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The Bargain

Prologue: Parental Pacts

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James Potter had been a member of the Order of the Phoenix for over a year. To say that his wife, Lily, hadn't been happy when he had suggested joining was like saying that Severus Snape's hair was greasy. The only thing that had placated her at the time was that he had agreed to let her join as well. Of course, as she had been very pregnant with their son, Harry, James had known in the back of his mind that she would never be assigned a high-risk post. After Harry's birth, he knew she would be perpetually busy taking care of a toddler, and, hopefully before long, pregnant once more.

The Order meeting that night was to be at their house in Godric's Hollow. Lily was upstairs, rocking Harry to sleep so James began to organise the living room. He levitated the chairs around into a circle, set a fire in the grate for those that would Floo to the meeting, and sent a Dusting Charm at the drapes. He had already closed them, as it wouldn't do to have the nosey Pratchett woman across the street seeing chairs floating in their front room.

The fire in the fireplace expanded to a large ball of green flames, signalling their Floo connection had been activated. Sirius Black shot out of the grate and dusted himself off with loud slaps against his leather jacket.

"Shh," admonished James. "Lily's putting the baby to bed."

Sirius stopped immediately. "Sure thing." Then, with a wicked smile, he added, "You old softy."

"Knock it off," James warned good-naturedly as Remus Lupin followed his friend through the grate. "If you'd let yourself be satisfied with one girl at a time, you might discover the joys of matrimony."

"Har, har," Sirius chuckled. "Who would keep Moony in line if I got hitched?" he said with a playful lunge at Remus.

"I happen to have a fine-looking witch to fill that need in my life, thank you very much," Remus responded.

"What?" James and Sirius chorused as Peter Pettigrew slid into the room through the still-lit fireplace.

"What, what?" Peter asked, sitting nervously on Lily's clean sofa behind the circle of chairs.

"Remus has got himself a girlfriend," Sirius chortled. "Is it that Isabella girl that was a year below us in Ravenclaw?"

Remus hesitated and James could tell from over nine years of knowing him that he was caught. "Maybe," Remus temporized. "Or maybe it's Kathryn, the one that works at the pub in Diagon Alley."

Sirius let out a low whistle. "How'd you score with her?"

"I didn't," Remus said, leaving out the implied *yet*.

"Well, you all look like you're thirsty, gabbing about like a bunch of prattling school-girls." The four men turned to see Lily descending the stairs. Her voice still caused James to shiver. She was looking pointedly at her husband and had a very awake Harry in her arms. "He must have heard you talking with this lot and refused to go to sleep," she explained and held out their son to her husband.

James took Harry and laid him over his shoulder, fumbling with the blanket until it covered most of his little body. "There's a good boy, Harry. Daddy'll help you go to sleep."

Lily rolled her eyes and kissed Harry on the cheek.

"What?" James protested. "No kiss for me?"

"I don't kiss prats," she replied and saucily stuck her tongue out at him. Then, turning to the other occupants of the Potters' living room, she asked, "What'cha fancy tonight? Butterbeer? Pumpkin juice?"

Peter made a face at the former and Sirius did so at the latter. "Right," Lily said and swept into the kitchen.

Several Order members began to Apparate into the hall between the entryway and the living room, the designated Apparition point. Soon, a dull roar enveloped their house as people began to fill each other in on their respective assignments. Everyone had a drink in hand as Lily moved back and forth between the kitchen to the living room. Little Harry was silently taking in the scene, content to be in his father's arms.

Albus Dumbledore arrived last, just after Minerva McGonagall. Clearing his throat, Dumbledore produced a parchment that presumably held the agenda and said, "Let's bring the meeting to order, if you please?"

The rumbling died down and little Harry instantly locked eyes with the elderly wizard. James thought it uncanny that Dumbledore could command respect from almost everyone, from the smallest of babes to the most hardened wizard.

The meeting ranged in topic from current efforts to discern Voldemort's tactics and how the Order would counter them. There were a few husband-and-wife teams at the meeting and James mentally went through each one. Craig and Angela Dervish, curse-breakers who had joined at the same time as James and Lily; Frank and Alice Longbottom, two of the best Aurors working for the Order; and of course, he and Lily.

There were also several other members there that didn't belong to a ready-made team. Mad-Eye Moody was the most notable, who was famous for wanting to work alone and had the scars to prove it, but there was also a new fellow that James knew only in passing. Arthur Weasley sat across from the Longbottoms, twiddling with one of the lamp plugs they were using. From what James knew, the Weasleys were good people and had Arthur's wife not been pregnant at the time, she would likely be in the Order as well.

"Moving on," said Dumbledore. "We need a team to investigate a suspicious gathering in Surrey. It appears that there is a Death Eater recruitment drive centred there, but we need to get a solid report from first-hand witnesses if we are going to be able to bring in *official* resources to stop them." Dumbledore winked at Mad-Eye Moody and the Longbottoms.

"Sirius, Peter and I are busy with the operation you assigned last week," Remus ventured. James knew exactly what it was, too, though there were others at the meeting that didn't. Remus was to act as a sort of bait for another recruitment drive in Scotland. There were rumours that Voldemort was trying to attract many dark creatures to join his cause and werewolves like Remus were at the top of that list.

"I'll go," Arthur Weasley offered. "I haven't been on a proper assignment yet and have been anxious to go. The only problem is I don't have a partner."

"Lily's been watching Harry, so I haven't got a partner, either," James said, still looking at his wife. She nodded her approval and James looked over to Arthur, who met his gaze.

"Excellent," Dumbledore said and made a notation on the parchment. "We'll go over the particulars when the meeting is over. "Now...moving on to the issue we're having in the Ministry..."

*

Following Rodolphus Lestrange was the easy part, Arthur decided. With his overly large black trench coat and enormous camouflage boots, it would take a concerted effort *not* to notice him. The trick was keeping him from noticing that two men, one with bright red hair and the other with distinctive black hair and glasses, were following him. Since Arthur only needed his glasses for reading, they wouldn't cause him stick out any more than he already did.

Arthur quickly solved the hair dilemma by donning a brown derby, while James somehow transfigured his hair until it was light brown and short all over. "It's a natural gift," Potter had explained.

Now that they were nearing the meeting place, Arthur was sure that the man at least suspected he had a trail. After all, it would be terribly costly not to suspect it.

An owl hooted in an alleyway, making all three men stop short. Rodolphus tilted his head as if to check for more noises, causing Arthur to give James a grateful glance for the Silencing Charm he had cast on their shoes.

The dark-haired man in front of them continued to listen, and then moved forward at twice his previous rate of speed. James followed, matching the Death Eater's pace, just as Rodolphus turned a corner.

He was gone.

"He didn't Apparate," James said at once as Arthur caught up with him. "I would have heard him."

"Let's each take a side of the alley and look for clues," Arthur offered.

There were piles of trash propped on the walls of the buildings that made up the alley's boundaries. A thin mist fell from the sky, highlighted by a single bare bulb at the end of the alley, and it carried the already putrescent odour further into their nostrils. Several rats scurried from under a rusted-out skip as they approached.

"Here," said Arthur as his eye caught a partially-opened door. Checking for hexes with a wave of his wand, James pushed on the stout metal door until they could see inside. It started to creak, so Arthur muttered a Silencing Charm, nodding at James to take the lead.

They entered the building and were immediately presented with a flight of rickety stairs. Another Silencing Charm was cast and they ascended.

The wooden stairs gave way to a long hallway, which they followed. There were doors on each side that looked like they were once a set of flats. There were burned-out Muggle devices and more piles of trash in the ones that were open. As they approached the end of the hall, they heard voices from the last open door on the right.

"...Lord will reward you for your service, if you are found worthy," said a man in a gravelly voice.

Creeping along the hall, their backs flat against the peeling wallpaper, they got as close as they dared.

Someone else spoke up with what only could be described as a whine. "But what about the Aurors? I don't want to go to Azkaban."

"Silence!" said the first man. There was a period of quiet where Arthur was sure he could hear whispering, and then there was nothing.

All of a sudden, a large *boom* accompanied by a flash of light knocked Arthur and James down to the ground.

James moaned softly beside him and Arthur could barely see the faces of three menacing figures through the spots in his eyes.

"What do we have here?" drawled a woman somewhere to Arthur's right.

"Looks like a couple of meddling fools," said someone from the left. "A little Cruciatus will teach them not to butt into our business."

James was coherent now and had his wand held loosely in one hand, pushing himself up slowly with his other. Arthur tensed, his vision slowly clearing.

One of the Death Eaters kicked James in the shoulder, forcing him back down, but James had seemed to be expecting that, using the force of the kick to be pushed further down the hall. In a flash, his wand was up, "*Concussus!*" he yelled.

A loud slapping sound knocked all three of the Death Eaters down to the floor, but several more heads appeared from the doorway. Arthur righted himself and ran pell-mell down the hall and towards the stairs. He could hear James hot on his heels and several bolts of light flew past their heads, sizzling as they hit walls and doors.

A dozen wizards appeared in the stairwell, dressed in all black, with white masks. James grabbed Arthur and pulled him through the closest doorway, using his shoulder to force the door.

As soon as they tumbled inside, Arthur shut and magically locked the door with the most advanced Locking Spell he knew. James added an Unbreakable Charm and they heard the pounding of feet echoing in the hall.

"Apparate back to my house," James yelled, transfiguring bits of garbage and broken furniture into large pieces of stone, and propping them against the door. "Go now!"

Arthur focused on the front hallway and twisted his wand. Nothing happened. "Can't – it's warded," Arthur said with a note of panic. "We'll have to fight."

"That means they can't get in here, at least," James said, his face a mask of concentration and dripping with sweat. "Can you make a Portkey?"

"No, sorry," Arthur said. "That's restricted to more senior Ministry officials."

"Right," James said as they heard the door reduced into a million splinters. Another slab of granite was levitated onto the pile. "If we ever get out of this, I'll marry my son off to your daughter." There was brief tenseness in the air as James continued to stack stone in front of the door.

Arthur guessed that James was thinking the same thing that he was – he needed something to focus on, something that he could use to inspire him to fight in the face of an increasingly bad situation. The difference was that Arthur already had six children and James barely had time to be with the one he had. No wonder the offer had been so seriously given.

Transfiguring his own bits of rubbish into stone, Arthur laughed, a strange sound considering their desperate circumstances. "Fine, Potter. But know that I don't have a daughter and there hasn't been a female Weasley in six generations."

James placed the last of the stones against the door and gave Arthur an oddly sombre look. "Fine, fine," he said, holding out his hand. "Do we have a deal?"

Arthur took it and felt a surge of power. He was about to ask if James had felt it, too, when the stones that were keeping them safe exploded with the force of a small bomb.

Dust obscured Arthur's vision, but he could hear struggling off to his right. "*Stupefy!*" came James's voice followed by a *whump*.

A blue jet of light illuminated the room and sent Arthur rolling to his left. He shot a Stunning Spell blindly and heard someone scream. Thinking of his unborn child, Arthur fired off a whirlwind spell and the dust cleared, taking along with it two Death Eaters and slamming them into the wall across the way. In this confusion, he zapped a Muggle machine in the corner, which came to life with an annoying roaring sound as it scuttled about. A few of the Death Eaters turned to hex the hapless machine, giving Arthur an opportunity to incapacitate them with several nicely placed Stunners.

James was duelling with the man they had followed, his wand moving faster than Arthur had ever seen. But the hole in the wall that used to be a door was wide enough to allow several more Death Eaters to enter.

With a surge of determination, Arthur shot a blast of pure white light from his wand. Three Death Eaters were hit and knocked out, the Sleeping Spell doing its job.

James appeared next to Arthur, his opponent left crumpled on the flat's floor with a nasty cut on his head. They worked as a team, covering each other's backs as the four remaining Death Eaters surrounded them. Two had fallen when James let out a scream, followed by a sickening crunch.

"*Avada –*" yelled someone behind Arthur, but he couldn't let himself get distracted. The Death Eater in front of him was very crafty with his tactics and Arthur was having a hard time keeping ahead of the man's spells.

Another loud *whump* sounded and Arthur was sure that James had fallen. Desperate, he flung himself to the right in a half-dive roll, ending up behind a small wall in what was once the kitchen. A spell glanced off the wall, leaving behind the smell of burning paint and plaster.

Outnumbered, Arthur decided to take a risk, banishing a heavy-looking object at his attackers. The dense, square object flew over the wall and slammed into the man Arthur had been duelling. Using the distraction, Arthur jumped up and let off a series of Stunning and Binding hexes.

The remaining Death Eater swatted the spells away, but was forced to move away from the prostrate James. Arthur's partner lay on the floor, his leg sticking out at a strange angle, but he held his wand firmly and was chanting something under his breath.

The Death Eater shot a Cutting Curse at Arthur, who erected a hasty shield in time to deflect it. Another series of spells and Arthur was on the defensive, backing away from James and towards the door.

A giant hand appeared out of nowhere and Arthur heard James let out an almighty groan as his partner pulled the hand in an arc towards the remaining attacker. The hand caught the Death Eater in the back and propelled him into the wall, knocking him unconscious.

Breathing heavily, Arthur stood rooted to the spot, unable to believe that the fight was over. When he didn't hear any more curses, he walked stiltedly over to James and conjured a splint for his leg.

"Thanks," James said through clenched teeth.

"Thank *you*," Arthur replied. "I don't think I would have lasted much longer."

"Oh, tosh," James said with forced laughter. "You had him beat cold. I just didn't want you to think I wasn't going to help, you see."

Arthur cast the counter-spell for the Anti-Apparation Ward and offered a hand to James. "Think you can Disapparate?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Arthur winced as he rolled his shoulders. "I could always leave you here and bring Lily back for help," Arthur said with a wry grin.

"No thanks," James said at once. "I'll take my chances with a splinching."

"You first, then," offered Arthur.

"See you at St. Mungo's." Then with a modest *crack*, James was gone.

Arthur checked to make sure there was no part of James left in the destroyed flat, and decided that he would check with Molly first – there was nothing more terrible than his wife when he neglected to inform her of everything. He concentrated on arriving at the Burrow's front parlour and was gone.

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Far away, in a little, underused office on the second level of the Ministry of Magic, a quill dipped itself into a magically sealed jar and began to scribble a line of words. What was most peculiar about this event was not the words it was writing, so much as it was the fact that it had not written anything for almost a hundred years. For this was the quill that had been enchanted to record all the arranged marriages in all of Wizarding Britain since Merlin set the quill to motion thousands of years ago. It wrote out three lines:

Harry Potter – DOB 31/7/80

Child Weasley – DOB –unknown–estimated at 14/8/81

Binding

The Bargain 1: Birthday Dilemmas

Chapter One – Birthday Dilemma

Thirty-six-year-old Remus Lupin strode carefully down the hall towards the office of Hogwarts' Headmaster, wary of the reason for his summoning. Albus Dumbledore had requested an audience with Remus the previous evening by post owl, but his duties with the Order of the Phoenix and a trip to Diagon Alley that morning for Harry's upcoming seventeenth birthday party kept him from coming before now. Normally, the head of the Order communicated with Remus at the meetings, so it was with some trepidation, and a little bit of nostalgic guilt, that the former Hogwarts student approached the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"Cauldron Cakes," Remus intoned. The Gargoyle opened, exposing a set of stairs and Remus stepped onto them, activating the charm that carried him towards the office doors.

He raised his fist to knock on the faded oak panel but stopped short when Dumbledore's clear voice rang out, "Come in, Remus."

Remus opened the door, revealing Dumbledore's tidy office, containing an array of quietly clicking instruments, a snoozing phoenix, and its generous owner.

"Ah, Remus," Dumbledore began, "I trust your trip was successful?"

Knowing that the elderly wizard was referring to his excursion to Diagon Alley, Remus nodded. "It's not every day your ward turns seventeen."

The ever-present twinkle in the old man's eyes flared for a moment or two. "Indeed. That's actually what I called you here for, Remus." He gestured for Lupin to sit.

Taking the offered chintz armchair, Remus asked, "Oh? Harry's in trouble already? School's not even in session yet." It wouldn't be beyond the scope of reality for Remus to find out that Harry had been involved in some sort of mischief. As good a lad as he was, Harry was the son of a Marauder.

"No, no. Nothing like that," said Dumbledore with a reserved chuckle. "It's actually something to do with a magical contract of sorts."

Remus furrowed his brow, letting the small smile slide off his face. "Magical contract? What kind of contract?"

Dumbledore paused, as if to measure his words carefully, and steepled his fingers under his chin. Remus was instantly on his guard. "What do you recall about the Wizarding Decree of 1016?"

"What?" asked a suddenly perplexed Remus. He certainly hadn't expected *that*.

"The Wizarding Decree of 1016," repeated Dumbledore. "It's obviously very old and has been modified quite a lot by more recent legislation, but...there are a number of statutes stemming from that decree that are in effect today."

"What does this have to do with Harry?" Remus strained his brain for information on the law. He knew that the decree had something to do with how the magical community was to be organized....

"Allow me to be terse, Remus." Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair and brought his hands down to the desk between them. "One of the more archaic forms of Wizarding law is still active through this decree. Specifically, a less acknowledged form of marriage can still be carried out today, if certain qualifications are met."

"Marriage?" Remus said, his ears perking up immediately. "Please don't tell me Harry's gone and got married! He hasn't so much as dated anyone since his fifth year."

Clearing his throat, Dumbledore continued. "Yes, well, *Harry* hasn't tied the knot quite yet, but I'm afraid that it may not be far off in his future."

The colour drained from Lupin's face and he sat back in his chair. "You may as well tell me," he said with a distracted wave of the hand.

"There is a quill in the Ministry, much like the one we use to record the birth of magical children, that documents when arranged marriages between two magical families are made. Sometime in July of 1981, James and Arthur Weasley must have arranged for their children to be married. More specifically, they made the agreement with a magically binding contract."

Remus's mind was reeling. How could something like this have been overlooked? What was James *thinking*? They knew about the prophecy by then; James and Lily must have known what they were getting into. And how did Arthur fit into all of this?

"I see that you have many questions," remarked Dumbledore, interrupting Remus' thoughts. "I will endeavour to answer all of them."

"How did this happen?" Remus blurted. "Why are we just finding out about it now? And...what are we going to tell Harry?"

Dumbledore was silent for a moment, staring out the window. Without looking at Remus, he passed a small glass jar across the desk. "Have a lemon drop. I've found them to be most soothing in a stressful situation."

Almost automatically, Remus popped one into his mouth, letting the tangy sweetness invigorate his senses. *How many times have I eaten one of these in this office?* he mused.

Taking one for himself, Dumbledore turned to him and continued. "I only found out through a twist of luck. It seems that the office where this quill is kept is next door to the assistant for the Magical Transportation Department. I was there yesterday to renew my Apparation license and happened to hear one of the clerks say 'Potter' and 'Weasley'. Well, naturally, my curiosity was piqued and once I finished my business with the Transportation Department, I inquired as to why *those* two names were being mentioned.

"It turns out that the reason no one has known about this until now is that the quill isn't checked regularly. In fact, since there hasn't been an arranged marriage for over a hundred and fifty years, it hasn't been checked at all this century and a new clerk in that office wandered into the room while taking an inventory."

Unable to visualize Harry married to anyone, let alone an arranged one, Remus sat in his chair, completely gobsmacked. Then he realized exactly whom it was that Harry was supposed to be married to. "Have you spoken to Arthur? Does he even know?"

"Actually, according to the law, certain procedures are supposed to be followed. My knowledge could affect the course of events, and I risk severe consequences by even telling you."

Having just regained his colour, Remus blanched again. "What sort of consequences?"

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Dark clouds billowed around a full moon as Harry Potter watched the empty streets of Little Whinging. He would be leaving Privet Drive for good the following morning and, in his excitement, Harry couldn't seem to fall asleep.

Dumbledore had given him permission to finish out the holidays with the Weasleys. He would finally get to spend his birthday with the only family he had known.

With a sigh, he reread a letter he had received from them yesterday.

Harry,

Get your things together and be ready to leave on Monday. Ron and I will be taking you by Portkey at eight o'clock that morning. We'll be aiming for the back garden, so as not to frighten the Muggles. Meet us there and we'll help you say goodbye to that wretched place forever.

Love from,

Ginny

Since the events in the Department of Mysteries over a year ago, Ginny, Neville and, to a certain extent, Luna had been included in with the "trio" more often than not. Ginny had been an important part of the effort to remove Harry's less than cheerful attitude the previous summer, and ever since, she and Harry had fallen into what Harry considered a companionable friendship.

Ginny was the strangest sort of friend, though. Unlike Ron or Hermione, Ginny wasn't afraid to tell Harry off. She had a tendency to make Harry participate in activities even when he didn't want to, and had the most annoying habit of turning up when he wanted to be left alone. The odd thing, in Harry's opinion was that he found he didn't mind.

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As soon as they arrived in the Burrow's garden, Ron grabbed Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage and thrust them at Ginny. "Here, Ginny. Take these upstairs. Harry and I are going to go flying."

Ginny's feathers were immediately ruffled. "I don't bloody well think so. You can take them up yourself. Or Harry, for that matter," she retorted with her fists clenched, as if to make sure Harry's things couldn't pop into her hands if she left them open. "Besides, if there's flying to be had, I'm just as capable as the next person."

