a fair trade because I’d waited so long to go to Hogwarts, but I did miss my tree.

“I’m scared,” I whispered and pressed my cheek to the bark, not caring that it was rough. “What if I lose him? What if I lose any of them?”

My heart raced in my chest and I forced myself to take slow, deep breaths. It was something I was getting good at—calming the panic.

“I can’t.” I said it forcefully, as if I could will it to be so. “I won’t lose them. We’ll all fight and we’ll all be fine.”

Maybe if I believed it deep enough inside me, I could use all my magic to make it so.

“I don’t want to fight. I wish none of us had to. I wish we could do things like normal kids—climb trees and steal kisses, play Quidditch and worry about staying out too late...” I sighed and reached for my broom, balanced between two branches.

“I’ll be back,” I told my tree with a firmness I now felt deep inside me. “I’ll be back and so will he. They all will.”

I slid off the branch and fell, pulling my broom under me at the last second and shooting off toward the house. If Mum caught me outside, I didn’t like to think what she’d do.

My window was still open and Mum wasn’t screaming when I hovered back toward the Burrow, so I floated inside, taking care to land on my bed, rather than chance her hearing my feet setting down. My poster of Gwenog Jones gave me a covert wink and I tucked my broom into my open trunk, folded my leaf into my Transfiguration book and opened my bedroom door.

The house was far too still and it made me feel empty inside. The Burrow was never supposed to be this quiet. I’d learned through the years that quiet was something you had to be wary of. I stuck to the edges of the stairs coming down, skipping the ones that squeaked the loudest.

“Ginny?”

“Coming!”

Mum’s call from the kitchen startled me, but at least she didn’t sound mad. I straightened my shirt and brushed my hands along my behind, trying to remove any evidence that I’d been outside the house before entering the room. Mum was finishing up with breakfast, keeping a wandering eye on the hands of the clock that was sitting on the counter next to her (all of our hands still pointed at ‘mortal peril’ and I was mollified to see that mine hadn’t shifted at all, it seemed) and Dad was sitting at the table, pouring over every inch of the *Daily Prophet*.

“Did you get everything, dear?”

I slid into the chair next to my father and snatched food to pile on my plate, trying not to look guilty. “I think so,” I said through a mouthful of toast. “Just had to track down one of my books. It used to be Fred’s so it tends to wander away at inappropriate times.”

Mum hummed in distracted approval and Dad peered at me over the top of his glasses. His eyes grew wide and I panicked, trying to decide what he was seeing. Just as Mum began to turn around with a plateful of eggs, Dad snatched something from the top of my hair and rustled his paper to cover the movement. I felt my cheeks heat as he tucked a stray twig under his serviette and gave me a covert wink.

I mouthed 'thanks' and set about devouring my food. Mum commented on my lack of manners and I made a point to slow down. It was best not to draw her ire when I was so close to leaving; she could change her mind in the blink of an eye and I'd be upstairs, tucked in with the ghouls before I could say Merlin's saggy y-fronts.

Two hours later Dad was helping me load my trunk off the cart as Mum fretted about the state of security on the platform (All these Aurors! Do they really think something might happen?!) When her back was turned, Dad leaned in close.

"Sure you're ready for this, Ginny?" He nodded toward the train. I let my eyes slide over the platform and the somber, stiff feel of it all. Gone were the days when friends greeted each other loudly and laughed. The grim faces of Ministry Aurors replaced the smiling faces of friends. The haughty, smug looks of the Slytherins replaced the laughter and joy from the past years. And the uncertainty that hung about like a Dementor fog stole away the excitement of going back to school. It wasn't going to be anything like a normal year.

Neville and Luna stood shoulder to shoulder in one of the train windows, watching the same scene I was.

"I'm ready," I said firmly.

Dad looked torn. I knew he hated sending me away—another child out from under his watchful eye—but he knew it was best, just like I did.

"You taught us to do the right thing, Dad, even when it isn't easy."

I don't remember seeing my dad look at me like he did right then and my heart that had been so weighed down by everything lately fluttered in pride.

"That's my girl." He kissed my forehead and helped me load my trunk before Mum pressed a few galleons into my hand and gave me a list of all the things I should be careful of during the year. It was far more extensive this year, but I just listened before throwing my arms around her shoulders and squeezing for all I was worth.

"I love you, Mum."

When the train pulled out, I took my place next to Neville, watching as London disappeared and our future rumbled and rattled toward us.

"We can do this, you know," I whispered, watching their reflections in the window. "We can make a difference."

Lesson #3: Saying goodbye hurts, but it's part of life.

Even when I was younger, I never spent as many hours in my tree as I did when I came home from Hogwarts that year. I think everyone understood; they all had their little places of escape where they could go to be alone and deal with the grief, or whatever it was they were feeling. We were still a family—slightly broken—and we were still together, but there was a palpable sense of oneness that existed in the house as we all faced the task of recovering.

The world moved on: the sun rose every morning, the flowers in the unkempt gardens bloomed, the birds still sang. And slowly, we began healing.

Harry and I were together, but we hadn't defined what lay between us yet. I think that might have been because I still had another year at Hogwarts, and while I would have loved for him to return with me and Hermione to get the year he was cheated out of, I understood when he just shook his head and told me that forward was the way to go for him.

And so we were on hold, once more. It wasn't the most pleasant idea and there were times I wanted to scream and throw myself at him, beg him not to leave me again, but I did understand. And I think it might be good for us to have one more year before that huge, daunting concept of life begins.

Summer faded into Autumn and still I waited for the next step, the next phase in my life to begin. Hogwarts wasn't ready on September 1st, and not on October 1st either. The Express would pull away from Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ the week before Halloween. I was given a reprieve from leaving my family, and Harry, and even my tree.

A few days before leaving, I wandered out to my Weasley tree, glowing with orange light, and climbed up into the branches. I owed it an update on my life. Even though I'd been visiting, I hadn't said much to the tree, taking instead its offered solace and comfort. It was time to give back.

"Things are... better," I started after I'd climbed up to my spot. (It was much easier now than it had been when I was seven.) I rested in the spot well-worn from my behind through the years. "Dad convinced Mum to hang the clock again. It helps that there's a wall there to hang it on." I gave a little amused snort and shook my head at the memory of the damage the Burrow had sustained when Death Eaters came looking for Harry, Ron and Hermione in the Spring. "Dad had so much fun rebuilding parts. He kept begging Mum to let him use a Muggle hammer and you should have seen his face when Harry brought one of those loud, obnoxious drill thingys. I thought he was going to knock Harry down just to get a look at it. The poor thing didn't last long, though. Dad took it apart in minutes."

I chuckled at the memory and rested my head against the trunk, searching the ginger leaves in front of me for the perfect one.

"George is... he's getting better. I always knew he'd be okay, you know, but it was hard watching him struggle. I think it will always hurt—saying goodbye does—but at least he doesn't get that blank look on his face anymore or make jokes that really aren't funny. I still miss Fred more than I ever thought possible, and I always will. Harry says we just need more time, that it never really gets better, missing someone, but it does get easier."

Just Harry's name brought a smile to my lips. "Harry and I... we're good." I wasn't sure how much more to tell my tree. "We spend every minute he's not at the Ministry together. He's helping me get ready for the Quidditch season, even though it'll be a short one. He's the only one I've told about how I want to play for the Harpies. Well, him and you, tree." I ran my hands over the bark lovingly. "He thinks it's great."

A rustle of leaves below me broke me from my quiet musings and I looked down to see Harry wander

aimlessly by. He knew where my tree was—I'd invited him up a few times during the summer—but this was his way of offering company without making me commit. If I called to him, asked him to come, he would; if I let him wander by he would know that I wanted to be alone. He never held that against me.

"Up here!"

He stopped just below the branches and beamed up at me, looking artfully windblown and completely perfect. His face was flushed and his hair tousled, as if he'd just gotten off his broom, which he might have, if I thought about it. Ron was around here somewhere today, too.

"Mind if I come up?"