"I need to talk with Harry, *alone*," Ron said slowly.

Harry seemed torn and had been looking warily between Ron and Ginny. "Listen, Ginny," he began. "You don't have to take my things up, but let me and Ron talk for about fifteen minutes?" He looked to Ron who nodded in agreement. "Then you can come fly with us."

Ginny weighed her options. It would have been easier to just browbeat Ron into letting her come, but Harry's suggestion seemed reasonable. "All right."

"Great," Ron said happily. "We'll see you later, Ginny."

Ron dragged Harry over to the broom shed to extract his Cleansweep, and then they were off to the Weasleys' makeshift Quidditch pitch.

As Ron and Harry left, Ginny sat on Harry's trunk and propped her chin on her hand to wait. Just then, the door on the side of the house squeaked open and Ginny turned to find Hermione looking back at her. "Enjoying the view?" she teased.

"When did you get here?" Ginny asked, deliberately ignoring her question.

"Just before you did." Hermione motioned for Ginny to budge over and then joined her on Harry's trunk. "I've already taken my things to your room."

Ginny returned her chin to her hand and caught the top of Harry's head as the boys turned to enter the paddock. "What did you get Harry for his birthday?"

"I'm not telling," Hermione answered cheerfully. "But I'm sure he's got what you want for your birthday – he being a male with messy black hair, dreamy green eyes, and a penchant for getting into trouble."

The back of Ginny's hand hit Hermione in the shoulder. "It's not as if I'm pining after him like a lost puppy any more."

"Of course," Hermione placated, but Ginny could tell she wasn't being entirely sincere. "You just keep telling yourself that."

"Well, you're one to talk, aren't you?" Ginny countered. "I mean, if Harry *or* Ron asked you out on a date, would you say no?"

Hermione blushed but otherwise kept her composure. "That's for me to know and for you to find out, Miss Weasley."

"Oh, come off it, Hermione," Ginny said with a giggle. "Everyone knows Ron's got a crush on you and, no matter how close you keep your cards, you have to admit to being attracted to him." She thought about that for a moment and added, "Even if he *is* my brother."

"So you don't think I should ask Harry out? He is quite attractive."

Ginny scowled. "This is not a good day to push my buttons, Hermione."

"Oh, relax, Ginny," Hermione soothed. "I'm not after Harry Potter. Even if you died a horrible, tragic death and he needed the attention that only I could give, I don't think it would work out between us. He's too moody."

Ginny snorted. "How do you know? Maybe he's got a crush on you, but he's holding back because he knows how Ron feels."

Hermione froze, apparently surprised at this thought. Then she shook her head. "No, I don't think so. Harry's not so much as blinked at me *that way*, Ginny."

The mirth left Ginny's laugh and she said, "Yes, well...he hasn't so much as blinked at *me*, either."

"What about Colin?" Hermione asked quietly. "He certainly seems to *keep* looking at you, even after you broke up."

"Colin never grew up."

"Dean?"

"He loved his painting more than me."

"Michael?"

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "Do I have to go over that one with you again?"

"No," Hermione said. "I suppose not."

*

Harry's heart was beating rapidly. The thrill of flying again after five weeks off was a welcome feeling, and he was doing his best to make sure that he made the most of it.

"So, how does it feel to be free?" Ron asked as they continued their game of follow-the-leader.

"Almost as good as grinding Malfoy's face into the pitch," he yelled as he shot past his friend.

"Oi! You're supposed to be *following* the leader, not showing off," Ron said with a smile.

Harry swivelled on his broom until he could see Ron. "If you weren't so ruddy *slow*, I might let you lead more often."

After several minutes of flying, they glided over to a large oak tree and pushed through the branches until they found a small platform high above the ground. Bill had built it when he was thirteen and Ron had discovered it the summer before he left for Hogwarts.

"So, what's on your mind, Ron?" Harry asked quickly.

Ron laid his broom across his lap and sighed. "I'm going to ask Hermione out on a date today."

Harry's expression remained impassive. "About time, mate. How do you think she'll take it?"

Ron wiped his face with his hand and leaned back against the trunk of the tree. "I dunno. I 'spect she'll want to hex me at first, but I'm counting on my wit and charm to win her over."

Harry pursed his lips. "Well then, you're certainly doomed." He looked up suddenly, snapping his fingers in an exaggerated manner. "But Ron... What if she fancies *Malfoy*?"

"*Malfoy*!" spluttered Ron. "What makes you think –"

Unable to help it, Harry dissolved into unrestrained laughter.

"You git!" Ron said as he punched Harry in the shoulder. "I'll eat your Firebolt before Hermione gives him the time of day."

"Yeah," Harry said, regaining his composure. "But eat your own broom. I'm a little partial to mine."

Ron looked to be on the verge of another witty comeback, but the sound of Ginny's voice came across the pitch. "Rooooonn. Haaarrrry."

"Speaking of which," Ron said with a waggle of his eyebrows. "When are you going to ask Ginny out?"

Now it was Harry's turn to splutter. "What are you on about? She's over me and – well, we're just friends."

"Right, Harry. You aren't fooling anyone when you say that." Ron clapped his shoulder and stood. "I saw the way you reacted when she grabbed your leg, you know."

"She didn't *grab* my leg, Ron. She...she *brushed* against it."

Ron straddled his broom and said, "It's my story and I'm sticking with it. Just ask her soon, mate. I'm sure Hermione would love to go on a double with you two." Then he shot off from the platform and crashed through the top branches of the tree.

"You git!" Harry called, shaking his head and laughing.

*

That Thursday was Harry's birthday. The day was filled with presents, friends and, best of all, loads of Harry's favourite foods. Fred and George made a token appearance, enchanting the candles on the birthday cake to sing shrilly after they were blown out for the first time. Luna Lovegood visited from the village to wish him a happy birthday and to give Ron a kiss on the cheek. Hermione didn't look happy with that at all.

As the birthday dinner was finishing up, Harry secluded himself on a wicker chair near the garden. He propped his legs on a matching ottoman and linked his fingers behind his head. Mr. Weasley had cast an Insect Repellent Charm over the whole garden, so he heard only a few, distant buzzing noises outside of the chattering partygoers.

When the guests finally filtered away from the tables, Mrs. Weasley banished the dishes and joined in with the mingling.

Harry let a contented smile slip onto his face and he sunk down further into the cushions on the chair.

"You've had quite a birthday, Harry," said Remus Lupin, as he approached with a drink in his hand.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "It's been the best I've ever had, actually."

Lupin sat down across from Harry on a wicker loveseat. "I'm glad you've enjoyed it, because now I've got some information for you that will most likely be difficult to deal with."

Harry tensed up immediately. "What do you mean? Is Voldemort doing anything? I haven't felt anything in my scar..."

"No," Lupin answered with a deadpanned expression. "It's not anything to do with Voldemort. It's something much more frightening than that."

"*More* frightening?" Harry asked, straightening up in his seat and setting his feet firmly on the ground.

"Well," said Lupin, scratching his chin, "judging by how you've been acting around her tonight, you might take to the idea better than I thought."

Harry shook his head, thinking that his guardian had lost his marbles. "Uncle Remus...what *are* you talking about?" Harry asked, using their agreed-upon title.

"Have you heard of the Wizarding Decree of 1016?" Lupin asked, quoting Dumbledore from a few days ago.

"The...what? I'm sorry, but I think you've hit your head. Are you feeling well?"

Remus chuckled. "Yes, Harry. I'm fine. I'm talking about the decree that formed the Ministry of Magic and codified just about every line of Wizarding law at the time."

Still dubious about Remus's mental condition, Harry said, "Um...no? I must have slept through Binns's lesson that day."

"Well, one of the things that that statute provided for was arranged marriages."

"All right," said Harry, waiting for the other shoe to drop. "You're not going to tell me that my dad arranged for me to marry Pansy Parkinson or something, are you?"

Remus hesitated and a shiver of fear ran up Harry's spine. "Actually...that's not far from the truth."

"Which part?" whispered Harry. "Marriage, or Pansy?"

"Marriage. According to the Office of Ancient Wizarding Customs, you are to be married to Ginevra Molly Weasley."

Something in Harry's mind froze and nothing he did could wipe Ginny's face from his mind. "Ginny?" he finally said. "And me? How?"

"I don't have all of the details, but the agreement was made sometime in July of 1981, just before Ginny was born. Dumbledore stumbled upon it a few days ago and, according to the list of prescribed procedures and rules, you have to be informed by your legal guardian, me, by your seventeenth birthday, today. Ginny has to be told by you and you are to be wed by her next birthday. No one else is supposed to speak of it until the bride and groom are notified, or the arrangement will be voided and the punishment inflicted."

Harry's mind was spinning. "Procedures? I have to tell her... Punishment? What's the punishment?"

For the first time since Harry had known him, Remus looked frightened. "Well...you see... If you break any of the rules – there are almost a hundred by the way – or if you and Ginny don't wed by her next birthday... You both will lose your ability to...have relations with anyone."

Harry blanched. "WHAT? WHAT DO YOU MEAN I WON'T BE ABLE TO HAVE –"

"*Silencio*," Remus intoned with a flick of his wand. Harry's voice immediately disappeared, though his mouth continued to move. Several of the party guests turned and looked oddly at him before returning to their drinks and conversations.

After a moment, Harry stopped trying to speak, but motioned vigorously towards his neck.

Remus ended the spell by tapping his wand on Harry's throat and Harry, more calmly, said, "Thank you. Now would you please explain to me why I've got to marry Ginny Weasley or my...my...*thing* won't work any more?"

"It's out of my control, Harry. According to the law, you've got to marry her by her next birthday *and*, er...consummate the marriage within thirty-six hours of the ceremony, or you...well, you become impotent and she instantly becomes menopausal. You'll be like a simmering pot of hormones for the rest of your life but will never be able to act on your urges."

Harry moaned slowly. "What in the name of Merlin did I do to get into this? Who did this to me? There's really *nothing* at all I can do?" He was pulling at his face with his hands, desperately trying to come to terms with his situation.

"No one knows, except perhaps Arthur," Remus replied.

Harry shot out of his chair, his eyes finding the patriarch of the Weasley family standing next to his wife, talking with Hermione and Ron. He took two steps before Remus's arms were around him.

"Hold on, there, Harry. Remember the rules? You can't tell *anyone* before you tell Ginny. Only after that can we ask Arthur what happened – assuming he remembers."

Harry stopped struggling and Remus let go of his arms. "How do we know that Dumbledore's knowledge hasn't already tripped the punishment?" Harry asked.

"Are you...fully functional?" Remus asked with a straight face.

Harry was caught off-guard by the question, but remembering his all-too-lucent dreams that morning, flushed red and nodded. "So what do I have to do?"

"Talk to Ginny. Find someplace quiet and secluded, try to set the mood so that she's relaxed, and then tell her."

"Just like that?" asked Harry.

"Just like that," confirmed Remus.

"But her birthday is in *twelve* days! How are we supposed to get married in *twelve* days?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something, Harry."

The Bargain 2: Telling Ginny

Chapter Two – Telling Ginny

To say that Harry was worried about Ginny's reaction to the news that they had to be married in twelve days was a definite understatement. He was downright terrified.

Remus left Harry to return to mingling with the partygoers, so Harry decided to walk around in an attempt to clear his mind. Maybe the cool dusk air would somehow inspire him.

"Hello, Harry," said Luna, who had found him prowling next to the hedges surrounding the garden. She was wearing a bright yellow set of robes with Butterbeer corks sewn onto the hem. "Lovely party."

"Thanks, Luna," said Harry with a small smile. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Yes, well," she began, "it's not every day that you get to spend an evening in the company of a Weasley, now, is it?" Ron had been manoeuvred into dancing with Luna twice by Harry's count, and despite his own problems, Harry had to grin.

"I suppose not," Harry said as Ginny passed by behind her, catching his eye for a second.

Luna sighed. "You pursue your Weasley and I'll pursue mine," she said airily and walked off.

"Wait a minute," said Harry to her retreating form, waving uselessly after her. "I'm not –"

Harry held his arm out for a moment after she disappeared, feeling foolish for yelling.

As he lowered his arm and turned around, he almost ran into Ginny, who was watching Ron try to dodge Luna's persistent advances. She wore a wry smile on her face and held two glasses in her hand. "Care for some punch? Talking with Luna can dry the mouth out like nothing else," she said, pushing one of the cups into Harry's hand.

"Um, thanks," he said, taking an obligatory sip. "Are you, uh...having a good time?" Harry felt stupid; he was acting as if this were the first time he had ever met her, but thankfully, Ginny didn't seem to notice.

She smiled. "I am, actually. The punch is good, the cake wasn't charmed to make us all sprout extra heads, and even Mum seems to be handling all the guests well." Her smile dimmed and she reached out a hand for Harry's shoulder. "But there's something wrong with you, isn't there? I can tell. You seem a little guarded."

Nervously looking at the ground, Harry said, "Do I? Um, well... yes, I suppose I am a little nervous."

"Care to talk about it?" Ginny asked.

Harry looked back at her face and was grateful they had been friends the past year, or their impending conversation would be even more unbearable. Still, he wasn't quite ready to broach the subject with her.

"I'd actually like a chance to think about it some more, if that's all right," Harry said. "For reasons that won't be clear until we talk, you're the only one I *can* actually talk with about it."

Ginny's hand slipped off of his arm. "Well, just let me know when you're ready to talk," she said with a curious glance and walked past him.

Harry drained his drink and located the punch bowl, looking for a refill. Working up the courage to tell a girl they needed to get married was thirsty work. Before long, he found himself back in the seat he'd been in when Remus had unloaded the news on him in the first place.

After a few minutes of quiet rumination, Ron plopped down across from him, in the seat that had been recently occupied by Remus. "Are you going to just sit here for the rest of the night," Ron began, "or are you going to have some fun?"

Harry blinked. "I think I will just sit here, actually. In fact... that's a perfectly reasonable solution."

Sending his friend a concerned glance, Ron took Harry's glass from the small table and sniffed at it. "Not spiked," he said to himself. "You feeling all right, mate? You look well out of it to me."

Turning back to look at Ron, Harry shook his head. "I couldn't even begin to tell you, Ron. Remus just dropped a very large..." Harry paused as he tried to figure out how he was going to tell Ron without triggering the punishment. "A very large problem in my lap just now and I'm having a tough

time sorting through it.”

Ron placed Harry’s drink back on the table and leaned back into his chair. “You want to talk about it?”

With a sigh, Harry mimicked his friend, reclining in his chair. “I can’t. It’s part of the problem, actually.”

“Well, is it about You-Know-Who?” Ron whispered, inching forward a bit.

“Nah,” said Harry with a wave of his hand. “It’s much worse than that. But don’t try to figure it out.” A musical laugh resonated across the field and Harry’s eyes instantly found Ginny’s smiling face. “As soon as I tell her, I can tell you.”

Ron looked to where Harry’s gaze was fixed and back to Harry. “What’s this got to do with my sister?” he asked in a slightly colder voice. “She’s not in trouble, is she?”

Harry let out a hollow laugh and forced himself to look away from Ginny. “Actually, I’m the one that’s going to be in trouble.”

Ron knocked back the rest of his punch with a loud swallow and set the glass down on the table next to Harry’s. “Personally, I think that if it hasn’t got anything to do with Lord Nutters, then you’d better thank your lucky stars.” He rose and stretched, then jabbed a thumb in Ginny’s direction. “Oh, and Harry? Stop staring at my sister’s bum.”

Harry’s face heated. “What are you on about?” he hollered. “I’m not staring at her. I’m not even thinking about her.”

“Whatever you say, Harry. I’m off to find Hermione,” he said with a significant look. “Wish me luck.” Ron walked back to the knots of people milling around the food table, presumably to find their bushy-haired friend.

Harry rose as well, but headed for the small hill that overlooked the village, grateful he was of age now and could cast his own Insect Repellent Charms. The lights of the village were just now coming on as the sun set on the horizon, already masked by the trees in the distance. The air seemed sweeter here and the music from the party filtered up to his ears.

Having only closed his eyes for a second, Harry was slightly startled when he heard someone say, “Mind if I sit here?”

Blinking his eyes open, Harry found Ginny sitting next to him, her back to the same tree as his. “Of course you can sit here. You live here, after all.”

Ginny looked thoughtful and said, “Well, you live here too, you know. Mum wouldn’t have it any other way and since you don’t have to go back to your aunt’s again, and since you have to sleep somewhere....”

Pulling himself forward, Harry broke off a few blades of grass from the ground and twirled them in his hand. “I suppose you’re right. Your family means the world to me, you know?”

Her hand slipped into his and Harry’s stomach seemed to drop to the ground. “I know, Harry,” Ginny said with a smile. “You mean the world to us, too.”

They looked into each other’s eyes for a moment before Harry’s gaze fell to their hands. “There’s something I need to tell you, Ginny... something big, and I don’t know exactly how to say it.”

Ginny squeezed his hand and said, “Whatever it is, Harry, it sounds like it’s got to be said. So just tell me.”

Harry looked up again and found her smirk entirely too cute for what was about to happen. “All right. But you have to promise two things. First, don’t interrupt me until I’ve finished and second... no hexing me. It’s not my fault.”

To Harry’s consternation, her smile only increased. “Well, that’s a switch. Harry Potter admitting that something isn’t his fault.”

“You’re laughing now, but I guarantee you won’t be in a few minutes,” Harry said.

Ginny’s smile fell, and she gave him a penetrating stare. “What could possibly be so terrible, Harry? Just tell me,” she pleaded.

Taking a deep breath, Harry cleared his mind and began. “There’s this ancient Wizarding tradition that’s apparently still legal, and our fathers, yours and mine,” he said, pointing a thumb at her, then him, “somehow invoked it just before you were born. There’s no way to get out of the bargain once it’s been made without activating this whopping bad hex. I’m the only one that can tell you and no one can say anything about it until I have, so we can’t ask your father anything at all until I’ve told you.”

“Harry,” Ginny interrupted. “You still haven’t told me what *it* is.”

“Right,” Harry said. “You see...we, um...have to get married.”

Silence was his only answer as Ginny stared dumbly at him.

“Ginny?”

The expression of confusion that had momentarily been jammed on her face cleared. “You’re joking, right?” she blurted. “This is a joke and you’re really Fred or George and you’ll change back and yell ‘GOTCHA!’, right?” Ginny buried her face in her hands and whispered, “Tell me you’re joking.”

A burning glob of bile swelled in Harry's throat. "I'm not that bad, am I? I mean, it's not like I planned this, you know."

"No, Harry. You don't understand," Ginny replied shakily, her face still hidden.

"Then explain it to me," Harry said, getting more and more aggravated by her reaction.

"I can't, Harry. It's not that simple, and I'm not sure I understand myself."

Harry stood and started to pace in front of the tree. "Well, let me finish telling you the rest of our situation. Not only do we have to get married, but we have to do it by your birthday." Ginny was watching Harry, and he saw the colour drain from her face. "Oh, it gets better," he continued. "If we don't get married, or don't...how did Remus put it? If we don't consummate our marriage within thirty-six hours of the ceremony, or don't follow a whole host of crazy rules, your body's time clock goes forward forty years and my... er... *thing* stops working. Forever."

"My birthday is in less than twelve days!" Ginny exclaimed. She brought her knees up and folded her arms across them, letting her head sink onto her arms. "It's too fast," she muttered.

"I know!"

Ginny's head jerked up. "You know when my birthday is?"

"Of course I know," Harry said testily. "That's not the issue here."

"There's no need to get shirty with me, Harry," she told him calmly.

"Well, if you'd show a little bit of sympathy here, I might be calmer about it," he retorted.

Ginny stood, brushed her skirt off and pinned Harry with a steely gaze. Harry stopped pacing.

"Listen here, *Mister* Potter. Neither of us asked for this. This isn't just about you anymore, so I'd appreciate it if you'd consider someone other than yourself for a minute."

Harry guffawed. "I would if you'd tell me what you have against being married to me!"

"It's complicated!" she shot back. "I'm not even sixteen yet. Do you expect me to just jump into your arms, smile, bat my eyelashes and fall in love with you?"

"Well, no," Harry spluttered. "But you could at least not act as though I'm half-troll or you're about to be sick or something."

Ginny narrowed her eyes and stepped up to Harry. "With the way you've been acting, it'd be no small surprise if we found out you were half-troll."

"Hey!" Harry said as she strode past him. "At least I'm trying here."

Ginny stopped and turned around to face him. "You're right," she said with a sigh. "I'm sorry. It's just that I can't quite grasp this whole situation."

"Tell me about it."

"All right," Ginny said with a sudden grin. "I will. You know all about my crush on you, so you know I've had...feelings for you ever since I was a little girl."

Harry nodded, not entirely sure where this conversation was going.

"Hermione told me she said I had given up on you. Is that right?"

He nodded again.

One of Ginny's fingers found a piece of her long red hair and began to pull on it absently. "When I said that, I had mostly reckoned that you would never be attracted to me that way. So I started dating other fellows..."

"Michael Corner, Dean Thomas, and Colin Creevey," Harry said, counting them off on his fingers, giving a small shudder at the last name.

She smiled. "That's right," she said. "You and I had become pretty good friends, and when I was dating Dean, I reckoned that it was better to be your friend than to not be anything to you. When I broke up with Colin, I realized something, though. I realized that none of the boys I was dating were what I needed and that what I needed, you had, Harry."

Looking at Ginny then, the rising moon sending a pale glow around her face, Harry had to wonder why he hadn't ever used the word 'pretty' to describe her. "I have something you need?" he asked, his voice sounding strange to his ears.

"Yes, Harry. I realized that I'm still powerfully attracted to you."

Harry swallowed as she moved closer to him.

"But what you've just told me.... What we've got to do in twelve days. It's just...it's just crazy, Harry." Ginny put her hands on his bare arms and a shiver ran up his spine. "Do you see how crazy it is?"

"Barking mad," Harry said. "The whole concept. But you do understand the consequences, don't you? What's going to happen if we don't get married?"

Ginny's hands fell away from his arms and wound around her chest. "Yes. Mum went through menopause a couple of years ago. I'm all too familiar with the effects. Poor Dad, he really bore the brunt of the changes, though."

Harry shrugged and said, "Yeah, well, according to Remus, it's not just menopause, the urges won't go away, either. So imagine being ravenously hungry, having piles of food in front of you, smelling it, watching other people eating it, but your mouth is sealed shut and you can't ever get it open to taste it."

Ginny made a face. "That would be miserable," she said.

Looking over her shoulder, Harry noticed that the lights in the Burrow had come on and people were filtering inside. "Listen, Ginny. I know this isn't going to be easy, but let's at least think about it, all right?"

"Just tell me one thing, Harry," Ginny said, pushing on his chin until he was looking at her. "How do you feel about me? Could you...could you love me?"

Harry fought off a flush of embarrassment. "Could I? Well, of course I could," he said, looking back at the Burrow. "It's not like you're ugly or anything."

"*What?*" she screeched. "So I'm just another pretty face to the great Harry Potter?"

"N-No," Harry stammered, back-peddalling. "I mean, you're my friend. I just haven't really ever looked at you that way before."

"No," Ginny repeated, still shooting daggers at him. "I suppose that's the problem, isn't it?"

She turned to leave, but Harry caught her arm. "Hey! What did I say?" he asked, grasping for control of the conversation.

"When you've sorted out how you feel about me, then we'll talk about this, all right? Until then, I'd suggest you leave me alone."

Ginny struggled to release Harry's grasp, but he wasn't finished. "How I feel about you? You've never told me how you feel about me! Why do I have to be the one to sort things out first?"

A wicked grin flashed on Ginny's face. "You don't get it, do you, Harry? You're the wizard, I'm the witch. You have the obligation to initiate things. I don't even have a ring yet."

She made another attempt to leave, but Harry tightened his grip on her arm. Ginny grimaced and flung out her other hand. A bolt of yellow light flew from her fingers and zapped Harry below the belt.

"AHH!" yelled Harry, releasing Ginny and falling to the ground.

Then, without another glance at Harry, Ginny strode swiftly down the hill and into the Burrow.

"What just happened here?" Harry asked himself, as he examined the smoking hole in his trousers.

*

On the verge of both crying and screaming as many profanities as she could recall, Ginny stormed down the hill and through the tight knots of party guests. She ignored Hermione and Luna as they approached her from different directions, concern on the former's face, airy indifference on the latter's. Reaching the Burrow, Ginny flung open the kitchen door and raced for her room, where she could finally allow her control to slip.

Once the door was shut, she let out a feral cry and grabbed the first sufficiently heavy thing that was within reach, her Charms spellbook. It flew across the room and slammed into the wall, leaving a sizeable dent in the plaster, then bounced onto her bed.

It wasn't enough.

Ginny grabbed her book bag and slung it around until the contents were strewn across the floor. Then she kicked at her chair and winced at the stabbing pain in her toe.

"Sodding Harry Potter!" she yelled, balling her fists and sinking to the floor.

Her door sprung open and Ginny heard her mother suck in a breath. "What in the name of Merlin...?"

Ginny didn't answer, too afraid of letting loose with the many epithets swirling around in her head. Instead, she let her hair fall in front of her face and vainly hoped that her mother would leave well enough alone.

Instead, her mum pushed the strewn quills and parchment out of the way and sat awkwardly down on the floor in front of her. "Ginny? What's got you upset, dear? Did I hear Harry's name?"

A twitch started in Ginny's eye at the mention of *his* name. Still, she remained silent, though her breathing was now becoming more rapid with the effort to not scream.

Come here, pumpkin," Molly's voice said soothingly and she took her daughter into her arms.

Ginny let her, not really caring at first, but as her mum's hands rubbed her back, she found herself relaxing. Her fists unclenched and her emotions rushed towards the opposite end of the spectrum. Tears blurred her vision and Ginny gave a great shuddering sigh.

"I really do love him," Ginny said into her mum's shoulder, not really talking to anyone. "He's kind and caring and brave and..." She sighed again. "Such a great, stupid pillock."

Molly's hands stilled and she pushed Ginny away slowly, looking into her eyes. "What did Harry do, sweetheart?"

Ginny pushed her hair out of her face, wiped her eyes and said, "It's really not his fault. It's sort of Dad's fault."

"Arthur?" Molly asked. "What does your father have to do with Harry?"

With a grimace, Ginny thought quickly. She didn't want her father to get into trouble with her mum, but all the same, he was the one responsible for this mess. "Well, he sort of promised Harry's father that we'd be married and that promise is kind of...binding."

The colour drained from Molly's face. "You mean like an arranged marriage?" she said, her voice rising in pitch at the last word.

Ginny nodded. "Exactly like that, except...there's all these rules and – and punishments if we don't do things exactly right, and I don't think there's a way out of it."

Molly's jaw was set and she was staring at a point somewhere over Ginny's shoulder.

"Mum?" Ginny asked quietly. "Don't hurt Dad too badly. I know this is all really sudden, but the last part of the arrangement is that we have to be married by my next birthday or..."

Her mother's eyes were getting wider and wider as Ginny spoke and when she stopped, Molly said, "Yes? Or what?"

"Or," Ginny said tentatively, "or Harry and I both lose the ability to make babies."

Ginny had never seen her mother's face go from white to red so fast, nor had she ever seen Molly move quite as quickly as she did just then. The door to Ginny's bedroom was blasted open, leaving it dangling precariously on one twisted hinge. Molly was at the bottom of the stairs before Ginny could even get off the floor.

*

Having discharged his duty to inform Ginny of their mutual predicament, Harry made a beeline for Arthur. The eldest Weasley was fiddling with the wireless receiver by the punch bowl, and as Harry approached, seemed to find the station he was looking for. A slow parade of music came out of the unit and the dancing resumed.

"Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked tentatively.

Turning around to face Harry, Arthur set his drink down and said, "Ah, Harry. How does it feel to be an adult?"

"Absolutely corking," Harry deadpanned. "Do you mind if Remus and I have a word with you?"

Remus had apparently spotted Harry and Arthur and was making his way over from where he had been dancing with Tonks.

"Well," Arthur started uncertainly, "of course, Harry. What can I do for you?"

Remus arrived and gave Harry a significant glance. Harry nodded and said, "I told her, Remus. She left a nice little something to remember her by, too."

When Harry pointed to the charred hole in his trousers and the red mark on his leg, Remus bit his lips together and said, "Yes, that can happen."

"Who did that?" asked Arthur. "It wasn't Ginny, was it?"

"Actually," Harry replied, "that's precisely what I need to ask you about."

Arthur looked from Harry to Remus and back again. "We'd better get ourselves a drink, then. This sounds too serious to be without some lubrication."

Remus raised his eyebrows but followed Arthur as they all re-filled their cups at the punch bowl.

Once they were settled on some chairs, Harry started in. "What do you know about the Wizarding Decree of 1016?"

*

"Let me get this straight," Arthur said ten minutes later. "Your father and I made a binding, arranged, magical marriage. Now you've got to marry my daughter by her next birthday, or you both become the equivalent of an unwilling monk and nun?"

Harry's face was in his hands and Remus sighed. "That about sums it up," he replied for Harry.

"What we'd like to know," Harry said, bringing his head back up, "is how on earth did this all happen? Did you really pledge to marry your daughter off to me?"

Arthur hesitated and opened his mouth, as if to say something. Then he closed it again and let out a breath. This repeated a few more times before he finally said, "I'm not entirely sure. There was one time James and I were on an assignment for the Order. He may have said something like, 'I'll marry my son to your daughter if we get out of this alive' but...I didn't think it would be of any significance. I mean, it's just one of those things you say in moments like that."

Harry snorted and Remus leaned back in his chair, folding his arms and stretching out his legs. "Well, it seems that it *was* a binding contract, Arthur. You and James made a pledge. You were both purebloods, you shook hands on it, and you both survived the ordeal, making the contract binding."

When Remus finished, Arthur drained the rest of his drink and with one word summed up how Harry felt. "Blimey."

"I'll say. So, what do I do now?" asked Harry. "Ginny's mad at me for Merlin knows what. She doesn't want anything to do with me, let alone get married to me, and we've got twelve days to sort this out before I lose the ability to do something I haven't even had the chance to do yet!"

Both Arthur and Remus started chuckling, annoying Harry even more. "Ginny's an emotional young lady, Harry," Arthur soothed. "Much like her mother, if there's any doubt, but I..."

However, Arthur didn't get a chance to finish, for out of the Burrow came the very person they were discussing. Molly Weasley was walking as fast as Harry had ever seen her move without running, and as she made her way to their location, Harry could hear the same high-pitched, high-volume voice that made her Howlers legendary.

"ARTHUR HAROLD WEASLEY! What in the name of Merlin were you thinking? How utterly careless and irresponsible could one wizard be? Selling off his daughter's love to a family we hardly knew!"

As Molly approached, Arthur rose to his feet, hands behind his back and head bowed. Remus and Harry rose also, in a show of solidarity, though Harry thought that many of Molly's points quite closely summed up his own feelings on the matter.

"Now, Molly, dear," Arthur began, when she had stopped in front of him.

"Don't you 'Molly, dear' me. I've half a mind to hex your bits so they don't work properly, either." Arthur blanched, but Molly wasn't finished. "And what's worse? We have twelve days to figure something out. *Twelve days!*"

"Yes, Molly, you see...."

"I don't want to hear one word of excuse from you," she said, her finger wagging accusingly at him. "We need to go to the Minister and have this whole affair overturned at once. It's the only proper thing to do."

"W-Well," Arthur spluttered. "It's not that simple, I'm afraid."

Remus, apparently seeing that Molly was ready to have another go at Arthur, stepped into the conversation. "As egregious as this is, he's right, Molly. Dumbledore took a look at the rules and it's quite explicit that any attempt to break the contract would result in the immediate inflicting of the punishment. There are only two outcomes to this, I'm afraid."

Molly looked from Remus to a thoroughly dejected Arthur, and finally, to Harry. "Oh, my dear boy," she said, and enveloped him in a tight hug. "And you don't even have parents here to demand explanations from."

She pulled away, but kept her arms around him. "We'll think of something, Harry. You and Ginny will be all right, no matter what we have to do."

For the first time since Remus had appeared at his party, Harry felt a small surge of hope that, even though his friendship with Ginny was currently ruined, they would find a way to mend things.

"As for you, Arthur," Molly said, releasing Harry and turning to face her husband. "I don't expect to see you darken the doorway to our bedroom for at least a week."

She turned on her heel and walked stiffly, slowly, proudly back to the Burrow. Remus's eyes were dancing and Arthur was doing a reasonable impression of a goldfish.

"Well, Harry," Remus said. "Do try to get some sleep tonight. I suspect that things will be much better after some rest."

Not the least bit convinced, Harry reluctantly followed Molly and walked into the Burrow. When he entered the kitchen, Ron and Hermione were waiting for him.

"Quick, Harry," Hermione whispered, shooting a nervous glance at the stairs. "You had better come with us to the living room."

"All right," Harry said, but was instantly quieted by Hermione's frantically waving arms.

"Shhh," she hissed. "Come on."

He followed them into the living room and sat on the sofa across from the loveseat they occupied. "What's going on?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't really know."

Then, for the third time that evening, he related how his father had left him an inheritance, but that the inheritance was neither wealth, nor property, only an unending headache involving another redhead in the life of a Potter.

When Harry had finished, Ron's jaw was threatening to hit the table, Hermione was looking like someone who would rather be eating glass and Harry just wanted to be asleep. Then, without warning, Hermione rose and walked over to the fireplace.

"Where are you going?" Ron asked, now apparently capable of coherent speech.

Hermione grabbed a handful of Floo powder and, acting as if he hadn't said anything, said, "Light a fire for me, Ron."

"Tell me where you're going first," he demanded, but took out his wand just the same.

"To the Ministry. We've got to *do* something."

"Do something?" he replied. "What could we possibly do? Harry's in a mess bigger than anything we've ever dealt with before and charging into an empty Ministry building isn't going to help."

Hermione set her jaw and said, "You light that fire and I'll worry about what's useless and what's not, Ronald Weasley."

With a flick of his wand, a cheery fire burned in the grate and Hermione was gone in a flash of green flames.

"Completely mad, she is," Ron said, returning to his spot on the sofa.

"Yeah," agreed Harry. "But you have to love her."

Ron crooked an eyebrow and said, "Is that why you're upset with this whole marriage thing? Because you love Hermione?"

It had been a source of endless amusement for Harry and Ron to tease each other about the other one being in love with Hermione. "Nah," said Harry with the wave of a hand. "She's too bossy for me. You, on the other hand, need a girl like that in your life to keep you humble."

"Me?" Ron said with feigned shock. "I like my girls curvy and quiet."

"Yeah, right," Harry said noncommittally. "You and Victor Krum."

"What's Vicky got to do with anything?" Ron retorted. Harry thought he could see the humour leave Ron's eyes.

"I'm just saying that you both have similar taste in women, and they don't involve curves *or* quiet." Harry smirked at his friend's silence, but was instantly regretful when Ron turned the tables.

"So you must be right happy with this whole thing with Ginny." The smug look on Ron's face made him sick. "I mean, you've been pining over her for at least a year and now you've got your chance to ask her properly."

"Since when did the idea of me and your sister appeal to you so much?" Harry asked to deflect the attack.

Ron's smile, if it were possible, widened. "So, you admit it? You do fancy her?"

"Even if I did," Harry temporized, "she's not exactly tripping over herself to get to me, now, is she?"

Ron sat back in his seat and his grin changed from an expression of sadistic pleasure to a grimace. "No, I suppose not. One thing about Weasley women you've got to learn is how to distract them from what they think they want with what they really want."

"Huh?" Harry asked, thoroughly confused.

"If you know what a girl wants," Ron started explaining more slowly, "but she's upset at you for something stupid, say...you said she looked fat – then all you have to do is give her what she wants in the first place."

"Ron," Harry said, shaking his head. "You aren't making a bit of sense."

"What I'm saying is, you know she wants you – you know she wants you to sweep her off her feet and do things properly. Make the best of the situation and she'll forget all about how much she hates you right now."

Harry rubbed at his temples with his middle fingers and pushed his headache out through his nostrils. "So how do I know this? What makes you so sure that she wants me in the first place?"

The smug look returned to Ron's face and he tapped his head. "I'm her brother, I understand how a Weasley thinks; I live above her, I hear almost everything that's said in her room. I've got inside information."

Ron walked into the kitchen and leaving Harry sitting and wondering why in the world Ginny would want anything to do with him – especially now that he'd messed things up so badly.

The Bargain 3: Reconciliations

Chapter Three – Reconciliations

When Ginny awoke the next morning, the first thing she did was make sure that Hermione was still asleep. Hermione's face was buried in her covers, but her breathing made it clear that she sleeping soundly; she had been up late last night and hadn't come to bed until the wee hours of the morning. The second thing Ginny did was to remember that she had less than twelve days to straighten things out with Harry Potter – either to marry him or suffer the consequences.

As she sat on her bed, a dim light washing through her curtains, Ginny's eyes searched through the mess that was her bedroom floor for her dressing gown. It was underneath a pile of used parchment and a cracked bottle of ink. Ginny leaned down to pick it up and carefully moved the ink bottle onto a bit of parchment.

Because the size of the crack was so small, the ink had only run out in small drops and her dressing gown was only marred by a few small splotches on it. Her mum would be able to get those out in a snap, so Ginny wrapped it around her thin body, tied it closed, and then walked downstairs.

"Good morning, dear," Molly said cheerfully when Ginny arrived in the kitchen. "Have a good sleep?"

Ginny sat heavily on one of the chairs at the table and gave her mother a withering stare. "Do you have to ask?"

Molly lit a fire on one of the burners and set a heavy iron skillet on it. "No," she responded. "I suppose not."

Soon, eggs and toast were heaped on large platters and Ginny found herself helping her mum set the table, a chore she performed like any other morning.

"It's not all that bad, you know," Ginny's mum said.

Ginny set a fork down and looked up to her. "Really? I'm not sure how much worse it could get. Maybe you could help me see what's *not* bad about it?"

"Mind your tongue, Ginny Weasley. I'm still your mum. Sulking about things you can't change won't make them better."

Ginny let out a lingering breath. "I'm sorry, Mum. You're right. I'm just not ready for a commitment like this. For crying out loud, I'm only fifteen!"

Molly finished with the plates and took the remaining silverware from Ginny's hand. "And a wise fifteen-year-old, who knows her limits but wants more than what she's got," she replied. "Age has nothing to do with making difficult decisions."

Taking the nearest chair out, Ginny sat down and started to push a knife back and forth on the tablecloth. "What am I going to do? I used to fancy Harry, then I walled him out of my heart because he would never feel the same way about me; I still don't know how he feels about me, and I'm completely confused about what to do now. I mean... it's twelve bloody days – I just can't do it, Mum!"

Her mother put the last of the forks in their places and caught Ginny's eye. "You need to sort out your feelings, of course, and I think that you need a proper courtship for that to happen. You can't rush headlong into marriage, arranged or not." Molly cast a heating charm on the food and stood behind Ginny. Reaching out her hand, she pulled Ginny's hair back into a loose ponytail and said, "Let him come to you, Ginny. He's a bright boy and he'll eventually see what a wonderful, attractive, and independant young woman you are. We just have to hope that 'eventually' is sooner rather than later."

Snorting, Ginny let her mother buoy her spirits, even if she thought staying in the comforting depths of self-pity was the better option.

*

Harry's morning was scarcely better. Instead of an anxious mother, he had to deal with a best friend who also happened to be the brother of the girl he was supposed to marry.

For the first time since Harry had known him, Ron had woken up before Harry. The first thing that Harry saw upon waking was Ron, sitting on the end of his bed, arms folded, giving Harry the most penetrating stare he had ever received.

"Uh, g'morning?" Harry ventured.

Ron didn't respond, other than pinching his lips together even more tightly than they already were.

"I'll just head to the loo, then," Harry said, edging past Ron and making his way downstairs to the floor that held the girls' room and the bathroom.

As Harry set foot on the landing, he caught sight of Ginny walking downstairs, but didn't dare call out to her. Instead, he stopped where she had been and allowed her lingering scent to fill his nostrils. *Why did girls have to smell so good?* he mused.

After using the bathroom, Harry returned to Ron's bedroom to pull on some socks and his dressing gown over his pyjamas, while a fully dressed Ron waited for him by the door.

"You need to say something, Ron?" Harry asked. "I'd rather you get whatever it is off your chest so we can work it out."

Ron stared at Harry for another moment, and then said, "Do you want to marry my sister?"

Harry met his gaze and, feeling a sense of dread fill him, said, "Well, it's not like I've got a lot of choice right now, really."

"Listen," Ron said in the sternest voice that Harry had ever heard from him. "Forget about what you *have* to do. Tell me what you *want* to do."

Having never before considered the question, Harry took a second to think about it. Then looking back up to his friend, said, "I don't know." He walked over to Ron's dresser and looked at himself in the mirror. His hair fell untidily on his head, his face had lost most of the softness of youth and his shoulders had grown as broad as he remembered Cedric Diggory's had ever been. "I mean...Ginny's been a good friend for a while now. She's funny and smart and...well...pretty." Harry turned back to Ron and held out his hands. "Why can't I just see where things naturally lead?"

Ron relaxed his arms and nodded solemnly. "Why not? I'll tell you why, you dozy dough-head, because you don't really have the luxury of time. One thing I do know, however, is that you've got to go into this with a decision made. Either decide that you want to marry my sister, or that you don't. If you get wishy-washy, Ginny will eat you alive."

Once again, Harry looked inside himself and drew up an image of Ginny in his mind. She was laughing, telling him off for sulking, giving him a playful look, and all the other pleasant things that he had seen her do over the past two years. Try as he might, he couldn't conjure up a picture of her that wasn't delightful. *Do I want to be married to Ginny? Could I live with her forever?*

More images came: Ginny laughing as he was holding her hand, her falling asleep with her head in his lap, Ginny sitting in a rocking chair, rocking a bawling infant with messy black hair. He felt his heart stop for a moment. Whatever he'd just seen, he wanted it to be real with all his heart.

Harry straightened his back and looked Ron in the eye. "Ron," he spoke quietly, but with confidence, "I'm going to marry your sister."