I smiled down at him and shook my head. "Not at all."

His smile widened and he looked down at his hands, cradled around two perfectly ruby apples. His jumper didn't have pockets and there was no way the snack would fit in his jean pockets.

"Catch!"

I reached out just in time to grasp the apple he tossed up to me. It felt warm and solid in my hands, and completely perfect. I caught the second one and watched as Harry scrambled gracefully up the tree, settling right next to me.

My branch wasn't overly wide and twisted oddly not far from my perch, so Harry was nearly on my lap when he swung a leg over each side. There was nothing for his back to lean against, but somehow I didn't think he minded today.

"Chatting with your tree?"

My cheeks heated but I contented myself with taking a huge bite of my apple and nodding. Harry was amused with the idea that I talked to a tree, but he didn't tease me like my brothers would, well... not always, anyway.

"It's my favorite place in the whole world, I think," I told him. He nodded and looked around while eating his own apple.

"I can see what you mean." He tugged on a leaf and then twirled it in his hand before comparing the color to my hair. "Same color."

"It's a Weasley tree!" I laughed and he scooted just a bit closer, our knees overlapping.

"My favorite kind." His cheeks flushed and I let the awkward, warm feeling that grew between us wash over me. I knew I loved Harry, but I wasn't sure if he was ready to hear it just yet. We were still so young, still so very naïve about this world we were perched on the edge of discovering.

I watched him devour his apple, seeds, stem and all, before he wiped his hands on his jeans. "Do you always eat them like that?"

He shrugged innocently. "Dunno, I suppose. I never really thought about it."

I pondered that, wondering if it had to do with how he had grown up, but dismissed saying anything more. What did it really matter, after all?

We sat in relative silence, enjoying the last warmth of the season. Harry sometimes asked questions about my tree and I sometimes asked him about other things—growing up, our time apart, things that lay unsaid between us.

Before I knew it, his legs had slid under mine and I was sitting on his thighs, rather than the branch. My hands were resting on his shoulders and his were braced on my back. Our faces were impossibly close, closer than they'd been in a long time.

"I'm going to miss you." He whispered into my shoulder and I pulled him to me, winding us together tightly. "You make everything okay, even when it's really not."

"It's the same for me, Harry."

He sighed and I felt the flutter of a kiss on my neck. Sparks that I'd forced to stay dormant for more than a year flared to life, roaring into a fire just for him, and the words I wanted to say so badly hovered in my mouth, tasting like treacle on my tongue.

"Ginny, I..." His words faded out and I just held him tighter.

"I know, Harry." His shoulders relaxed and he pulled back, his bright eyes searching mine deeply. He must have found what he was looking for because he brushed his lips across mine, igniting our first kiss in weeks—I wasn't sure if I should count the one on his birthday because he'd been just a bit more than tipsy on the Firewhisky George gave him. This one was more real to me, anyway. It was soft and slow, strong and sure. It wasn't the tentative, hesitant first kiss, or the desperate snog of a stolen moment, but a confirming emotion shared between us.

"We'll be okay, won't we?"

He sounded unsure, anxious for reassurance. I smiled and wiped a bit of my lipgloss from the corner of his mouth.

"We'll be fine," I said quietly. "We'll write letters."

"And I'll come up for your games." He brightened up, as if he'd just remembered a thing called Quidditch. "And Hogsmeade weekends."

"And we'll see each other at Christmas—which really isn't that far away—and then Easter. You can make sure Mum invites us home this year. I doubt she could keep Hermione away, at any rate."

We both laughed softly at the idea of Ron and Hermione being kept apart now that they'd finally figured themselves out. It wouldn't happen, I knew that much.

Harry pulled me to him again, kissing me once more before sighing in contentment. "Do you..."

I looked at him, curious as to what thoughts were swirling in his mind. "You can tell me." I wound my fingers into the cabling of his jumper, soaking in the warmth that radiated from his skin.

“Do you think it would be bad if I added to your tree? Just a little bit... nothing big.”

My brow furrowed as I tried to reason what he meant. “Added?”