A moment lingered where a spider's thread of fear mingled with his confidence. Ron smiled. "You're going to have to go about this properly, then," he told Harry, rubbing his hands together. "You're going to need to win her heart, buy her a ring and propose to her," Ron said, ticking the items off on his fingers. He was so completely serious that Harry couldn't help but agree to everything he was saying, hardly wondering what qualifications Ron had in knowing how to properly court a girl.

"We're going to Diagon Alley after breakfast. Get dressed and meet me downstairs. Bring your money pouch and your vault key."

Ron turned and left the room, leaving Harry goggling after him.

*

Molly's cooking was as good as he had remembered it, but Harry barely noticed. He was too busy staring at Ginny, who was looking at anything but him. Hermione and Ron were exchanging nervous glances and Molly whispered in Ginny's ear from time to time, but nothing seemed to be able to convince Ginny to pay Harry the least bit of attention.

At long last, breakfast was over and Ginny left the dining room to wash the dishes in spite of her mother's protests. Molly followed her into the kitchen and Hermione walked towards the living room.

"I'm off to the Ministry again," Hermione announced. "There's been loads of changes to the law since 1016 and I've only been through half of the records."

She left before either of the boys could say anything and Ron shook his head after she had gone. "Mental. Completely out of her mind, that one."

When Harry didn't say anything, Ron nudged him and said, "Let's go. The sooner we get to Diagon Alley, the sooner we can get back and start working on how you're going to approach Ginny."

Harry followed his friend to the living room fireplace and watched as Ron extended the small clay pot of Floo powder to him. "You first, Harry."

With a slight tremble in his hand, Harry took a pinch of powder and threw it into the grate. "The Leaky Cauldron," he announced with a warble, but making sure to speak clearly. The fire sparked emerald and he was sucked into a twisting, turning network of fireplaces.

Harry slid onto the main floor of London's all-Wizarding pub and was immediately pulled to his feet by a pair of rough hands.

"Well, well, well," said a familiar voice behind him. "Fancy meeting you here."

Ron slid through the grate just then and, after dusting soot off his robes, said, "Oh, good. You're all here."

Harry turned around and looked into the faces of his on-and-off-again minders: Nymphadora Tonks, Alastor Moody, and Remus Lupin. "Hello," Harry offered weakly. "Here to see the Boy-Who-Just-Learned-He's-Getting-Married?"

Remus laughed and took Harry by the shoulder. "You've got a long way before you're that far, Harry. The four of us have decided that you'll need a crash course on courtship before you can even think about marriage."

"And a heavy dose of how to not bollix up your fledgling love life," added Tonks with a wink.

Remus steered Harry into the alley with Ron next to him and Moody and Tonks taking up the rear.

"Courting a young lady need not be expensive," Remus began, "but in this instance, it wouldn't hurt to pull out all the stops, so our first stop will be Gringott's for some spending money."

"All right," Harry replied. He was more than a little nervous about the idea of courting Ginny, but his earlier determination stuck with him. Harry would not let the sword of impotence drive him to do something he wouldn't normally do – he would have to make his best effort to convince Ginny that he truly wanted her and that they could make marriage work.

Sensing that Remus wanted to be alone with Harry, Tonks took Ron by the arm and walked him towards the lobby. A security troll looked on with squinted eyes while a goblin led Harry and Remus to the vaults.

"So, Harry," Remus began, clearing his throat, as they stepped into the cart. "I feel I would be remiss if I didn't point out all of your options. I understand that you've decided to pursue a relationship with Ginny. If, for some reason, it doesn't work out between you..."

The cart began to roll forward and Remus paused, firmly gripping the handle in front of them. His eyes widened in the darkening passageway as they approached the first dip. When they followed the track down a particularly long drop, his face turned green and Harry had to laugh at his discomfiture.

They sped around a corner, and through another dip. Harry had done this enough to know that the next branch to the right would be their stop and was glad because he didn't know how much longer Remus would be able to hold onto his breakfast.

But the cart didn't turn. "Hey," Harry said loudly to the goblin sitting in the front of the cart. "You missed the turn back there." The goblin didn't so much as twitch an ear. Harry was about to yell louder, but Remus pulled on his arm and shook his head.

Instead, the cart dipped again and began a series of twists and turns that left Harry utterly lost. At last they started to slow and Harry noticed a dim glow emanating from a spot in the distance.

When they arrived at the end of the track, they were faced with several sets of vaults on either side that were large enough to fit the whole of the Burrow within them. The numbers above their doors were double digits, and as they continued down the track, they ticked down until the teens, then they were under ten and the cart slowed to a crawl.

"Vault number five," the goblin announced when it stopped completely and promptly exited the cart.

Harry helped Remus step onto the platform and turned to address the goblin. "I think you may have made a mistake, sir. My vault is on a completely different level."

"No," said Remus, who was leaning against one of the handsomely carved columns along the vault wall. "This is your family vault, Harry. The other one was just for your use until you came of age. The contents of that vault, as well as what Sirius left you..." He took a breath, steadied himself, and then continued, "are now in here."

The goblin had opened the vault while they had been talking, so Harry didn't see how it was done, but all that was forgotten when he was confronted with the capacious, gold-filled...cavern that was now his.

In every corner, and all along the walls, were stacks and stacks of Galleons. There were chests and shelves and strongboxes bulging with money.

"But...Remus," Harry said as he turned to look at his guardian, "what do I do with it all? I don't want it – I don't *need* it."

Remus had regained a bit of his colour and gave a slight chuckle. "Harry, you're about to get *married*. That means that all of this will not just be yours any more. Besides, you're going to need a far amount of money today when we go shopping for you and your intended."

Harry nodded sheepishly and once again found himself trying to stretch his mind around such an overwhelming concept.

"Oh, and Harry?" Remus asked. "Before I forget... what I was trying to tell you before is that if it doesn't work out between you and Ginny – what I mean is, if for some reason you and she can't make it work, you could always fulfil the requirements of the bargain and then go your separate ways."

Harry was silent for a long while. Then, in a voice dripping with anger, he said, "You mean, marry Ginny, do the deed, and then get divorced or run away?"

"Well," Remus said as he scooped a sizeable chunk of Galleons into a bag, "technically, there is no such thing as divorce in the Wizarding world. So...you'd still be married, but you wouldn't have to stay together."

"Remus, that is the most despicable thing I have ever heard," Harry spat softly, advancing towards Remus, who began to back away. "I could never look at myself in the mirror if I tried that, much less look at Arthur or Molly. Never mention that again, Remus. I may not be the best of persons, but I'm not a liar and I'm not an adulterer."

"I understand," Remus soothed. "I felt I owed it to you to point that option out. Personally, I'm glad you feel that way. Just make sure that Ginny knows that's how you see it. Girls love that kind of thing."

*

Ginny sighed as she set aside her soaked dish towel and stared absently at the rack of drying breakfast dishes. With one more year of being an underage witch to go, she was simply itching to make chores like this easier with a flick of her wand, but in this instance, she was glad for the mindless distraction.

Sorting through her feelings for Harry and, more importantly, about how they were going to deal with the prospect of marriage or life-long infertility had been difficult for Ginny. A smile crept onto her face every time she thought about Harry being her husband – her not-so-secret dream since she was able to read. But that feeling was tempered with the reality of marriage. She'd watched first-hand the ups and downs her parents went through – there had been many rough patches to their relationship – and so she had more than ample reason to be wary.

Her mother was whistling as she directed a broom across the floor in the now-vacant dining room. But the noisy *whump* of the Floo being activated told Ginny that it was soon to be occupied by at least one more person.

"Goodness," Molly exclaimed, and Ginny walked carefully over to the door separating the kitchen from the dining room to hear properly. "What brings you here, Albus?"

"My apologies, Molly. I would have announced myself appropriately, but time is of the essence, and I knew that Harry would be away just now." His voice was as calm and endearing as ever, but Ginny found herself wishing that she could see his face – it always conveyed his emotional state much better than his voice alone could.

"Oh, well, it's not a problem, Albus. I was just tidying up. Would you like to have a seat?" Ginny heard the broom being banished to the closet and the scrape of wooden legs on their tile floor.

"Actually, I was wondering if I might fetch Arthur for a moment. It would be best if we had him here for this."

There was a pause and Ginny could imagine the storm clouds gathering around her mother's head. "He's at work, Albus," Molly said in a cool voice. "You know where to find him."

"I shall return in a moment. Maybe a spot of tea would be helpful?"

A slight *pop* sounded and Ginny moved towards the stove automatically, placing a kettle on to boil.

"Ginny, dear?" her mum called. "Put on a kettle for me, please. Dumbledore will be here in a minute."

"Yes, Mum," Ginny said as she lit the burner and gathered the tea service and a tray from the cupboard.

A few minutes later, a *crack* echoed from the dining room and Ginny wondered how her father could have arrived so soon. Besides, she was certain that her father's Apparation noise was a little bit quieter and less pronounced. It sounded almost like Bill's.

"Hello, Mum," said Bill unexpectedly.

"Well, if it isn't our number one son. How are you, dear? Did you get the package I sent you?"

"Yes, Mum. The tin of ginger biscuits was a big hit at the office. But I came to ask after Ginny. Is she here?"

There was a flurry of whispers and then the room went silent. Too silent. Ginny leaned towards the door to hear, but the kettle took that moment to whistle, and she moved back to the stove instead. When the tea service was ready, Bill hadn't come into the kitchen as she expected. She took an extra cup, saucer and spoon and set them next to the others.

Ginny lifted the tray, grasping it firmly from each end, and made her way to the dining room. Sitting down at opposite sides of the table were her mother and eldest brother. At the head of the table were her father and the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Although their mouths were moving, she couldn't hear a word of it.

"The tea is ready," she announced and walked towards her brother, but no one seemed to hear her. She walked through a section of air that seemed thicker than the rest. It resisted, but she was able to push through it and she found herself able to hear the conversation. "Hello, Bill," Ginny said as she set the tray down on the table.

Bill stood and embraced his sister. "Hello, little bit."

Ginny set out the cups and proceeded to pour the tea. The feeling of four pairs of eyes on her head was acute and the accompanying silence stifling.

When she had finished, Ginny walked towards the door, but was called back by Dumbledore.

"I had hoped," he said as she turned to face him, "that you would be able to stay and listen, Miss Weasley. Perhaps we can be of some assistance with the many questions you must have."

Ginny looked to her mother and father, who both nodded, and then back to Dumbledore. "All right."

"Very good," Dumbledore said. "Now, Arthur, Molly, let's start with you."

Molly took a sip from her cup and cleared her throat. "Remus made it sound like there was nothing that could be done – that either Harry and Ginny were to be married, or that they wouldn't be able to have babies. Is that right?"

Dumbledore produced a piece of parchment from his robes and handed it to Molly. "Once Remus notified me that Harry had spoken to Ginny, I went to Minister Fudge and personally requested that there be an investigation into our options. You'll find the signature of all the members of the Wizengamot on the bottom."

Molly read through it once and then handed it over to Arthur, who withered under her cold stare. "It's an amendment to the decree," Dumbledore said, once Arthur had read it. "It is now illegal to arrange marriages under Wizarding law. However, it also states that it would not affect marriages that are already arranged, or those that are pending. Not much help, I know, but unfortunately, this was as far as we could go. Several curse-breakers were consulted, including Bill," Dumbledore nodded at the Gringotts employee and continued, "and it was decided that it would be too dangerous to try to annul the arrangement."

"Ginny?" Bill started softly. "Do you mind if I check you with my wand? I promise not to trip the jinx."

The threat of instant menopause jumped into Ginny's mind and she felt herself slinking back from Bill. She bit her lip but felt the trust she had developed for her brother over the last fifteen years burn through the fear. "Go ahead."

Bill produced his wand and pointed it towards the ground; with a swirling motion, he then raised it above her head. He muttered a strange-sounding incantation before circling her entire body, sheathing her in an ethereal blue light. Ginny felt a strange tugging in her middle as the wand moved, as though Bill's probing was on the verge of collapsing some vital organ. Ginny almost yelled out for him to stop, but he dropped his hand and started to point at various parts of the spell.

"It's just as I thought," Bill said suddenly and then whistled. "I've seen things like this before; it's a combination of about thirty charms and hexes." His wand highlighted different shaded areas around her, and then he drew lines from one to the next. "They're linked together such that tampering with one of them causes them all to cascade until every one of them is tripped. It'd take years of constant monitoring and lots of calculations just to figure out the right order to attack this. This is really good work."

Bill cancelled the spell and the light vanished. "I'm so glad you admire the craftsmanship, brother of mine," Ginny said wryly. "From where I'm sitting, I certainly wouldn't call anything about this 'good'."

With a sad smile, he wrapped an arm around her, gave a gentle squeeze, and said, "Hang in there. We'll work something out."

Ginny gradually fell out of the conversation as the four adults continued to talk about different options. Her thoughts turned to Harry and what he was doing right now. She wondered if he was as scared as she was, if he had given any more thought to their conversation last night. In the midst of so many odd feelings and terrible consequences, one thing was certain: if she and Harry were going to make this work, Harry was going to have to take the initiative for once. Ginny wasn't going to pine after him like a lovesick little girl any more.

Ignoring the quizzical looks from her parents and brother, she slipped quietly out the garden door and into the bright afternoon sunlight.

*

"Oi, watch it," Ron said when a gaggle of twittering witches walked past, gaping and pointing at Harry.

They had come out from Gringotts with an odd device that Harry instantly equated with a Muggle credit card – apparently there was a hefty fine for taking sums over two thousand Galleons outside of the bank directly. It was a bit of parchment that was half the size of a normal piece, and according to the goblins, charmed to transfer money from a special holding cell on the ground floor of the bank to wherever he was. All he had to do was write a number on the parchment with his wand, scribble his signature with the wand, and that sum of money would appear on the paper.

Since Remus and Tonks were the ones in charge of preparing Harry for his courtship, they took the lead and walked promptly to Madam Malkin's for a complete set of new robes – dress and everyday use.

"Now, Harry," Tonks said after they finished purchasing their robes and made their way around the alley towards the jewellery shop. "It's going to take more than fancy clothes and fine jewellery to get you into Ginny's knickers." She pointed to where Ron was struggling with several formal robes, both men's and women's, that they had purchased earlier.

Harry's face flamed red while Ron's jaw dropped open. "I'd really prefer that you not put it quite that way. I've turned down any number of flings with girls I didn't care for," Harry said.

Tonks giggled, looking at the slack-jawed Ron, making her rather long purple hair shake in an odd way. "Don't like the idea of Harry in bed with your sister?"

Ron, who was carrying several of their purchased robes, shoved a lovely rust-coloured dress with a plunging neckline out of his face. "To tell the truth, I was always hoping Harry would be the one. I just didn't think it'd happen so soon."

Harry stopped walking and turned to face Ron. "Really? You're...okay with all of this?"

Ron sized him up for a moment and nodded. "You'll treat her right, Harry. I just don't want to hear any of the sordid details, all right?"

Harry smiled, but the smile fell just as quickly from his face. "That is assuming I'll actually win her over."

"Cheer up, mate," Ron soothed. "It's like I told you: she likes you just fine. You just need to be clear on your objective and then take the initiative."

"Right," Harry muttered, turning back to follow Tonks and Remus. "I'll try to keep that in mind."

*

Out in the garden, Ginny spent the afternoon wandering from one childhood memory to the next. The tree house where she had caught Charlie kissing a girl from the village, back when Ginny was five. The pond that held so many memories that she sat for an hour reliving them all. The paddock that served as Quidditch Pitch, extra-large dining room, and hosted just about every event that was too big for the Burrow.

Ginny smiled to herself when she realised that every place she visited, every memory eventually came back to Harry. The tree house was also where she first heard Harry's name – Bill had told her and Ron the story of how Harry had first defeated Voldemort countless times as she fell asleep in his arms. The pond was where the twins had teased her endlessly about him before he had arrived that fateful summer prior to her own trip to Hogwarts. The paddock was where she spent hours thinking about her possession by Voldemort and the courageous and humble young boy who had saved her from him.

With a sigh, Ginny found herself back in the paddock, swinging from an oak tree on an ancient rope swing. She hadn't lied to her mother the previous night. She did love Harry, and something pinched deep within her when she thought about him. The simple fact was, she would always love him, but the current circumstances warranted a slight change to how she would manifest that love. No longer would she be the silly little girl Tom Riddle had found so easy to prey upon. Ginny was going to make sure that Harry earned her hand properly.

As she pushed on the swing with renewed effort, a lone figure appeared out of the stand of trees that blocked her view of the Burrow. She stopped pumping her legs and let the swing's energy bleed away naturally while he walked towards her. By the time the swing was at only half its previous height, Harry was standing in front of her.

"Nice day for a swing," he remarked. His hands were in his pockets and he leaned against the tree. The soft breeze floated through his hair and pushed it into impossibly divergent directions.

Ginny had to catch her breath before she could speak. "Yes, it is," she said, proud that there wasn't the slightest quiver in her voice.

"Mind if I join you?"

The question was so startling that Ginny's eyes jerked over to him and she put out a foot to catch the ground. When she was completely stopped, she stood and pointed to the wood slat she had been sitting on. "It's a little small for that, don't you think?"

Harry approached her and pulled his hands out of his pockets. "I reckon the worst thing that could happen is that we fall off."

Ginny narrowed her eyes, detecting a hint of challenge in his voice. *So that's how it's going to be?*

"All right," she said and took hold of one rope with her right hand while she sat gingerly on one side of the seat.

Harry bunched up next to her and pushed off...

"I've been doing a lot of thinking today," Harry began. Ginny could tell that he was slightly frightened about something, so decided to let him talk it out. It was easier for him to speak when left to himself.

"A-And I really don't know what I did to upset you last night, so I wanted to start out by apologising." Because they were both facing forwards, Ginny found it easy to not be distracted by his messy hair, mesmerising eyes, or handsome face. "Because I'm not one for holding a grudge, and hoped that we could start things out normal, and..."

"Harry," Ginny interrupted quietly, "you're babbling."

"Oh," he replied sheepishly. "I'm sorry – I hadn't realised..."

Ginny let out a musical laugh and turned to regard his profile. "I forgive you for what happened. I suppose I should have gone a little easier on you, as we're in the same boat and, well...it really isn't your fault. If anything, I should be upset with Dad."

The swing's arc began to ebb. "Don't be hard on him, Ginny," Harry said. "Your mum's got his punishment handled just fine, if I heard it right. Besides, we shouldn't let what anyone else thinks get between us. We've got to handle this on our own."

She smiled and moved her hand to cover his on the rope. His gesture of equality and companionship did more to heal her wounds than anything else. "Thanks, Harry."

His hand seemed to tremble slightly underneath hers as he began to swing again, pushing off from the ground. "My pleasure," he whispered.

They turned to face each other at the same time, his eyes sheltered behind his glasses, hers full of wonder and curiosity.

"So what do you say? Do you think we could try to make this work?" Harry asked, almost shyly.

Ginny could see him swallow in anticipation of her answer. "What did you have in mind?" She wasn't going to let him off that easy.

Harry cleared his throat. "Well, we've got to get married, right? I think we need to get to know one another better and see if we can make a go of it."

Putting her feet down to stop the swing, Ginny turned to face him as fully as their position allowed. "We don't exactly have a whole lot of time, you know? And what if we decide that we loathe each other? What happens then?"

With a defeated look, Harry dropped his gaze. "Well, if that happens, then we have to suffer the consequences, I guess." He looked back up to her and his awkwardness was replaced with a strength that took Ginny's breath away. "But I don't think we'll ever loathe each other, Ginny. We've been good friends for too long."

They sat there for what seemed like an hour, just staring at each other. Then Ginny reached out her free hand and cupped Harry's cheek. "I'd love to give it a go – getting to know you better, Harry." She stood and disengaged her hand. Then, turning back to him, she said, "You're right, by the way. We have been friends too long."

Harry stood and slowly approached her. "Then let's do this properly." He reached out a tentative finger and touched the knuckles on her hand. "Ginny? Would you, um...like to double up with Ron and Hermione tomorrow? For a picnic?"

Ginny regarded him and was surprised to see the insecurity return to his eyes. The thought that she had such power over him sent chills racing up her spine. "That sounds lovely, Harry." Relief washed over him and he moved even closer. Ginny held out a hand to let him know that they were still just friends – friends looking to see if they could be husband and wife – and said, "I'd better go finish my chores. Mum will need my help making dinner."

"Oh," Harry said, obviously disappointed. "You wouldn't want to upset your mother."

"Bye," Ginny said with a small wave and backed away from Harry.

"Bye, Ginny," Harry said as she turned around and walked away.

As she made her way back up the path towards the Burrow, Ginny couldn't contain the bubble of happiness that swelled within her and let out a silent cheer. She was being courted by Harry Potter.

The Bargain 4: Best Foot Forward

Chapter Four – Best Foot Forward

August 1, 1997

Harry stopped on the pinnacle of the small hill on the Weasleys' property overlooking both the paddock and the Burrow. Ginny was walking jauntily down the worn path towards the Burrow, and he caught snatches of her voice carrying across the lazy afternoon meadow, singing something light and happy. He leaned against a nearby ash tree and simply watched her.

That is, until he felt the presence of someone behind him. Whirling around, Harry came face to face with a wall of red hair and four freckled faces leering down at him.

"Hiya, Harry," said Fred and George in unison. Flanking them were Bill and Charlie – all four wore large grins, but the glint in their eyes told Harry the good humour wouldn't last past the first few minutes of their encounter.

"Hi, guys," Harry said slowly. "Beautiful afternoon, isn't it?"

"Not as pretty as our sister, though," Bill added as he cracked his knuckles menacingly. "Wouldn't you say?"

Harry sized up the eldest Weasley as Fred and George moved to either side of Harry's peripheral vision. Bill and Charlie advanced a few steps, forcing Harry backwards.

"No," Harry ventured mustering his courage. "Not as pretty as Ginny. Then again, not much is."

Bill turned to Charlie and asked, "Ickle Harry isn't so ickle any more, is he?"

"All grown up," he replied as they continued to force Harry backwards. "But we can't just let him dicker with Ginny's love life, can we?"

"I reckon not. We'd be piss-poor brothers if we didn't do *something* about it."

They had been advancing on him the whole time, Fred and George keeping up with him on his sides. Harry nearly tripped over a piece of wood, but recovered before he fell.

"Listen, guys," Harry began, his hands held palms out in a pleading gesture. "Ginny and I have an understanding. Everything's all right between us now."

"I'll just bet it is," Fred said with a scowl.

"Probably already got a look at her knickers, I'd say," George added. "Judging by the sappy look on his face."

"N-No!" Harry spluttered. "We're going to date and see how things work out between us. That's all, I swear! We haven't even kissed!"

He was so distracted by their verbal assault, that he barely noticed the grassy ground had given way to rough wood planking that sounded hollow underneath their many footsteps.

Bill nodded, and they all took out their wands. Harry's fear instantly tripled.

"Guys..." Harry appealed, his voice cracking a little. "We can be reasonable about this, right?"

He looked from Bill to Charlie, all the while stepping back from their outstretched wands, as their eyes sparkled menacingly in the reds and oranges of sunset. They jabbed their wands at Harry's mid-section. The tip of Bill's wand began to glow and then sparked.

Acting on instinct alone, Harry turned and bolted, his feet pumping even as they left the wooden pier. He fell right into the pond.

When he hit the water, the shock of it forced some of it into his mouth. His glasses were pinned to his head because of their small size and thankfully, weren't dislodged by his impromptu dive.

By the time he reached shore, spluttering out the clear pond water from his mouth, the Weasley brothers were rolling around on the dock in laughter. Fred and George were giving each other high-fives, and Bill looked at Harry with a mixture of pity and pride. He called out to Harry as they all started to walk towards the Burrow.

"Keep yourself cool around our sister, Harry – or we might have to douse your hormones again."

Harry wrung out his shirt and emptied the water from his shoes. Then, as the fear left him completely, he gave out a loud guffaw. "It's not me you've got to worry about, Bill!" he yelled, but they had already gone.

When Harry got back to the house, squelching and squishing as he walked, he found no sign of Ginny's brothers, but instead, both of her parents, Remus, and Dumbledore talking at the kitchen table.

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed upon seeing him dripping on her floor. "What on earth happened to you?"

Harry thought quickly, trying to come up with a plausible reason for his sodden state. "Um, I tripped and fell into the pond." It wasn't completely untrue, anyway.

Dumbledore's eyebrows were threatening to levitate off his face.

"Well, go get a hot bath, dear," Molly she said reassuringly. "Then fetch Ginny for me. We need to go over some details with you."

Catching Remus' eye, Harry noticed a repressed grin on the Marauder's face and resolved then that his future brothers-in-law would not get away with their prank.

*

Sitting on her bed, reading one of the many romance novels her mother had banned – but read herself – Ginny reflected on her afternoon with Harry. Things could scarcely have gone better, in her estimation. He was nervous but interested, respecting, and trusting – but didn't give her the slightest indication he was pursuing her out of duty. That was the quickest way to get Ginny's ire up – to pretend interest when other motivations were the real reason – as it had been with Michael Corner.

Ginny knew in the back of her mind that two of Harry's biggest character strengths would be pitted against each other because of their impending marriage. He was honest to a fault, and would sooner marry Millicent Bulstrode than fake a romance. However, his sense of duty would compel him to try to make Ginny *feel* loved even if he didn't *really* love her, just because it would be the right thing to do.

Harry's actions that afternoon hadn't been out of duty, however. Ginny could tell by the way he looked at her, by the thrill of excitement that caused her stomach to quiver when she saw the desire in his eyes. It was plain that he was at least attracted to her, and that was all Ginny needed for now. They would just have to see where the next week and a half would take them.

Someone knocked on her door, and Ginny was instantly brought back to the present. Only one person in the house would knock on her door.

"Come in, Harry," she said as she put her bookmark in the fold and set the book facedown on her cluttered desk.

The door slowly creaked open, and a head topped with a mop of jet-black hair peeked inside. "Ginny?" His voice was tentative and nervous, just as it had been on the swing.

"I won't bite you, Harry. You can come in, just leave the door open."

Harry chuckled briefly and took a hesitant step inside. "Your - uh...mum wanted us to go downstairs. They wanted to talk to us about something, or another." Harry hadn't looked at her as he spoke and was holding his hands behind his back. "Wonder what it could be?" he said with a demure smile, finally making eye contact.

Ginny grinned back at him and took his hand, noticing how hot and sweaty it was. "Probably something about a wedding," Ginny quipped. "Mum's been intolerable since last night. Going on and on about daffodils and chiffon dresses."

"Really?" Harry asked, sounding genuinely interested. "She's not still upset, then?"

"No, but Dad doesn't know that, yet." Ginny let out a giggle and then said, "He's still sleeping on the sofa."

A thousand emotions played across Harry's face – going from humour to sadness. "I'm really sorry for all of this, Ginny. I wish it didn't have to happen this way."

Narrowing her eyes, Ginny tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear and asked, "What do you mean?"

"It's the whole schedule, Ginny. I hate seeing what it's doing to your family." He hesitated for a moment, giving Ginny's hand a squeeze, and said, "Especially you. Getting to know you is grand; I just wish we had a different schedule."

Just the thought that Harry would still be so concerned with her feelings made something tremble inside her. "That's awfully sweet of you, Harry, but I know you weren't responsible for any of this."

Harry shook his head and let go of her hand. "It's not just that. I know you said you still have feelings for me, but I have to wonder how differently things would have turned out had we been able to do things normally." He paced over to her closet and rested his head against the door.

"I don't understand," Ginny said, her heart skipping a beat. "Do you mean you would have asked me out anyway?"

Harry turned to look at her and nodded. "Eventually – I'm not exactly good at understanding things like that myself, but I would have ended up here eventually. Then when all of this happened," he said with a dramatic sweep of his hands, "it forced me to realise that I've fancied you for a while."

Really?" Ginny asked with wonder in her voice. "You really mean it?"

"Of course," Harry replied. "We've been friends for a while now; you've got a quick wit and are as stubborn as a mule..." He stopped when she glared at him, and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Stubborn is good if you have to deal with me, remember? You *are* a pretty girl, Ginny. I was bound to notice sooner or later – I may be thick, but I would have come around eventually."

Ginny hesitated, still cross about the mule comment, but was so completely happy that he had already been considering her as something more than just a friend. She jumped over to Harry and captured him in a hug, squeezing him for all she was worth. "Oh, Harry. You've made me so happy!"

Harry gave her an awkward pat on the back and said with a nervous stutter, "We, uh...had better get downstairs. They'll be wondering where we are."

Ginny withdrew slowly, trying not to get distracted by the warm soapy smell he was exuding. "Yes, you're right."

Harry took a step back and motioned for her to exit first.

The bubble of happiness still lingering inside her, Ginny stepped over the threshold and turned back to wait for him.

"Oh, and Ginny?" Harry asked. "I'm going to need your help with a little project involving your brothers."

Her lips pressed together, Ginny asked, "Is that right? What have they done now?"

"I'll tell you after our meeting. Suffice it to say, they think my intentions towards you aren't entirely honourable."

With a gleam in her eye, Ginny took Harry's hand again and proceeded down the stairs. "We'll just see about that."

*

Taking the steps slowly, Harry savoured the tingles Ginny had left around his middle when she had hugged him and tried very hard to not stumble.

In the kitchen, the Privacy Charm still in place, Harry saw that his Head of House had joined the discussion in the seat that Dumbledore had recently occupied. Arthur and Molly were next to Professor McGonagall, while Remus sat on the other side at the end, leaving two adjoining seats for Harry and Ginny.

Harry pushed through the quiet space, feeling a tug as he passed the barrier, pulled out a chair for Ginny, and sat beside her.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said affably. "Professor Dumbledore had to leave on urgent Order business, but he promised to return shortly. I'll be sitting in for him in this discussion."

Harry and Ginny both nodded and waited for their Professor to continue.

"Well, this is a fine mess you've landed in," McGonagall began, her hands folded primly on the table. "Your guardians have just filled me in on most of the details, but I'm afraid I simply can't wrap my mind around it." She paused and let out a quick breath. "The purpose of this meeting is to arrange for the wedding details, and..."

"But Professor," Ginny interrupted. "Harry hasn't even proposed yet."

Harry's head fell to the table and McGonagall cleared her throat. "Is this true, Mr. Potter?"

Looking guiltily at Ginny, he noticed she was pinching her lips between her teeth, and her eyes were dancing. "Yes, but it is on my to-do list, Professor," Harry replied.

"Very well; I expect that to be remedied shortly. I assume you are planning on going through with the wedding, rather than the alternative?"

Ginny nodded. "Oh, yes, Professor, Harry and I would rather avoid that particular aspect of the arrangement."

For some reason, Harry was sure that Ginny was enjoying this meeting far too much, especially as it pertained to making him sweat.

"Then I suspect you've discussed the wedding date?"

Harry and Ginny caught each other's eye, and Harry spoke up. "No, Professor. Since the deadline is on Ginny's birthday, I didn't want to presume to take her special day away from her."

Ginny gaped at Harry while Molly muttered something under her breath that sounded like, "Such a good boy."

"But Harry and I *did* discuss the fact that we wanted to take as long as possible to prepare for the wedding," Ginny added, still looking at Harry. "I don't mind sharing my birthday with him." She suddenly covered Harry's hand on the table and gave it a squeeze. Harry had a feeling that this squeeze was very different from the one out on the swing just a short while ago.

McGonagall looked between both teens and said, "So it will be on the eleventh, then?"

"Yes," they chorused together, and then Ginny added with an innocent grin, "Assuming Harry proposes, of course."

Harry rolled his eyes and leaned close to Ginny's ear. "I get the point – there will be a proposal." He was satisfied to see her shiver as his breath

licked her neck, and her hand shot away from his to cover her neck against further attack.

Seeming to be completely oblivious to the interaction between Harry and Ginny, McGonagall continued on, reading from a piece of parchment. "You'll need to consider who you want at the wedding, send out invitations, contract catering, music, and arrange for clothing. I must tell you that short-notice weddings such as this are very expensive."

"I've got the means to pay; money's not a problem," Harry said.

Still rubbing at her neck, Ginny said, "Well, that's a relief."

McGonagall's lips remained as thin as ever. "The next item we need to discuss is your accommodations at Hogwarts. The school has a strict policy against matriculating married students, but given the special nature of your situation, the Board of Governors has authorised your attendance this year, Mr. Potter, and for the next two for you, Miss Weasley."

With a confused look, Ginny asked, "So what does that mean for us?"

Harry was curious as well, hoping that McGonagall wasn't suggesting that they stay apart from one another.

"It means," McGonagall continued, "that you can finish your schooling, if certain conditions are met. First of all, you will each remain in your own dormitories."

"No," Ginny said firmly.

"What do you mean 'no'?" McGonagall queried.

"I mean absolutely not," Ginny exclaimed. "This isn't a sham that we're working on – if I'm going to be married, I'm going to act like it. I'm not going to be living apart from my husband. It's impractical; it demeans our relationship and us as individuals. It's just plain wrong." Harry was amused to note the colour change in Ginny's face before she spoke, as if he could tell she was about to explode.

Interestingly enough, Molly now matched her daughter's expression, though Harry guessed it was for a different reason. "Watch your tongue, Ginny Weasley," she said. "You will show Professor McGonagall the respect her position deserves."

"No, Mum, I'm not being disrespectful, I'm just not rolling over like a little girl being sent to her room," Ginny countered. "I'm not going to budge on this. If we're going to be married, then we're going to act like a married couple. That means we sleep in the same bed."

Harry didn't know if it was the determined look on her face, or if it was a product of his admiration for Ginny's principles, but something changed in his regard for her then, and he knew he had to support her. "I agree," he ventured. "We should stay together." He reached an arm around Ginny's shoulders and pulled her close.

Ginny smiled at him, and Harry noticed Remus was nodding at them.

"Very well," McGonagall conceded. "I was told that you might feel this way and have been authorized to offer you an alternative."

A small *pop* announced someone Apparating, and Dumbledore's kind face appeared behind McGonagall. With a flourish of his wand, he expanded the silent space, and Harry was shocked to actually see the air change to an electric green as it moved.

Dumbledore replaced his wand in his robes and said, "I trust things are proceeding well?"

McGonagall stood to relinquish her seat back to her superior. "Sit, sit, Minerva," Dumbledore said. "I've been on my backside for far too long today as it is."

The younger professor reluctantly resumed her seat, and Dumbledore folded his hands. "I've just gone through the list, and we're discussing arrangements at Hogwarts," McGonagall said.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said airily. "And they refused your first option, I assume."

"As you predicted, Albus."

"Good, very good." Dumbledore locked his twinkling blue eyes on Harry, and for a split second, Harry felt a surge of pride from the elderly professor leap across the room. "We will be preparing a special suite of rooms for you. Entry will be off of the Gryffindor common room. While you will be living together as husband and wife, you will have to be apart for classes, I'm afraid."

Ginny nodded and said, "I can live with that."

"Excellent," McGonagall announced. "Then the last thing we need to discuss is..."

In the middle of her sentence, a fire crackled to life in the kitchen, and a brown-haired witch tumbled out onto the floor, her arms loaded with books.

"Hello, Professors," Hermione said when she righted herself. "Is this a good time to interrupt? I've got loads to tell you."

"Be our guest," Professor Dumbledore offered graciously.

There were several more books floating behind her, and Harry marvelled at them. "The Ministry Librarian charmed them to follow me through the

Floo network,” Hermione explained as she dumped her load of books onto the table.

“Hermione,” Harry exclaimed. “You looked at *all* these books...for us?”

Beaming, Hermione patted him on the shoulder. “I can’t imagine what you must be going through, Harry. It’s what any friend would do. Besides, it was just a bit of light research.”

Harry and Ginny laughed and were soon joined by the rest of the room’s occupants.

“So what did you find?” Remus was sitting on the front of his chair in anticipation, asking the very question on everyone’s mind.

“Not a whole lot, I’m afraid.” Hermione reached down for the largest book and opened it to a marked page. “Here’s the text of the Decree. It goes on for pages, but the part about arranged marriages is here.” She pointed to a spot of tightly written text a third of the way down the page.

Harry squinted at it and then looked around the room at all the expectant faces. “Hermione, we can’t *all* read this, can’t you just tell us what it means?”

The wry grin on Hermione’s face gave way to a knowing smile. “I thought you might say that.” She produced a bundle of parchment and began to leaf through it. “It outlines the legal requirements that must be met before the arrangement can be considered binding, which you already know. There is a section on courtship that was modified by an amendment in 1813, which – you’ll be thankful to hear – also removed a provision for the marriage to be annulled after one year, if there are no legal heirs produced in that time.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Harry blurted. “Twelve days to get married and then twelve months to produce an heir – nah, no pressure at all.”

Ginny glared at him, but Hermione continued before she could say anything. “The ceremony itself is called the Reflection Ceremony, and binds the wizard and witch together with a spell.” She turned to the Weasleys and said, “It’s a bit different than normal Muggle or Wizarding marriages, but you should recognize the majority of it.”

“That sounds intriguing,” Arthur replied. “What exactly is entailed with that?”

“The procedure itself is straightforward. A mixture of the 1662 liturgy and Wizarding rights,” Hermione explained, “The spell is fairly simple, too. It’s the spell’s effects that are difficult to understand – it depends on the magic of the pair being married.”

Harry thought about Ginny and how their whole world was about to change, and then said, “I’m assuming you didn’t find a way to void the contract?”

Ginny’s foot pressed into Harry’s under the table, and he turned to face her. “What?”

She didn’t answer, but folded her arms across her chest and stared at the wall.

Harry sighed and looked to Remus, who, for some strange reason, was repressing the urge to laugh.

“There is one more thing, Harry, Ginny,” Hermione said, pulling out yet another book. “In 1154, there was another provision added to the statute. Apparently, they were having problems with wizards sowing their wild oats before getting married to their arranged partner, and a few witches as well. So they made it a condition of the agreement that pre-marital intimacy be restricted to a set of very limited acts.”

Hermione’s cheeks were glowing as she flipped through her notes for a specific page and pushed it over to Ginny. Harry leaned over her shoulder to read with her.

When they were done reading, Harry and Ginny caught each other’s eye, sporting matching blushes, and handed the paper back to Hermione.

“That’s quite...descriptive,” Ginny said. “What happens if we try anything more?”

“Well, before the Reflection Ceremony, the same hexes that would prevent you from being intimate with anyone else also apply to your own relationship. The major hexes only activate if you deviate from the list, or don’t get married. The pre-marital intimacy clause only activates the hexes for a short time – about five minutes, but depend on how long it takes to...um, cool off.”

Harry folded his hands and tried desperately to not look mortified. Bill’s parting words that evening echoed in his mind.

Beside him, Ginny seemed to have an epiphany. “So *that’s* what happened with Dean!” she exclaimed, and then promptly clapped a hand over her mouth.

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Weasley demanded at once. “What were you doing with Dean Thomas that would have tripped this hex? Hermione, let me see that list at once.”

Now it was Ginny’s turn to be mortified. “Nothing, Mum. That list is rather restrictive,” she said.

Molly harrumphed.

“Mum, it’s not as if Dad was the first bloke you ever kissed,” Ginny protested.

Arthur muttered something that sounded like “Wainwright” which in turn provoked Molly to furiously cross her arms.

Ginny opened her mouth to argue some more, but McGonagall interceded. “Be that as it may, we still need to work out some more details before

we can retire for the evening.”

As McGonagall took charge of the meeting once more, Harry silently watched Ginny and wondered both at how short a time they had to get to know each other, and how much he didn't know about her.

*

August 2, 1997

The next morning at breakfast, Ginny found herself staring at a bowl of porridge. Harry was sitting next to her and had already eaten two bowls full. As he helped himself to another ladleful, Ginny spied her mother putting the oats into the dry pantry.

“Mum?” she asked sleepily. “What happened to the normal breakfast?”

Molly walked back into the kitchen and wiped her hands on her apron. “I'm sorry, dear,” she said. “There's just too much to be done today to have a proper breakfast.” She untied her apron and folded it across the chair she normally sat in. “Lunch will be even more catch as catch can, I'm afraid. I've got loads of shopping to do and many other errands to run.”

Ginny must have had a sour look on her face because her mother flicked her wand at the fireplace, lighting a cheery blaze, then placed her hand on Ginny's. “There, there. We'll have a good dinner tonight.”

“Yes, Mum,” Ginny said reluctantly. “Harry, Ron, Hermione, and I are having a picnic anyway.”

“Right,” Molly replied, then began to gather up her purse, cloak, and shopping list. “See you tonight.”

Then she threw a handful of Floo powder into the fire and stepped off to Diagon Alley.

Ginny pushed at her porridge and gave it a tentative taste. Beside her, Harry laughed. “You'd get better results if you'd actually take a whole bite,” he jibbed.

“Ha, ha,” Ginny retorted dryly. “Nothing looks good compared with Mum's eggs and bacon.”

“Well, you've got this afternoon's date to look forward to, right?”

With another tiny taste, Ginny sighed and said, “I suppose you're right. At least you'll be around.”

There was a pregnant pause, and when Harry didn't answer, Ginny turned to look at him. “I, uh...actually have something else to do this morning,” Harry admitted. “I'll be back in time for our date, though. Don't worry.”

“We already don't have a lot of time together as it is,” Ginny said with a pout. “Where are you going that's so important, anyway?”

“It's sort of a surprise,” Harry said quickly. “I'm actually going to Apparate there, now that I'm of age.”

“All right.” Managing a smile, Ginny stood with him and gave him a tentative hug. “Take care, Harry.”

Harry hesitated as she started to pull away, and they stood close together until he seemed to snap out of whatever thoughts had captured his attention. “Bye, Ginny.”

Then with a *crack*, he was gone.

*

All he had was an Apparation coordinate. From his recent training, he knew that it was somewhere in London, most likely near the Leaky Cauldron, but he wasn't sure if he were Apparating into the Magical or Muggle section of the city.

When the momentary fuzziness in his vision faded – a by-product of his now-favourite form of Wizarding transportation – Harry realized he'd Apparated into an alleyway. It was stuffed with rubbish bins and stacks of pallets, and the buildings looked at least eighty years old. He picked his way around the bins and made for the street, where the women were wearing tank tops and shorts – he was in Muggle London.