He nodded and pulled his wand from his back pocket, shifting me slightly so he could get at the trunk behind me. His face was flushed—even the tips of his ears were red!—but he looked determined.

“Watch.”

Slowly, sketchy lines began to appear in the bark where I always rested my back. The rough form of a heart took shape and then two letters. I watched, mesmerized as Harry put our initials in the middle of that heart.

And I understood.

This was his way of saying it when he wasn't sure about using the right words.

I moved behind him, wrapping my arms around his chest and staring at our mark on my tree. The perfect mark that meant so much more than this wonderful, shy boy could ever express with words.

“Me too, Harry,” I whispered against the back of his neck once he was finished carving. He shivered and rested his head against mine.

My bottom was numb when Harry shifted. He brushed his fingers along the heart and then began to climb down, reaching up and offering his hand to me, drawing me down into his embrace again.

Once we were down, he twined our fingers together. “I like that I don't have to say much to you and you understand.”

I laughed and nudged him with my hip. “That may not always be the case, you know. Maybe one day I'll want you to talk until my ears fall off.”

He laughed and pushed a pile of leaves together with his foot.

“Can we do something before we go back?” He looked slightly guilty and I wondered if he wanted to push me up against the tree and kiss me again. At least, that's what I wanted to do to him.

“Sure.”

Surprisingly, he let my hand drop and reached down to scoop an armful of leaves from the ground, adding to his tiny pile. He was a blur of motion, gathering leaves, building his pile. I caught on to his idea quickly and joined him. In no time at all we had a huge pile of Technicolor foliage in front of us, just waiting...

With a whoop of glee, Harry threw his arms wide and fell back into the tower, smashing it horribly and laughing with abandon.

“I've always wanted to do that.”

I watched him be more playful and carefree than... I'd ever seen, and then squealed with surprise when his hand wrapped around my ankle, tugging me down into the pile with him. We wrestled in the leaves, crushing our pile beneath us, and I stuffed them up his jumper, and he rubbed them in my hair... until we were a rumpled, tangled, laughing mess.

Harry tugged me until I was lying on his chest, splayed out over the top of him. The look he gave me made me melt into a sticky, warm puddle of something horribly sweet. I tried to decide what it was but my brain stopped working when his fingers brushed bits of stray hair from my eyes.

"I love you, Ginny," he whispered, so softly that it might have been the breeze blowing by.

"I know, Harry," I answered back and pressed my lips to his. "I've known for awhile now."

His lips twisted into a smile under mine and he pulled me all the way down with him, burying us in the leaves. I couldn't think of a better place for him to tell me than right here under my tree.

"Are you... are you going to say it back?" he finally asked after we'd kissed until my lips were swollen and chapped.

"I think you're pretty special, Harry." I gave him a wink and he rolled his eyes before digging his fingers into my sides where he knew I was dangerously ticklish. I writhed against him deliciously, cackling with laughter. "Okay! Okay!"

I sat up, straddling his waist and let my eyes trace over how perfect he looked—flushed and rumpled, leaves strewn in his hair, lips perfectly pink, and glasses crooked.

"I love you, Harry. I have for awhile now."

His fingers wound through mine, binding us together, and I knew I didn't have to tell him anything more.

Lesson #4: Sometimes the best things in life are the ones we can't plan.

He found me in my tree and he didn't seem surprised at all to see me there.

It wasn't yet October, and the leaves in my tree—*our* tree—weren't their brilliant orange yet, but the edges were just now starting to turn yellow, signaling the change in weather.

I didn't invite him up, but he knew I wouldn't kick him out of our tree, especially not when he was the only one I really wanted to see anyway.

"Hiding from your mother?"

Harry nudged me forward and slid behind me before pulling my back into his chest. We curled together perfectly, just as we had for years now.

"Is it that obvious?"

His chuckle vibrated through my body and I wished I could melt into him forever. It seemed fitting that he was the one to find me in my first safe place, as he'd become my permanent safe place when the rest of my world was going crazy.