Waiting for Tonks was always an interesting experience, as one was never quite sure *what* or *whom* one was waiting for. Would she be tall or short, thin or stout, young or old? A smartly dressed young woman was walking down the street, carrying a leather attaché case in one hand and a scarlet umbrella in the other. Harry concluded that he didn't know what to look for, and he wasn't going to stare at every woman on the street, if for no other reason than not wanting to deal with the awkward glances he got in reply. The woman walked by him, giving him an opportunity to watch her familiar gait as she passed by. She then turned on her heel, catching him in mid-stare.

“Wotcher, Harry,” she said, breaking into a broad smile.

“Hiya, Tonks,” he replied. “So, where are we going today?”

“Friend's place,” she answered. “Walk this way,” she said then, breaking into an off-tune whistling rendition of an old Aerosmith song.

Harry caught up to her as they walked down the street, which was filled with small shop fronts, until they reached a shop with a narrow door and a large window decorated with a painted white dragon. Between the glare of the morning sun and the grime on the window, he couldn't see anything

inside the store.

Tonks rapped on the door with the handle of her umbrella, a staccato beat with an odd rhythm, tucking her umbrella back under her arm as they waited. Which turned out to be not long at all. With a series of clicks, the door opened, swinging inward, revealing a burly bearded man, not much taller than Harry. "Master Hand," Tonks said, bowing formally.

The man stood at attention, returning her bow, "Miss Tonks, it is a pleasure to see you again," he said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "Your student, I presume," he said, looking at Harry.

"Yes," Tonks replied curtly.

"There are no classes scheduled until the afternoon, the practice area is all yours," Master Hand said. "Lock up when you're done," he said, passing by them, and making his way down the street without looking back.

Tonks entered the shop, taking her shoes off. She nodded at Harry, pointing to her shoes on the mat next to the door. Harry slipped out of his trainers, lining them up next to the black leather pumps. The room was filled with sofas and lockers lining one wall. Next to a drinking fountain was a circular staircase. Tonks rushed to the stairs, stumbling on the first step, but thereafter taking the steps two at a time. Harry followed cautiously to the next floor. The stairwell opened into a room that Harry judged to run the length of the building. One of the long walls was lined with mirrors, while the other walls were covered with pads that hung from hooks high on the walls. The floor was a weathered but still smooth hardwood. The room gave an odd echo as Tonks' bare feet slapped on the floor.

"What is this place, Tonks?" Harry enquired.

"It's a dojo," she said, snapping open her attaché case while she kneeled on the floor.

"A what?" he asked.

"A school for teaching martial arts; Master Hand was one of my instructors when I was an apprentice Auror, not that many years ago. He retired and opened this school. We kept in touch over time, and when I thought about a place to teach the gentle arts of ballroom dancing, I decided to ring up my old friend. He was gracious enough let me borrow his school – although I expect that he'll ask for a favour or two in reply; life works that way, you know," Tonks explained. She pulled a stack of compact discs out of the case, putting three aside before she pulled out a small compact disc player, setting it on top of the attaché case.

"So," Tonks said, turning to Harry, "dancing. You do know why we're here, don't you?" she asked.

Harry stared at her for a while. "Uh, to learn how to dance?" he replied. "I'm going to have to dance with Ginny at the reception, and I reckoned I'd better learn before rather than later."

Tonks raised an eyebrow, circling him silently. "Dancing," she began, speaking in an odd, detached voice, "is fun, it's a means of communication, a way to bond, and if you're doing it correctly, a form of seduction." She turned to the music box, slipping a CD into the front of the machine. Pulling her wand out of her sleeve, she slashed the air several times, leaving motes of silver dust hanging in the air. The dust coagulated into a man-sized cloud and then turned into a formally garbed man, dotted with silver sprinkles. The man bowed to Tonks, who curtsied in reply and then took his outstretched hand.

Walking briskly, they travelled the length of the room in time to the music that was pouring out of the box. Most of the time the only contact between them was one pair of clasped hands and a light touch of a hand on the other's waist; at times there were brushes of one part against another, but for Harry the most riveting thing was watching Tonks' eyes. Her expression was blissful, but she never broke eye contact with her magical partner. However clumsy she might be when walking, when moving to music she was fluid and graceful. Beneath the blissful expression was a smouldering something that Harry couldn't quite put his finger on. As the dance progressed, he began to be uncomfortable; this was private and intimate, and he was intruding. The music's tempo lagged for a while, circling back to an ambling, walking pace. The dancers drew closer to one another. As the dance stopped, Harry was struck by Tonks' face: cheeks flushed, with a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead, she was panting lightly. As the music stopped she embraced her partner, who then bowed before disappearing in a swirl of dust. Tonks closed her eyes for a moment, hugging herself before turning to Harry.

"That," she said breathlessly, "was dance."

"Who was your partner?" he asked.

"You didn't see his face?"

Harry shook his head.

"That was a facsimile of your guardian, Remus."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You dance with him, like that?"

Tonks smiled. "Every chance I get, Harry. My mum, when I was a little girl, warned me about dancing. She said to choose my partners carefully, because I might develop feelings for them. Mum was, of course, spot on," she said with a wicked smile. "So, now to teaching you a bit of dancing," she said, her face now serious.

Harry began to fidget. "You know about the hexes that are in place, don't you?"

"I heard about it from Bill. Mind if I check for myself?" she asked.

Harry nodded.

Tonks drew her wand from her sleeve, holding it out in front of Harry's eyes. She slowly circled him, twitching her wand. He felt a chill begin to descend from his scalp, rather like being covered with very cold and slow-moving oil, which puddled down towards his heels. "Blimey," she exclaimed, "he wasn't kidding. Oooh, that's a nasty one, that is," she said as she came to face him again. "Well, that explains a few things," she said as she tucked her wand away again. She clapped her hands. The cold oozing feeling was replaced with a slight tingling warmth.

"Explain what?" he asked.

"Why you've had such rotten luck with girls. One of the hexes is a specialized Confundus Charm. Any girl who's not *your* girl who takes a fancy to you finds herself distracted if she gets too close to you and forgets what she was doing for a moment. The hex right next to that one is a rather violent Banishing Hex; if you express any interest in the wrong girl, she's hurled across the room. Has a lovely effect on chatting up girls, I'm sure. Well," she said, drawing herself up tall, "no matter, as my heart is pure – at least as far as you are concerned – so that shouldn't be a problem."

"What about me?" he asked, leaving unsaid the notion that as a seventeen-year-old wizard, purity wasn't something he normally used to describe the inner workings of *his* mind.

Tonks smiled. "I've got ways to work around that, no worries," she said. "Now, let's begin. I'm going to clap some rhythms and you're going to copy them."

"What's this for?" he asked.

"To see if you have any rhythm at all," she said in a sour voice. "We've not much time, Harry, and so much to do. Please trust me and save the questions for later, all right?"

Tonks clapped out a slow beat, two longs followed by a triplet. Harry answered in kind. She responded with a longer string; he echoed out its match. The clapping volleys continued, until she threw in a series of syncopated strings. Harry never missed a beat until the last string; he asked that she repeat that one, and then repeated it flawlessly. "That one's hard, Harry, and there's not too many dance tunes in 7/8 time with syncopation on the down beat. You do have rhythm, so this shouldn't be impossible," she said as she Summoned a pair of tennis balls from the attaché case.

"Juggling?" Harry quipped.

"That would be three balls," Tonks replied. "Palms up," she commanded. Harry put his hand up as if stopping traffic. Tonks pressed the ball against his palm, holding it in place with her own palm. "No grabbing the ball – we hold it in place with a light pressure only. Now give me the other hand, same arrangement. We're going to walk together in a square – three paces forward for you, backwards for me, three paces to your right, three paces backwards for you, forward for me, three paces to your left. With any luck we'll be back where we started and should still have the ball," she said, punctuating her explanation with a smile.

They made the first box without dropping either ball, but Harry soon discovered that it was much harder than it looked at first, especially as Tonks began to set the exercise to music. After a while, they were practicing steps that Harry recognized as belonging to various dances. Tonks grabbed the balls and tossed them into the attaché case.

"Harry, look me in the eye," she said solemnly. "I need to get this one just right."

As he held her gaze, he noticed that her pale blue irises were darkening and turning towards a lovely shade of emerald green, the colour of shamrocks in the spring, the colour he saw in the mirror every morning. "You can blink now, Harry," she said as she pulled her shoulder-length, dark-red hair into a ponytail. She was shorter now, just a bit taller and broader than Ginny, and was the exact replica of his mum.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, Harry, you're going to learn to dance with your mum. I'm sure that Lily would teach you if she was here to do it, and I really don't fancy the notion of being blown across the room, all right?" she asked with a wink.

Harry swallowed and nodded.

The music began. The morning of practice was paying off; he would step and slide, dip and bow as he'd been trained. Putting aside his disbelief in the moment, he basked in the warmth and scent of his dancing partner, wondering what it would be like to hold Ginny this way.

Life was good.

*

When Harry arrived back in the Burrow's living room, he was winded, happy, and a little sore. Tonks was a fabulous dancer, and if Ginny were half as good, Harry would have a hard time learning enough to impress her. Having Tonks dancing with him as his mother was the icing on a very nice cake and he was glad for the chance to have that particular desire realized – even if it wasn't real.

There were sounds coming from the kitchen and when Harry walked inside, he saw Ron, Ginny, and Hermione in the midst of making and packing lunch.

"Sorry I'm late," Harry said as he helped Hermione by opening a package of crisps and poured some into a container.

Hermione gave Harry a knowing smile and quietly said, "Have a good time with your other lady friend?"

Ron snorted, having obviously heard, and tossed some apples into a large wicker basket. "Is she as good as Charlie said she is?"

"Better," Harry replied with a smile. "I'm going to be sore for a week."

When Ginny appeared at the table, a plate of sandwiches in her hands, she gave Harry a smile and set the plate on the table. "You're not going to get any traction with that line of teasing, Harry. I know what you can and can't do with this hex hanging over us."

Harry smiled back and helped her wrap the sandwiches with wax paper. "Who says I was teasing? I really will be sore for a week after what she did with me."

Ginny wasn't rising to the bait, however, and said, "If you'd been doing anything, she'd be in St. Mungo's right now. Trust me."

"Ooh," Hermione said with a giggle. "There's a story there, isn't there?"

"Yeah," Ginny answered, placing the wrapped sandwiches in the basket. "But I'm not telling with *him* around." She lightly elbowed Harry in the side and snapped the lid of the basket shut.

"Let's get going," Ron piped in. "I'm starved."

"You're always starved," Harry countered as he held the garden door open.

Ginny stepped out first, followed by Hermione.

"I am not," Ron said. "Sometimes I'm famished, other times I'm just a little bit hungry. There's a difference."

Harry chuckled. "I suppose you've got more kinds of hunger than Hagrid has had deadly pets."

They continued to banter as they walked, eventually ending up in a shoving match that had both of them rolling around in the bushes.

"Will you boys stop acting like...boys!" Hermione said exasperatedly. "We're supposed to be on a date."

Harry righted himself and helped Ron stand as well. "Sorry, Hermione," Harry said with the appropriate amount of contriteness.

"Won't happen again," Ron apologized. Then whispering so only Harry could hear him, he said, "Unless you make another crack about my eating habits."

Harry snorted but, seeing the look on Ginny's face, refrained from goading Ron any more.

They walked over to a secluded part of the paddock, shaded from the warm noon sun by a stout willow. Ron spread out a pair of blankets, and Hermione and Ginny began to dole out the food.

Harry leaned his back against a small beech tree that grew under the willow and let out a contented sigh. There was a small breeze that rustled the leaves overhead. A stream gurgled and splashed a hundred feet away and as Harry chewed on his ham sandwich, he could scarcely imagine a better place to have his first outing with Ginny.

Ron and Hermione had moved their blanket towards the open meadow and were throwing crisps at each other. Ginny laughed at their antics, then turned to observe Harry.

"It's a lovely day for a picnic. I'm glad we're out here together," she said, taking a sip of pumpkin juice and pointing at their friends, "even if we have to be around them."

Harry sighed and smiled. "They're not so bad. I've spent the better part of six years with them – getting into every kind of trouble, avoiding death, freeing the innocent.... Blimey, it doesn't seem like it's been that long."

They sat under the swaying willow for a while before Ginny said, "There's so much I wish I knew about you, Harry."

Intrigued, Harry straightened up and wiped the breadcrumbs from his hands with his trousers. "Like what?"

Ginny thought for a moment and said, "What's your favourite colour? Mine's dark green – and before you ask, no, it has nothing to do with your eyes."

Harry sniggered. "I wasn't going to say anything, honest."

They regarded each other for another moment before Ginny prodded, "Well?"

"Oh, umm, red and black." Harry paused a moment, then continued. "I won't wear brown. Most of Dudley's cast-off trousers were brown."

"I don't like pink," Ginny ventured, beginning to anxiously twirl a lock of her hair with one of her fingers. Harry thought she was cute when she was nervous.

"I hate Brussels sprouts," Harry finally said.

"Me too," she dropped her hand and sucked on her bottom lip for a second. "Same for turnips."

"When I'm around Dementors...I hear my mum screaming."

Harry closed his eyes and wondered why he had to send the mood into such a nosedive. Things had been going so well... He looked at Ginny, and saw her take a shuddering breath, unshed tears in her eyes.

"I hear Tom..." Ginny said softly

Harry's hand found hers, and gave it a comforting squeeze.

"Peeves chased me into the girls' loo once, back in first year. Eloise Midgen was in there, trying to hex away her acne. Both of us promised we'd never tell."

Ginny giggled, and Harry was relieved at the change in tone. "I sing alto," she said.

"I don't even know what the different parts are," Harry countered, "but I know what's good and what's not."

Looking thoughtful, Ginny seemed to be considering something, then shook her head and continued on with the mini-confessional. "I only eat marmalade at breakfast."

"I actually knew that," Harry said. "But you don't butter your toast – you just apply a single, thin layer of marmalade. Orange, if I remember correctly." When Ginny just gaped at him, he tried to divert her back to the conversation. "I like my bacon crunchy."

Ginny smiled, and then became suddenly nervous. "... um... Oh, this is embarrassing," she said as she straightened the hem of her sundress with her fingers. "But if we're going to be married..." Ginny paused a moment, and Harry looked at her, encouragingly. "I just finished my period yesterday, so we shouldn't have any problems with... that... after the wedding."

Harry's eyes widened, and he felt his face heat up, but he did his best to not react. His mouth opened, but he couldn't think of a thing to say, so he shut it again.

Impulsively, Ginny leaned over and hugged him. "Thank you, Harry, for not making a joke, or looking revolted, or anything."

Harry gave himself a mental shake. "I like to sleep in on weekends."

"I like to sleep in every day!" Ginny exclaimed. "How many children do you want?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. I know I want more than one, but I don't know about having *seven* – like your parents."

Ginny smiled. "More than one is a good start. I think you'll be a fine father...someday."

Harry looked nervous. "I'm worried about that, actually. I don't have much practical experience in that department. I don't want to treat my children the way Uncle Vernon treated me, always yelling and locking me in my...room."

Ginny rubbed his hand with her thumb and forefinger. "Harry, never in a million years could you be the kind of...arse that Vernon is. Besides, you'll have me to keep you on the straight and narrow."

Harry smiled and, remembering something Professor Trelawney mentioned in fifth-year, said, "Actually, if our Divination teacher is to be believed, I'm going to have a dozen children." Ginny's eyes bugged and he let out a hearty laugh. "She really said that – and even said I'd be Minister of Magic one day."

"Well," Ginny said, seeming to recover. "I'll have the babies and you make the Wizarding world safe for them to grow up in. Deal?"

Harry nodded and let out a breath. "Deal."

The Bargain 5: The Receiving of Advice

Chapter Five – The Receiving of Advice

August 3

"Morning, all," Mr. Weasley said jauntily as he strode into the kitchen the next morning. His briefcase swung loosely from his hand as he sidled up to his wife and pecked her on the cheek. "It's shaping up to be a fine day."

He took a sip of tea and folded the recently-delivered *Daily Prophet* under an arm. Then with a wink at Harry, he said, "See you tonight, kids, Molly."

"Not so fast," Mrs. Weasley replied, grabbing the collar of his robe before she gave him a lingering kiss full on the mouth. "Now you can go. Have a nice day, dear."

Harry's eyebrows arched high on his forehead, and he gave Ginny a questioning look.

Leaning forward, Ginny whispered, "Mum reckoned he'd had enough time on the sofa."

"Oh," Harry replied. He was glad for Mr. Weasley, although he tried very hard to not think about what his future in-laws did when they were behind closed doors. Would he still be chasing after Ginny in forty years? Would he spend the night, or several nights, on the sofa? He was fairly certain that his own dad would have spent a night or two on the sofa, but he wasn't looking forward to that in the least. Maybe he could work it into the list of things that he had to discuss with Ginny. A sharp poke to his arm broke his reverie.

"Huh?" he responded, looking up to see Ginny talking to him.

"I said, did you get a chance to look at the invitations yet?"

Molly had returned from her errands yesterday with a stack of sample invitations, swatches of coloured materials, and a load of advice that Harry couldn't make head nor tails of. Ginny, however, had dived headlong into the job of coordinating their wedding.

"I fell asleep with them strewn around my bed, after wading through only half of them," Ginny said. She buttered a scone, took a bite, and then continued with a simpering voice, "Are you sure you don't want to look at them with me?"

Harry cradled his mug of tea and shook his head. "Definitely not; it's too soon. I've still got to propose to you properly, remember?"

Ginny downed the rest of her scone and wiped primly at her mouth with a napkin. "Yes, I remember. You'd best get a move on with that, Mr. Potter."

Laughing and then taking a sip of tea, Harry replied, "I promise only two things: one, I'll propose to you before the wedding; and two, it'll be when you least expect it."

Ginny harrumphed and stood abruptly. "You're a tease, did you know that?"

"Am I?" he asked cheekily. "Who would have thought?"

Instead of a witty reply as Harry was expecting, she stuck her tongue out at him, swept up her dishes and marched over to the sink.

*

After breakfast, Harry met Tonks again for additional dance lessons. While he'd made tonnes of progress at their session yesterday, he was nowhere near the level of proficiency he wanted to achieve for his own wedding.

When he had finished running through two different waltzes and a very exhausting tango, his legs aching in protest, he was surprised to see Remus walk up the stairs to meet them.

"I see Miss Tonks has you well on your way to becoming a proficient dancer," Harry's old professor said. "Despite her normally clumsy nature, Nymphadora has always been able to strap on a pair of dancing shoes and leave us mere mortals in the dust."

Tonks walked over to Remus, her face a mask of feigned sweetness, and elbowed him in the gut. Remus let out his breath in a *whoosh* and Tonks smiled over to Harry. "That's for calling me by my given name," she said, still smiling as if he had handed her a bouquet of roses.

Harry chuckled into his hand as Remus clutched his middle. "Yes, well," he gasped. "As pleasurable as this encounter has been, I've come to collect Harry."

I'm not going back to the Burrow?" Harry asked pointedly.

Remus shook his head. "No. There's a small matter you and I need to discuss, and seeing as how you need a shower anyway, we can do both back at my place."

*

Harry reflected on Remus' words as he Apparated to Grimmauld Place and realised that he should have made the connection to what his 'place' was and the former headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Being back here was difficult for Harry. The old, dreary exterior reflected his own feelings on returning to his godfather's house. Remus ushered Harry in with a gentle smile.

They entered the foyer, and Harry could immediately tell that nothing had been cleaned in the year and a half since he'd last been there. "I had wanted to do this in a more congenial atmosphere, but the only other option was the Burrow, and –" Remus looked unaccountably nervous, rubbing his hands together, his eyes darting back and forth. Harry wondered what in the world could cause him to be so distracted.

"Let's sit in the kitchen, shall we?" Remus asked, clenching his hands as if to keep them from shaking. "It's much brighter in there than the rest of the house."

Sitting across from his guardian at the worn wooden table, Harry tried to make eye contact but it was a futile effort. Remus stuttered and stammered as he attempted to say something, and the mere fact that he was so flummoxed made Harry stare harder. "Whatever it is, Remus, you'd best get it off your chest. Merlin knows you've already laid enough of a bombshell on me this year."

Remus sighed and finally looked at Harry. "I know. You'd think I'd be able to just tell you..." He started to mutter something, but Harry only caught bits and snatches of it. "...kill Padfoot for leaving me to do this...should have known it would come down to me...not remotely qualified..."

After a few more minutes, a few quiet curses, and a belaboured sigh, Remus seemed to collect himself enough to begin.

"All right. I'm ready." Harry smiled encouragingly, and Remus continued. "What do you know about...girls?" he asked as nonchalantly as he could.

Harry cursed inwardly. He should have guessed this would be what it was about. Remus was going to give him *The Talk*. Better him than Arthur Weasley, Harry thought. At least he would be spared the indignity of being given the details on his intended's anatomy from her father. Or worse yet, Uncle Vernon.... The mental image alone made Harry's lips pucker as if he'd sucked on a freshly cut lemon.

"Well," Harry began, coughing slightly to release a nervous bit of energy. "I've heard things...here and there. It's not like I'm completely ignorant, or anything." Heat was rising in his cheeks, but he fought it down. There wasn't anything to get worked up over, yet. Remus might lose his nerve, after all.

"Yes, that is the sort of thing I'd expect, of course." Remus cleared his throat loudly. "But I was hoping to get a little more...in-depth and technical about it. You see, as uncomfortable as this is – for both of us – there is a risk that being misinformed on the subject could lead to even greater, um...discomfort...later."

"Oh," Harry replied. He tried to look like he knew what Remus was talking about, but in reality, he was thoroughly confused.

"So, perhaps you have some questions?" Remus paused and gave Harry a pleading smile. For some reason, however, Harry didn't feel like giving him anything to start out with. If Harry had to endure *The Talk*, then so did Remus.

"No, not really." Then, remembering an essay Hermione forced him to proofread for Hagrid's class, he said, "Maybe you could start with pheromonal attraction techniques?" *If it worked for Griffins, it should work for humans, right?*

Remus blanched, and then his mouth fell open. "What do you...? How...?"

Harry let him blabber on for a second longer, and then said, "Just joking. Look, it's not like either of us are experts on the subject..."

"Excuse me," Remus said, as if he was affronted at the idea of not being an expert, but Harry kept going.

"But we're both guys, and I know a little bit about kissing and...stuff." Harry had never really planned on getting *The Talk* from anyone, so he was determined to make this one as short and non-descript as possible. "I mean, it's not like you've got loads of experience or anything."

Remus pinned Harry with his hardest stare and with clearly enunciated words, said, "My experience is not germane to this discussion, Harry. I assure you that I am fully qualified to address this topic. What is at issue here is the fact that in about a week, you're going to be *compelled* to successfully perform certain acts with Miss Weasley. While you may think you know enough to get by, I can guarantee you that what I have to share with you tonight will do much more than just meet the minimum requirements."

Harry swallowed nervously and nodded his head in compliance, but indulged in an inward smile. He could see that Remus had passed over his own discomfort, allowing his teacher instincts to kick in.

"Now, if you're through insulting my love life, let's talk about – parts."

A chart was produced, and Harry's face instantly flamed. It was going to be difficult not to let his mind replace the moving diagrams with images of Ginny, but he'd just have to do the best he could.

*

A large tub full of soapy clothes occupied Ginny's morning after Harry left. Her mum was once again off running errands, which -- Ginny was growing more and more aware -- were all wedding-related, and would likely be gone for most of the day. Ron and Hermione were taking advantage of the lack of supervision, and had gone walking around the village, something Ginny had pegged for her next date with Harry. She suspected her brother was planning on more snogging than walking, but took consolation in the fact that Hermione had brought her book bag. One sure thing about Ron dating Hermione was that his homework was always going to be done, done well, and on time.

Ginny blew a piece of hair from her face as she poked her washing stick into the magically-churning tub to make sure the agitation cycle didn't chew up her robes. Harry was with Tonks for some mystery meeting that everyone but her seemed to know about. It wasn't that Ginny was jealous that he was keeping a secret from her -- she had certainly kept her fair share of secrets -- it was the feeling that time was increasingly scarce, and as far as she was concerned, any time *away* from Harry this week was time wasted.

Two identical *pops* announced the twins' arrival in the kitchen. Ginny heard them open the cold pantry and begin to rummage through for food.

Leaving the clothes to sit before the rinse cycle, Ginny peeked around the door, asking, "What are you two up to?"

Fred and George froze for a long second before closing the pantry and facing her. "Nothing, nothing at all, dear sister," Fred said with far too much vehemence. "Just nicking some lunch."

"Care to make us some sandwiches?" George asked as they sat at the table. "We're starved."

Ginny narrowed her eyes and walked fully into the kitchen. "I'm not your mother, so you can make your ruddy sandwiches yourself."

"That's nice," Fred said. "Reckon Harry'll get the same treatment, George?"

"Knowing her, he'd better plan on making all his own sandwiches, or he's bound to get hexed for thinking about asking her," George replied.

Stopping in front of her brothers, Ginny crossed her arms, and gave them both calculating stares. "And just what are you *really* up to? You're not fooling me for a second with all this sandwich talk. I know what pre-prank planning looks like when I see it."

The twins looked at each other before Fred smiled. "Ginny, Ginny, Ginny. What makes you think we're here to play a prank on anyone? You know we don't eat well at the shop."

"And Mum's made it clear she wants us to come here for a bite from time to time," George added.

Still suspicious, Ginny uncrossed her arms and pointed a finger at them both. "If Harry's pranked a single time by either of you, I'll hex you faster than you can say Canary Cream. Do you understand me?"

They swallowed and nodded. "We wouldn't dream of hurting lckle Harrykins. Now that he's your husband-to-be..."

"Good," Ginny pronounced. "Now make your sandwiches and get back to your shop before I hex you on general principle."

She turned and stomped back to the laundry, while Fred and George mumbled to themselves.

"Ungrateful, that's what she is."

"Spitting image of Mum. Hate to see how she treats her kids if she treats us like that."

With a sigh and a shake of her head, Ginny listened to them banter as they ate. She loved her brothers dearly, but sometimes, they just didn't know when to quit. She and Harry had enough to bother with and didn't need to be watching their backs at every turn just because the twins felt it their duty to prank every boy she'd ever dated. Ginny smiled at her thoughts -- maybe some pre-emptive pranking would be a good idea for her afternoon with Harry.

With the clothes spinning in the tub, she began to fold the load that had finished drying while she was in the kitchen. As the pile slowly dwindled and the next load went into the drying cauldron, Ginny began to formulate a plan -- starting with her eldest sibling.

*

Materializing in the Burrow's front parlour, Harry shook his head at the simplicity of Apparition. Faster than Floo, more flexible than a Portkey, it was no wonder that Harry loved to travel that way.

Remus' talk with Harry had lasted far longer than either of them had planned, leaving him with no time for a much-needed shower. What started out as an awkward, furtive discussion ended up being one of the highlights of the day. Remus had treated him with respect and trust, while Harry became genuinely interested in making his first time with Ginny more than a perfunctory performance.

When Harry turned to walk up the stairs, he came face to face with Ginny.

"Oh, Harry," she said haltingly and flung herself onto him.

Harry became suddenly nervous as she clung to him, and he found himself doing a marginally better job at consoling her than he had done last time. When she pulled away, Harry looked down to see her eyelashes moist.

"What's the matter, Ginny?" he asked sincerely. "Has something happened?"

Ginny gave a watery laugh. "Everything's fine. Well," she amended, "unless you count the gits I call my brothers."

Sensing that she wasn't expecting a comment, Harry let her continue. "They showed up this afternoon to help themselves to lunch, but then they went upstairs and I haven't seen them since." She looked up to Harry and touched his cheek. "I know they're planning on pranking you somehow. I just wish they'd leave us alone – to let us get to know each other better – without the distraction."

Relieved that her concerns were so simple to fix, Harry took in a deep breath and said, "Ginny, I know your brothers are a little...boisterous at times." She giggled a little at this, and Harry continued. "But I don't have a problem with them pranking me. It's actually sort of an honour – a rite of passage into the family."

Ginny's eyes were shining again as she gazed up at him. "You really believe that?"

"Of course," Harry said, and gave her shoulders a reassuring pat. "Besides, it's not like I'm going to let them get away with anything."

Ginny smiled, a conniving, almost-wicked smile that he knew was reflected on his own face. "So the only question is..." he said, deliberately leaving the sentence dangling.

"How do we do it?" Ginny finished for him. "I've already got a plan on how to deal with Bill and Charlie."

"Oh?" Harry asked, very interested in discovering how Ginny's mind worked.

"Yes," Ginny answered, then leaned towards Harry and sniffed. "But you smell like a changing room. You better get showered before Mum comes home and thinks you've been playing Quidditch all day. We'll work out the details when you get finished."

"That, I can do." Then without really thinking, he leaned down and planted a kiss on her cheek.

She sucked in a breath as Harry walked past her, all-too aware of their close proximity in the cramped stairwell. Fighting a flush of pleasure at the contact, Harry inched past her and hurried to the topmost bedroom to fetch a new set of clothes. With a pair of jeans, a loose-fitting shirt and underwear tucked under his arm, he proceeded back down to the only bathroom in the house.

*

After her encounter with Harry on the stairs, Ginny returned to the kitchen and started preparing for dinner. Mum had left instructions for her to remove the Freezing Charms on several cuts of beef so they could begin to thaw, then to bake some fresh rolls.

With the meat warming in a spot of sunlight under the window by the sink, Ginny went to the dry pantry for the flour, salt, and yeast. She cleaned a spot on the table with a soapy rag, making sure to wipe all the soap off, and then sprinkled the area with a liberal amount of flour.

As she started to mix the dough, she heard water creaking through the pipes and knew that Harry was showering. Thoughts of a naked Harry in the same shower she had used every day of her at-home life – water cascading down his body, his arms raised to lather shampoo into his hair – sent shivers up her spine. She started humming to herself to keep from getting too caught up in that mental image.

Ginny's hands were deep into the dough, kneading in the last of the flour, when she heard a high-pitched squeal followed by a thunder of feet on the stairs and a door slamming from somewhere above her head – where the twins' room was located. She narrowed her eyes and formed the bread into a ball, then threw a towel over it.

As she came up the stairs, she didn't hear the water running, but did hear someone stammering something from inside the bathroom. "G-G-G-G-in-n-n-n-y," said Harry in a halting voice.

"Harry?" she asked tentatively, putting a hand up to the door. "Are you all right?"

"C-C-C-C-o-o-l-d," came Harry's stuttering reply.

"Hold on," Ginny said. "I'm coming in."

She opened the door and saw that Harry was still in the shower. The normal steam on the mirror was absent and she wondered if he had just run out of hot water. Then she saw, through a gap in the curtain, that the taps were full on, but a line of ice was attached to the showerhead.

"Harry, I'm going to pull back the curtain." She thought she heard him mumble 'okay' and with a tentative pull on the material, she drew it back to reveal Harry, completely encased in a sheet of ice. He was huddled in the corner away from the showerhead and positioned perfectly so she didn't see anything she hadn't seen on her brothers before. And speaking of her brothers...

Ginny grabbed Harry's wand from the countertop and shoved it into his partially-freed hand. "Cast an Ice-Breaking Charm, Harry. I've got to take care of something."

She turned around and bolted out the door, up the stairs and began pounding on the twins' door. "Let me in this instant, you insensitive, miserable morons!"

There was no answer behind their locked door. In a fit of raw magic, Ginny forced the door open. It tore off the hinges, raining splinters of wood across the messy floor and clattered against one of the beds. Up against the far wall, Fred and George stared at their sister, eyes wide and afraid.

"It wasn't our fault!" George yelled immediately.

"You're telling me that you did *nothing* to the shower?" Ginny asked, her voice on her hips, her voice quivering in anger.

"Well, not directly," Fred hedged. "We did cast a small Freezing Spell."

"But it was set to only go off under a certain set of circumstances," George amended.

When Ginny didn't blow up immediately, Fred continued, "It was Harry's fault, really. Only he could set off the hex. It's not our fault that he couldn't keep his mind out of the gutter."

Pointing a finger at Fred, she bore down on him. "What - Did - You - Do?"

"It wasn't anything that Mum hasn't done to one of us," said George. "Remember when she did that to Charlie about seven years ago? Right after she caught him with a copy of *Playwizard* magazine in his room?"

"What did you do?" Ginny repeated.

"H-He had to be thinking about a naked girl to set off the hex, Ginny."

Reeling back towards the broken door, Ginny shook her head. Harry had been thinking about a girl, a naked girl? In the shower? She reviewed the nature of the hex that both of them suffered from as a result of the arranged marriage and concluded that he wouldn't be able to safely entertain *any* amorous thoughts about any girl except...her.

A new wave of fury welled inside her as she regarded her brothers. "If you think I'm going to let you get away with this...this ridiculous display of immaturity, you've got another think coming!"

Her hand shot up, coloured sparks flying from her fingertips. She began blasting at each of them. Fred's arms turned into tentacles and his face contorted into that of a monkey's while George dove behind one of their beds. She finished with Fred, then leapt onto the bed itself and proceeded to transfigure George's legs into a fishtail and apply Engorging and Shrinking Charms to the rest of his body.

Satisfied, Ginny walked down to the bathroom to sort out Harry, wondering how she was going to defrost her intended while keeping her own thoughts cool enough to avoid being shot across the room.

*

The Ice-Breaking Charm was inherently difficult for Harry to perform – seeing as how he could hardly pronounce the spell with his teeth chattering like a charmed nutcracker. Still, after a few tries, he was able to clear away most of the ice and turn off the taps. Naked, shivering, and with aching muscles, Harry covered himself with a towel while the sounds of yelping and yelling reached his ears.

Someone pounded down the stairs and stopped in the open doorway, just as Harry turned to see who it was.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said soothingly. "I'm so sorry about those idiots. I knew they were up to something, but I didn't realise they would attack your shower. Then they told me about how the curse was activated and..."

She stopped suddenly and her face turned an attractive pink. "Well, never mind about that. Let's get you warmed up, shall we?"

Harry nodded shakily and pulled his towel tighter. "S-Still...n-naked," he said.

"Yes," Ginny replied, rubbing her hands up and down his arms. "I can see that."

"C-C-Clothes," Harry blurted, nodding towards the pile next to the vanity.

Ginny gave him an odd sort of look and, with a wicked smile, said, "You want me to dress you?"

"G-G-Go!" he managed to say, then, at her stricken look, added, "W-Wait for m-m-me outside."

Still looking peeved, Ginny stomped out of the bathroom and closed the door. With a phenomenal effort, Harry pulled on his clothes, still shivering like mad, and then opened the door.

Ginny was sulking in the hallway and refused to look at him. Harry touched her shoulder, and she jerked it away. "S-S-Sorry," he stammered out. "For s-s-snapping."

With a sigh, she turned around to face him and pulled him into an embrace. She was so warm – he couldn't help but pull her tighter to him in an attempt to fight off his lingering chills. "I know it's not your fault, Harry," she said into his chest. "I'm just mad at the twins, and worried about you, and...a little scared."

Harry frowned as he rested his chin on her head, feeling the shivers melt away as they hugged. "Scared? About what?" he asked.

Ginny pulled away from him and wiped at her eyes. "Just... All of this," she said with a sweep of her hands. "The whole idea that we're being forced into this marriage, and..."

"Shh," Harry said soothingly. He took her by the shoulders and caught her eye. "Forget that we're going to be married for a minute. Forget about the hex and about all the pressure. Then ask yourself one question: Do you want to be with me?"

A smile crooked on her face as she regarded him, and then she nodded. "Yes, Harry. I do, very much."

Warmth flooded into his veins under Ginny's penetrating stare, banishing all vestiges of the twins' prank. "We'd better make the most of it, then."

August 4

Arriving at Gringotts the next morning, Harry and Ginny immediately walked towards a set of offices on the second floor marked 'International Division'. Ginny led them to a back corner that resembled an open-air bazaar, with its festive décor and multi-coloured flags. Stopping at a desk painted in blue, white and red, Harry was shocked to see a familiar blonde witch sitting on the other side.

"Ginny, 'Arry," exclaimed Fleur Delacour. She slapped a stack of papers onto her desk and stood to greet them. "What a pleasant surprise."

Harry was impressed. "Your English has improved, Fleur. You must have had an excellent tutor."

As Fleur kissed him on both cheeks, he briefly wondered why her Veela charms were having such a weak effect on him. He shrugged it off. He'd never been as affected by her aura of attraction the way Ron had been from time to time.

"My tutor started by teaching me some things that cannot be repeated in front of such innocent people as yourselves." Her smile flashed in the dim light of the office, and Harry knew that if other men had been in her presence, they would be drooling at the sight of it.

"Well," Ginny remarked, as she, too, received a kiss on each cheek, "I think you've done a marvellous job despite all the distractions my brother posed for you."

Fleur laughed. "Yes, well, he can be a bit of a 'andful."

"Speaking of which," Ginny said, looking around as if to make sure no one was listening, "I wonder if I might ask you something. Watch the desk, Harry, while Fleur and I have a little girl-to-girl chat."

"Oui," Harry said, using the only French word he knew, and watched the girls walk behind a small partition that was obviously used for private conferences.

Their twittering voices were light and airy at first, though Harry could only make out a word here and there. As he glanced around the office, pretending to be interested in the inner workings of the Wizarding world's largest bank, the voices behind the partition grew more urgent, until he heard a gasp of surprise followed by a string of what could only be French.

A moment later, with Fleur at her heels, Ginny reappeared, holding a set of keys and a small slip of parchment.

"Neither of us will be at the flat tonight, Ginny," Fleur explained with a slight giggle. "Feel free to take as much time as you like. Au revoir."

With a mischievous smile on her face, Ginny practically skipped out of the offices and onto the main floor of the bank.

Harry watched her appraisingly, appreciating the way her shoulders were set as she walked down the hall. "So when are you going to let me in on your master plan, O Great One?"

Ginny jingled the keys teasingly in front of him and said, "All in good time, Mr. Potter. Do you think you could Apparate the two of us to a set of coordinates?"

Taken by surprise, Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure if that's wise. My Apparation classes talked about it, but said that only a really powerful wizard could do it under the best of circumstances."

"The thing is," Ginny said slowly, "if we can't Apparate, we have to take Muggle transportation all the way to South London – he doesn't have a Floo connection. We wouldn't be back until *late*."

Harry knew what she was referring to. One of the conditions of their outing today was that they be home in time for dinner. It wasn't that Mrs. Weasley didn't trust them, as much as that she wanted them to be accountable during their courtship. Harry understood and made it a matter of honour to bring Ginny back safe by dinner.

"All right," Harry said at length. "But if we get Splinched, I'm telling your mother it was your idea."

Ginny beamed and threaded her arm into his as they walked to the Apparation point in the bank's lobby. Harry read the coordinates. "This is in Muggle London, Ginny. Are you sure we can Apparate there?"

"Fleur said it was on the balcony of his flat, and that the keys were for the back door," Ginny explained. "We could try the front door, but Bill's got it charmed so that only he and Fleur can open it."

Harry let out a low whistle. "Is he a little paranoid, do ya think?"

With a laugh, Ginny said, "Probably thinks it's standard to hex an entryway fifty times from seeing it done so often in those ruddy Pyramids."

"Well, let's just hope the back way isn't hexed, too, and he just didn't tell Fleur about it."

Ginny laughed again, but it took on a much more sinister quality. "When we're done, Harry, Bill will be lucky to slither out of his flat the next time he goes home."

With a raised eyebrow, Harry looked at the coordinates one more time and concentrated a little more than usual, letting his magic build up twice as much as normal, then released it into the spell. With a loud *crack*, they were gone.

*

Having never Apparated before, Ginny was excited to be Harry's first passenger. She knew that it was uncommon for anyone to use dual Apparation, but she also knew that Harry was an extremely powerful wizard and that if anyone could do it, he could.

So it was quite anti-climactic for them to end up on Bill's balcony, with all four of their feet in potted plants.

"That's lovely," Ginny remarked, and then pulled her feet from the hydrangeas. Her trainers were covered in wet soil and she shook them until dirt was flung everywhere on the wooden flooring.

"Ginny," Harry said slowly. "I could just clean them off for you."

Ginny froze, one leg in mid-shake and looked up to Harry – then burst into laughter. "Yes," she said after a moment. "I suppose that would be more efficient, wouldn't it?"

Harry sighed, pointed his wand and muttered, "*Scourgify*," at each of their shoes, then at the balcony's floor for good measure.

With their shoes clean and their bodies intact, Ginny extracted the slip of parchment Fleur had given her and began to tap on the French doors in a series of complicated patterns. When the doors clicked open, she knew she'd done it right.

"Let's go," Ginny said, and led Harry inside the flat.

Harry flicked the Muggle light switch and a half-dozen recessed lights flared overhead. Ginny had been here once before, when Bill had first moved back to London to help with the Order, and knew that they would have to avoid the front entryway at all costs. However, her plans didn't include the entryway – Bill would expect a trap there. No, she headed right for the bedroom.

As they walked over the threshold, Ginny noticed at least two weeks' worth of dirty laundry on the floor in messy piles. Bill's chest of drawers was open and had clothes spilling out of it onto the floor, mingling with the dirty ones.

"How does he know what's clean and what's dirty?" she wondered out loud.

"I don't think he cares too much," Harry replied. "I'd wager his uh, 'flat mate' would be more concerned than him, though."

Ginny looked up at him, wondering what he was talking about – Bill was living alone, as far as she knew – and saw Harry holding in a laugh, pointing a finger at a pair of silk knickers. They were much racier than Ginny ever wore – pink with bits of lace around the edges – and were currently dangling from the bedpost.

"Blimey," she said. "Do you think they're..."

"Fleur's?" Harry finished for her. "They'd better be, for Bill's sake, anyway."

Ginny giggled into her hand and walked over to where they hung provocatively, as if they were there purposely to tease them. "I dunno," she said as she hooked a finger through one of the legs and twirled them around. "Don't they look a little small for Fleur?"