"Well, she seemed rather worked up and you were nowhere to be found when I walked into the house..." He let the thought trail away and I groaned.

"I'm not sure I can take any more of this, Harry." His arms wrapped around me and I clung to them, laying my head back on his shoulder. "Can we just go? Can we just run away?"

He laughed again and kissed the side of my head. "We're not running away now, Ginny. We'll be fine."

"I might not be," I grumbled. "And if I have to argue one more time about that list, my mother might not be."

I couldn't see him, but I knew Harry rolled his eyes at my dramatics. He was my only ally in this, and while I wouldn't stay mad at him for something so silly in the long run, I couldn't help but be a little annoyed now.

"Two weeks, Gin. Two weeks."

I tightened my hands on his arms and forced myself to relax. "Why did we let her plan this big elaborate thing?"

He sighed loudly. "Because she's your mother, Ginny, and because she only gets to do this once. Fleur's mother planned her wedding, Hermione's planned hers..."

"George and Angelina had the right idea," I huffed. "They eloped!"

Harry laughed delightedly. "You don't have to convince me, Gin, I was all for that months ago, if you'll remember."

I grimaced but had to admit he was right. When he'd proposed to me, he'd been so excited he wanted us to get married that night, but I was trying to be sensible and smart, and insisted that my mother would murder us both in our bed if she discovered we got married without her there. Now, looking back, I wished I'd just given in to impulse. Then we wouldn't be in the mess we were in.

"Remember the day George and Angelina showed up at the Burrow with their shiny new rings and those guilty smiles?"

I couldn't help but laugh as I remembered the gasp my mother had let out and then the absolute chaos that erupted. My tiffs with my mother over cake flavors, wedding favors, flower colors and fabric choices paled in comparison to the all-out brawl that had occurred that day. Then again, at least it had ended there and not drag on for weeks. Once Mum erupted and let out all of her emotion, she welcomed Angelina to the family with a huge hug and an extra large helping of breakfast. George had taken longer to get back into her good graces, but the arrival of Freddie the next year made everything better.

I wasn't so sure that would work in my case...

Harry sighed and kissed my head again. "Two weeks, Gin, and then this will all be a memory. One day we'll look back and laugh at how insane it all was."

I turned in place, carefully bracing myself so I didn't fall. "I'm not ready to laugh just yet," I said as I wrapped my arms around him fully.

"What else is wrong, love? You've never come out here to hide when your mother is being overbearing before? Well, not lately, anyway."

I chewed my lip and wondered if now was the right time to tell him. "I suppose it's just... change, is all."

He hummed and peered at me, one eyebrow rising as he evaluated my words. "It's not much change, really. We already live together and we've been together for years now, Gin."

"I'm changing my name," I pointed out. "And it *is* a big deal."

He held up his hands in surrender, grinning at me. "I'm not arguing, I promise. I just wonder if there isn't something more. You're usually not this reactive when she pushes your buttons."

I nuzzled into his chest and weighed each word carefully. "I think it's just everything all at once."

"You had a great season," he murmured pleasantly. "And in a few weeks the wedding stress will be gone and you can go back to yelling at me to pick up my socks. And then you'll start training again and we'll go back to everything we love about our lives."

My belly stirred in nervousness and something else I couldn't quite define yet. I reached behind Harry and ran my fingers over the old heart carved in the tree. We'd both touched it so often over the years that it was getting worn on the edges and not nearly as deep as it once was. I loved that little declaration: such an innocent, simple way for Harry to tell me his feelings had changed so much for us.

"Harry?"

"Mmhmm?"

"You love me, right?"

He chuckled. "I'm sort of fond of you. I figure I've just got you about trained and it would take me forever to find someone else who didn't complain when I steal all the covers."

I pinched his side playfully and he squirmed, but laughed harder.

"Like... forever you love me?"

He lifted my chin and peered at me before kissing my lips. "Yep. Forever."

"In sickness and in health?"

"In good times and bad," he said.

"Forsaking all others?"

"Through nosebleed nougats and fainting fancies."

I smiled into the stubby skin of his cheek. "Through press conferences and rubbish articles?"

"Through Quidditch games in the rain and snow and sleet."

"Don't forget burning hot," I pointed out. Harry's smile widened and he rubbed his thumb over my lip, a wrinkle starting to grow between his eyebrows.

"Getting cold feet? Because I told you I'd wait forever. I've waited this long, and you know I'd—"

"I want to marry you, Harry." I didn't want him to ever question my devotion to him or the idea of joining our lives together. "I've never questioned that. I just..."

"You're just overwhelmed," he questioned, although it sounded more like a statement to me.

"You have no idea." We sighed and he kissed me once more.

"We're going to be fine, Gin, I promise. Two more weeks and then we'll disappear for awhile. We'll pretend nothing else exists but the two of us. Sound good?"

"Sounds perfect," I said. "But I'm not sure it'll work that way."

"Wow, you're a pessimist today." He laughed and squeezed me lightly. "Nothing is going to go wrong."

I hummed in both agreement and denial, but he didn't know that just yet.

"Harry?"

"I honestly don't care what color shoes you wear, Gin, I promise."

I laughed and pulled back to look deep into his eyes.

"Will you love me even if my brothers hunt you down and threaten to hex your bits?"

He gaped at me. "Uh, Gin, I think they already know we live together."

"Harry..."

"I mean, it's not like they can't figure out what we do. We're adults, after all, in a committed, serious relationship..."

"Harry, I'm pregnant."

His words trailed off to an almost painful whimper. "You... you're..."

I nodded firmly. "Pregnant. Four or five weeks from what I figure."

Harry let out an unsteady breath and swallowed thickly. "Didn't time that well, did we?"

A laugh burst out of me and I released all the nervous energy I'd been hoarding for days now. It seemed I could never find the right time, or the right way to tell him. Someone was always around, digging their noses into our business, wanting to measure me one last time, demanding my approval of the place setting cards, or the color of the candles that I would likely never even notice. And it wasn't like I wanted to advertise that Harry and I had been a little careless with our potions and charms in the heat of the moment anyway.

"Not really." I wiped tears from my eyes and kissed him. "Still love me?"

"More than ever," he said, sounding much more firm about his words. Hesitatingly, he lowered his hand to rest over my belly. "Really?"

I couldn't help the bright smile that spread across my face. I knew how much Harry wanted a family of his own—of *our* own—and I couldn't be happier to give it to him, even if the timing wasn't exactly how I'd always pictured it.

"Really."

Lesson #5: The future holds great possibilities.

I patted James' little hands together and then held up another to him, just waiting for him to say the word.

"Yeef!"

"Yes, you smart boy, it's a leaf!" I tossed it up in the air and James clapped and giggled. We were sitting in a pile of leaves at the base of the Weasley tree, wrapped in Nana Weasley's woolen jumpers, hats, scarves, and anything else she could possibly make from yarn, simply enjoying the end of the season.

"Yeef! Yeef! Yeef!"

James stood and toddled away, kicking 'yeefs' in his wake and having the time of his life.

"Wandered away again! I swear the two of you are constantly trying to get away from me. If I didn't know you adored me, I'd worry about that, you know."

I chuckled as Harry plopped into the pile with me and nuzzled his cold nose against my neck. He set his broom next to him and curled around me, watching James explore with wide, bright eyes.

"I had to bring him out the Weasley tree for the first time," I said. "Or at least the first time he'll likely remember it."

Harry tilted his head back and stared at all the golden orange leaves above us. A few drifted downward, dancing on the breeze, until they rested on the ground. "There's a lot of history here,

isn't there?"

I hummed my agreement and kissed his cheek. "If you only knew. I used to come here and dream about marrying you. Granted, I was seven or eight at the time..."

He chuckled, having heard the stories from my brothers for years. "Good thing you were a persistent little thing."

I run my finger up his side, making him squirm away from me. "Good thing I was *patient* while you got your head out of your—"

Harry cleared his throat loudly and nodded his head toward our son, who picked up every word he heard and repeated them back like some little red-headed parrot. I laughed and shook my head. Just last week I'd had to hex George who taught my son to call everyone a git. I had yet to repay the favor, but I would, in spades.

"What'cha got there, mate?"

James had rejoined us, carrying an armful of treasures. He dropped them at our feet and presented Harry with a leaf, grinning with his wide, toothy smile.

"Yeef!"

"I see that." Harry took the gift graciously, and the one after that, and the one after that, laughing while James proclaimed each one of them 'yeef' in his happy, bubbly voice. When he finished, he smacked his hands together and went off in search of something to catch his eye. Harry laid his handful of leaves on his lap and wrapped his arm over my shoulders.

"I've been thinking..."

"Uh oh."

"No, be good."

I grinned and shook my head. "Nope. Absolutely no fun in that. I've tried for years and it's much more fun to misbehave."

His eyes glinted darkly and I winked. Harry loved it when I misbehaved, and no matter how much he pretended he didn't, he was easily led down the path of iniquity right after me.

"I love our flat, but I've been thinking maybe we should start looking for something more."

I immediately loved the idea. "James could use a place to run around," I said thoughtfully.

"A place with a frog pond," Harry agreed.

"And a Quidditch pitch."

"Of course, he's *our* son, after all." Harry grinned and I knew he couldn't wait until James was a little steadier to take him up flying. The little broom we had that hovered a foot off the floor was

constantly having to be re-charmed because James used it so much.

"And maybe our very own tree," said Harry. "A Potter tree."

I looked up at my tree thoughtfully. "Not sure we could find one with black leaves, my love. Or if we'd want to."

He laughed. "Potters can be ginger, don't forget." He tugged on the end of my plait that hung down out of my knit hat, and then nodded his head toward James, who had his own thatch of thick auburn hair hidden under his cap.

"True."

He nuzzled his nose against my neck and made me squeal when he breathed on my skin. "And if we had more room... maybe we could think about getting James a little brother or sister."

I pulled him into the leaves with me and let him kiss me. "You think so?"

"I think being an only child might get lonely for him, love," Harry murmured as he kissed down my jawline and sucked on my earlobe. "We could at least entertain the idea. Practice."

"As if we don't practice enough." I rubbed his chest and arched against him.

"It's never enough, Gin, you know that."

"That's because we have a two year old son, Harry," I pointed out. "A two year old who climbs out of his cot and ends up in our bed more often than not."

"We managed before he came along," said Harry. "And that was with your brothers popping over at all hours of the day and night. And don't forget your very tenacious mother."

"And yet we still ended up with a surprise."

We both glanced at James, who had discovered that whacking a stick against the tree trunk made a satisfying and hilarious sound.

"Yeah, but the moment I showed them his little scrunched up face they forgave me completely."

I laughed at Harry's words, because they were entirely true. We'd waited until a month or so after our honeymoon to announce our exciting news. There were some suspicious glances and some knowing prods, but everyone had been rather accepting. The boys took the piss out of Harry every chance they got for getting me pregnant right before the wedding, but James had them all wrapped around his pudgy little Potter fingers the moment he first squalled.

"I might be open to the idea," I mused. "As long as we can find the right place."

"The idea of the house or of another baby?" Harry's eyes shined hopefully behind his glasses.

"Maybe a little of both," I said. "And a little bit of practice never hurt, after all."

“Da! Yeef!”

Harry kissed me one more time before jumping up to chase off after James, roaring like a lion the whole way and eliciting squeals of joy from his son.

“Don’t be mad,” I told my tree as I stared up at the leaves. “You’ll always be mine, but I sort of like the idea of having another tree. One my kids can climb up into.” With a cautious glance at Harry and James, who were now intently observing some sort of insect on another tree, I let my hand rest on my belly, where I suspected baby number two was already growing.

I’d tell Harry later, after all, I certainly wouldn’t mind a little bit of *practice*.

“Thanks for another great year, Weasley tree.” I stood and brushed leaves and twigs away from myself. “We’ll be back again.”

I chose one bright leaf that was still clinging to a low branch and plucked it to tuck into my book later.