Harry gulped loudly. "I wouldn't know the first thing about girls' knickers, Ginny."

"Oh, come on," Ginny pressed. "You can't tell me you haven't thought about...*that* before."

The flush that crept onto Harry's face was worth every bit of payback she'd catch for teasing him, but to his credit, he didn't lose his composure in any other way. "Well," he finally said. "I *have*, strictly speaking. But it's not like the hex makes it worth much."

She pondered that for a second and put the knickers back on their perch. The fun of teasing him was replaced by an honest curiosity. "What's it like for you? The hex, I mean."

Harry picked his way through the messy room and sat on the bed. He looked at one of the piles of laundry for so long, she thought maybe he wasn't going to answer her. "It's horrible, really," he said at length. "When I was living with my aunt, I didn't exactly have a lot of opportunity for...you know, fantasies of that sort. I was mostly caught up with dreams of hexing them, or escaping, or living with...your family."

Ginny sat down next to him and placed her hand on the small of his back. He seemed to lose some of his tension and continued. "When I started Hogwarts, the only real girl I knew was Hermione, and, well...let's face it – fantasies about her usually involved a stack of books and a stern lecture about proper procedures."

Goggling at Harry, Ginny exclaimed, "You had *fantasies* about *Hermione*?"

Harry jumped a little at her declaration and gave her a wide-eyed glare. "I'm a bloke, Ginny. I suppose the only girls I didn't think about at Hogwarts were Winky, Professor Trelawney, Madam Pince and Professor McGonagall. I had fantasies about almost every girl in Gryffindor," he said defensively. "You know what blokes are like! It's not like I asked Lavender or," he shuddered, "Parvati to come prancing through my head. When I was asleep things were fairly normal, but when I was awake, I'd run the risk of tripping the hexes, only I didn't know it at the time. The one time I *did* –er– actively think about someone like that...well, the *first* time," he amended, pushing his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose, "I had a very

bad experience – it was like a barrel of ice water had been dumped on my head. I thought I was...I dunno, broken or something – judging by the way Seamus and Dean carried on, anyway.”

Unable to contain her mirth, Ginny leaned into Harry’s shoulder and giggled uncontrollably.

“What?” he demanded in a wounded voice. “Did you ask that just to laugh at me?”

Suddenly not feeling like laughing, Ginny looked up and saw a frown on his lips. “Oh, Harry,” she soothed, gently rubbing her hand up and down his back. “I wasn’t trying to make fun of you. I was honestly curious – I had the same thing happen to me, but...mine was a little bit more embarrassing.”

Harry’s eyes softened and then a twinkle appeared in them. “It couldn’t be. You know you have to tell me now that you’ve mentioned it, don’t you?” He shifted over on the bed until their hips were touching, and then turned slightly to face her properly.

“Is that right?” Ginny asked cockily, but she was secretly nervous by his proximity. “I *have* to?”

“It’s only fair, you know.” His face loomed closer to hers now, and Ginny was certain he could hear her heart beating, it was so loud in her ears. She was only slightly less certain that he was going to finally kiss her.

“Only...fair,” she repeated, letting her eyes flutter closed.

The bed shifted, and when she opened her eyes, he was standing away from her, facing the adjoining bathroom. “You never did tell me what happened between you and Dean.”

Bereft and a little peeved at herself for expecting him to kiss her, Ginny stood and walked around to face him. “Nothing happened – well...at first.” She pulled her hair back into a messy bun and shoved her wand into it to hold it in place. “We were snogging a little in the broom closet by the portrait of Ignatia Wildsmith, and things got a little...involved and.... Harry,” she said suddenly, “I’ve only really kissed two boys before, and you have to understand that Michael wasn’t the most experienced, so we never really got much past...*standard* kissing.”

Harry blanched a little. “You mean?”

Ginny nodded. “When we were in the closet, Dean began to undo the buttons on my blouse as he tried to French kiss me, and he was...sort of...uh, blown out of the closet and onto Mrs. Norris.”

They stared at each other for a second, standing in her brother’s bedroom, surrounded by piles of dirty laundry and a pair of dangling knickers, and then began to snigger. Harry cracked first, and then when Ginny remembered the terrified look on the poor cat’s face, she couldn’t hold it in any longer. Soon, they were hanging on to each other in desperation, trying not to fall to the floor.

“So *that’s* what happened to him,” Harry finally blurted. “I thought he said he was hexed by a gang of Slytherins...but that *was* at the same time you and he broke up.”

“Exactly,” Ginny confirmed. “But I’m afraid it was just little Ginny Weasley that landed him in the hospital wing.”

Harry gave another low chuckle and then shook his head. “So, Miss Weasley,” he said, holding out his hand to her. “Shall we proceed with pranking your oldest brother?”

Ginny took his hand and smiled. “I think we should. You’ve got the wand, I’ve got the brilliant plan.”

She explained in detail the layered series of charms and hexes that she wanted to bind onto her brother. At first Harry looked confused, but he soon got the big picture, and admiration for her cunning, devious mind – not to mention her skill at spell weaving – clearly grew tremendously. Setting to work, they began to weave a series of pranks that no normal mind would ever consider in combination – certainly not for the purpose of revenge on an overbearing, nosey brother. Bill was doomed.

The Bargain 6: The Love of Money

Chapter Six – The Love of Money

August 5

Harry awoke to the sounds of china and silverware clinking downstairs as the Weasley family began to rise for the day. Ron was snoring lightly on his bed – a pleasant change from the normally high-volume noise he exuded. The sun was peeking through the orange curtains, casting a garish glow on the equally orange walls and Harry allowed himself a lazy stretch as he remembered the previous evening.

Harry and Ginny had barely made it back to the Burrow in time because after they were finished with Bill's flat, Ginny made Harry Apparate them to Charlie's. It was a bit trickier getting inside because they didn't have a girlfriend to appeal to for help with the wards. They took almost thirty minutes trying to figure out the charms on the door before Ginny brilliantly suggested that they simply Apparate inside. They had discovered that there weren't any anti-Apparation wards and they were able to pop into his flat with no problem.

The nature of the hexes they put on Charlie's bedroom was less involved than Bill's because of the nature of the two bachelor's current domestic arrangements. They would, however, each have a definite problem upon awaking that morning, or more accurately, several definite problems.

When Harry decided it was time to go downstairs, he did so with gusto – happy at the prospect of seeing the results of their pranks. Clattering around the twists and turns of the many-storied staircase, Harry nearly ran into a startled Molly Weasley.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clutching a pile of folded towels to her chest.

Reaching down slightly to Molly's cheek, Harry gave her a peck and said, "Morning, Mum," and continued into the kitchen proper. He turned back and noticed that she was still holding tightly to the towels, but that she was also touching a hand to her cheek and had a slight smile on her face.

"Morning, Harry," Ginny said with a twinkle in her eye. She sat at the table in her dressing gown, the *Daily Prophet* folded in front of her, and an air of expectation that seemed to match what Harry found within himself.

"A very good morning to you, fair Ginny," Harry said as he sat next to her, earning a glance from Arthur, who had just followed Harry into the kitchen.

The Weasley patriarch took the *Prophet* from the table and sat opposite them, ruffling the paper noisily as he unfolded it. "You seem awfully chipper for this early in the morning, Ginny. Unless I'm mistaken, there's some mischief about to befall one of us, isn't there?"

With an angelic face, Ginny turned to her father and said, "I don't have a clue what you're talking about, Daddy. I'm just happy to be alive."

Arthur made a disbelieving grunt and focused on the paper. "Oh dear," he said and Harry watched his eyes quickly scan the front page. "Oh, my. It appears that your secret is out, Ginny."

Grabbing the paper from her father, Ginny pushed it out flat in front of her and Harry read the headline over her shoulder.

Boy-Who-Lived Finds Love or Headache?

In a surprise discovery by the Daily Prophet, it has been learned that Harry Potter is to be wed to Ginevra Weasley of Ottery St. Catchpole by her upcoming birthday or they will both be left barren and unable to legally wed anyone else. A senior Ministry official was quoted as saying, "The pair of them have to abide by an arranged marriage that was enacted under the Founding Decree of the Wizarding world." As of this article's printing, the Wizengamot has stricken that part of the law pertaining to arranged marriages, but it seems too late for the famous Mr. Potter and his intended. The question remains, is he in love with his bride to be, or will he marry for honour, and not passion?

Ginny was slowly turning red as she read the paper, so that by the time Harry caught up to where she was silently mouthing the words, he half-expected steam to come pouring out of her ears. Instead, Harry grabbed the paper from her and handed it back to Mr. Weasley.

"Some things never change – the *Prophet*'s had it out for me for years," Harry said to no one in particular. Then turning to Ginny, he placed an arm around her shoulders and said, "I'm sorry this happened. It was inevitable, I suppose, but I had hoped it wouldn't happen until *after* we'd been married."

Ginny grumbled, but her anger dissipated as she leaned into his embrace.

Arthur continued to look appraisingly at the two teens as Molly breezed into the kitchen and beamed at Harry. "I never got to greet you properly; good morning, Harry," she said, ruffling his hair as he was still wrapped around her daughter. With a contented sigh, she moved off to the kitchen and began sending plates of steaming food onto the table with her wand.

Ginny nudged Harry in the ribs. "What'd you do to Mum? I've not seen her that happy since Ron was made Prefect."

"I wager he's finally treating her like she's hoped ever since he showed up here five years ago," Arthur volunteered.

Harry smiled and nodded at his future father-in-law. "You saw, didn't you?"

"I was coming out of the living room when you ran into her," Arthur answered. "You did right, *son* ." He stood and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "I better go in to work and get ready for the onslaught of questions. The rumour-mill will be going full-tilt today."

"Bye, Dad," Ginny said and he was gone with a *crack* .

"So," said Ginny as Harry retracted his arm to begin loading up food. "Buttering up the in-laws, huh?" She, too, began to pile eggs and bacon onto her plate. "You don't have to, you know? They've always liked you."

Harry fought off a flush of embarrassment and nodded. It was one of the only things he had ever counted on; something that had yet to fail him. No matter what the rumours had been, or what he'd done, the Weasleys had always loved him – and he numbered that among his most treasured possessions. "It's not like that. I guess it's what I should have been doing all along," he said quietly.

Just as Ron stumbled down the staircase, a loud *crack* echoed in the kitchen and Bill Weasley appeared, half-dressed, and decidedly angry. "Where are they?" he asked in a deadly voice. His wand was held tightly in one hand as he searched the kitchen. Across his forehead in odd-shaped bumps was the word 'Insensitive'.

Ron stifled a laugh into his fist and said, "Are those..."

"Warts," Ginny said without the slightest hint that she had anything to do with Bill's predicament. She took a small bite of toast and set it primly onto her plate.

"The twins?" Ron asked. Harry was wondering how many of the hexes Bill had managed to set off before Apparating to the Burrow. Well, he knew of at least one that was tripped.

"They'll rue the day they were born!" Bill yelled, and then began to hobble towards the stairs – his legs appeared to be fused together at his knees and it took him a full minute to reach the first step. He stopped abruptly, still fuming and cursing under his breath, when Harry realised what his problem was – he couldn't get up the steps.

Undaunted, Bill began to yell up the stairwell. "Get down here right now Fred, George! I know you did this to me and I want you to set me to rights!"

Molly walked out from the pantry and placed her hands on her hips. "What is the meaning of this?" When Bill shakily turned on his heels, Molly bit her lip to keep the laughing at bay.

"The twins aren't here, Bill," Ginny said slowly, a gleam in her eyes. "But I don't think they could have pulled off those hexes. It's not their style."

Bill turned from his mum to his sister and goggled at her. "Not their style.... What are you playing at?"

Instead of answering, however, Ginny simply took a sip of tea and smiled at her brother.

"It was you!" he said finally, then looked at Harry. "And you!"

Harry felt a bubble of laughter start to form in his lungs and, despite the wrath of his future in-law, he couldn't seem to feel afraid.

"The only thing I can't figure out," Ginny said calmly, still not the least bit perturbed, "is how you were able to counter the bladder-buster hex." She wrinkled her nose, sniffing. "Never mind..."

At that moment, Harry noticed that Bill's pyjamas looked decidedly wet, particularly along the legs, but that because his legs were sealed together, it was hard to notice.

Ron and Molly looked like they were watching a car wreck in slow motion, and the idea sent Harry's resolve out the window. Laughing silently, Harry managed to choke out, "And the...three different types of...binding charms."

Bill blanched. "There were three?"

"Didn't you notice your legs, Bill?" Molly asked before she returned to her cooking, seemingly unconcerned with her eldest son's fate.

His mouth working soundlessly, Bill pointed at himself, then Harry and Ginny, and then his face lit up. "You aren't going to know what's hit you, little one. When I'm through with you, your prank will look like a first year in Charms class."

He pulled up his sleeves and pointed his wand at Ginny. As they'd planned, she didn't react, so Harry cast a shield charm just as a beam of blue light shot out. It hit the shield, bounced over Bill's head and left a smoking hole in the plaster behind him.

"I wouldn't be so hasty, Bill," Ginny said smoothly. "Not only are there two of us and one of you, and never mind the fact that *you* and the others *started* this, but I know for a *fact* that Mum would be disappointed in you if she knew about the uh, arrangements at your flat."

Molly's ears perked up at this and she walked back over to the table. "What's this now, Ginny?"

Nothing, Mum!" Bill said loudly. "Just a little joke Ginny and I share. Right?"

If Ginny's smirk were any wider it would have split her face in two. "Of course, Bill. Just a little pink polka-dotted joke we use to keep each other on our toes."

She raised a meaningful eyebrow in his direction, as if to challenge his defiance, and he lowered his wand. "We'll just keep this one to ourselves, then?" he asked.

"As long as you leave us alone, you can consider it forgotten, brother of mine."

Bill let out a relieved breath and Ron, followed by Hermione, sat at the table.

"Oh, and Bill, dear?" said Mrs. Weasley as she returned to the oven, not bothering to even look over her shoulder. "Make sure to fix that hole you made in the wall before you go."

Grumbling to himself again, he cast a repairing charm on the hole and left the kitchen with a loud *crack*.

Hermione turned to Harry and Ginny. "So what did I miss?"

Harry laughed again, now that the tension had passed and said, "Just a little payback."

Hermione giggled. "So *that's* what you wanted the sneak spell for. You did a great job with the warts, by the way. I never would have thought of using it that way."

"Thought about what?" Ron asked. He must have been thoroughly interested in the question because not even the sultry smells of a hot breakfast deterred him from getting an answer.

"The hex, Ron," Hermione said. "I never would have thought to use warts instead of pimples." She took a piece of toast from the stack and began buttering it. "Much more appropriate for Bill, anyway."

Ron still looked perplexed, however. "How is that? It's not like he's a toad or something."

Hermione placed her toast on her plate and began to fill a glass with pumpkin juice. "It's too obvious, Ron. The charm was set to activate when Bill did something that he'd given Harry a hard time about. Because he was being hypocritical, he was branded as an insensitive wart."

"Right in one, Hermione," said Harry. Ginny's hand found his under the table and Harry's grin returned. "You *are* the smartest witch of your age for a reason."

"But what did you use as a trigger?" she responded sincerely, as only someone who was forever inquisitive could be.

Ginny glanced at Harry and they blushed. "He had to be thinking about...erm," she stammered, "a girl – without clothes."

"Must've been while he was sleeping," Harry remarked. "He didn't seem to even know he had them."

Ron seemed to consider this for a while and began to shovel eggs onto his plate. "Yeah, well, good job. I don't fancy being on the receiving end of one of your hexes, Ginny, so I'll just keep myself busy with Hermione."

Hermione swallowed her toast and with a steely glance, said, "That's nice, Ron. I suppose I'm just a pleasant summer diversion for you, then? Is that it?"

With the swiftest back-pedal Harry had ever seen, Ron was instantly contrite. "No, Hermione, that's not what I meant in the slightest. You're much better than a summer diversion – you're an all-year diversion."

Ginny pulled on Harry's hand as they watched Ron dig his hole deeper and deeper. He bent his ear to her and she whispered, "How long before Charlie gets here?"

Harry smiled and turned to whisper back. "I reckon it'll take him longer to get out of bed, but he won't be able to Apparate with his arms like that. Expect him to come by Floo."

Ginny giggled and laid her head on his shoulder, their hands still clasped together under the table. "We make a good team, Harry," she said.

Five minutes later, after Hermione had stormed out, leaving her half-empty plate on the table, and Ron had finished both his and Hermione's food, Harry wondered if Ron was going to be as insensitive as his brother, or if Hermione would be able to clue him in. He gave a contented sigh and barely noticed when the fireplace roared to life and another angry redhead spilled onto the kitchen floor.

*

Harry left for his last meeting with Tonks – doing what, Ginny *still* didn't know, but she had all but decided that she didn't mind the secrecy. Ron had been slated to clean the dishes, and because he hadn't got the hang of many of the standard domestic spells, he usually did it faster by hand. He would therefore likely be in the kitchen for at least half an hour. This all combined to make a perfect time for Ginny to enlist Hermione's help in choosing colours for the gowns, flowers, food, and all the rest of the things that Harry had made clear he was uninterested in being a part of.

Ginny sat on her bed surrounded by fabric swatches and moving pictures of floral arrangements while Hermione brushed out her long brown hair.

"So what do you think," Ginny asked, holding up two sets of swatches. "Ivy green and gold, or..." she looked at the tags once more, "warm butter cream and misty blue?"

Hermione set her brush down and ran her fingers through her hair. "What? No pink?" she said and sat on the floor at Ginny's feet.

"You know I hate pink, Hermione. Besides, Harry hasn't said a word about what *he* wants." Ginny placed the two sets of colours on the bed in front of her and gazed reluctantly between them. "I just don't know what to do."

"It's simple," Hermione said with a wink. "Find out what Harry's favourite colours are and choose the opposite."

With a stifled giggle, Ginny said, "Yes. That would get his attention, wouldn't it? His favourite colours are Gryffindor Red and Gold. It's why I chose the gold, and my favourite is green."

Hermione took the gold and green swatches and held them up. "Then why are you worried about the other set? It sounds like you've got the perfect colours right there – they're both your favourites and they match extraordinarily well."

Rolling her eyes, Ginny said, "Those others are what Mum wants. She not-so-subtly hinted that they were her preference."

Hermione stood and touched Ginny's shoulder. "You need to do what *you* want, Ginny. This is *your* wedding day, not your mum's. She's had her wedding and now you get to have yours."

Nodding her head in agreement, Ginny felt her heart tugging her in the opposite direction. "I just want her to be happy."

"And you don't think she'll be happy that you're marrying Harry?" Hermione asked with a laugh. "What colour dress she's wearing will be the furthest thing from your mum's mind when you walk down that aisle, I guarantee, Ginny Weasley."

"I suppose you're right," Ginny relented. "If only Harry would help me out with some of this." She grabbed a nearby picture of a rotating set of white roses and shook it in front of her for emphasis.

It seemed that Hermione could tell that the flower arrangements weren't really what was bothering Ginny.

"He'll propose soon enough, Ginny," Hermione said reassuringly. "I'm positive you'll enjoy the moment more if you're caught off guard a little anyway, so bask in the not knowing for now."

Ginny eyed her friend carefully. "You know something, don't you?"

Hermione walked lightly to the dresser and began to brush her hair again. "...might know *something*."

With a frustrated groan, Ginny flopped backward on her bed. "I wish it was just the proposal," she lamented. "He hasn't even kissed me!"

Even though she couldn't see her, Ginny knew that Hermione's eyebrows had just shot up on her forehead. "Is that right?" Hermione said. "I wonder why?"

"That's what I'd like to know!" Ginny sat up again and watched as Hermione gathered her hair into a ponytail and began to tie it with a red ribbon. "We were so close yesterday – at Bill's flat – I was *sure* he was about to kiss me and then...he just got up and acted like nothing had happened."

Hermione looked at Ginny in the mirror as she chewed on her lip. "Maybe he's just as scared as you are?"

A frown curved on Ginny's lips as she thought about this. "Maybe. Or maybe he's playing with my emotions."

"I hardly think that's likely," said Hermione. "He's not stupid, but he's not bright enough to be *that* manipulative. I mean, look at his C.V.* – Cho Chang, one kiss and one date that went down in flames. Not exactly the signature of a boy who plays with girl's emotions."

Unable to resist, Ginny let out a small laugh. "I suppose not. Still, I wish he'd get on with things. I know he likes me, Hermione – I can see it in his eyes – and he's bound to know that I like him..."

"Have you told him?" Hermione asked. "How sure are you that he knows you like him? Especially after your crush went away."

Ginny thought back to their first date, how he had looked at her that day and how they had been around each other since. The subtle hand-holding, the comfortable way that they had walked and talked together, and the definite fluttering in her stomach that plagued her with happiness and frustration – all told her that she was falling deeper in love with Harry. *But what if he didn't feel the same? What if he was just being noble for her sake?*

Pinning her friend with a stern look, Ginny said, "I don't know how sure I am, but you can bet I'll find out."

*

That afternoon, Tonks and Remus accompanied Harry to the Burrow after his last dance lesson and waited for him to shower and dress before they left with Ginny to go to the village.

Harry found himself suddenly nervous as they waited in the living room for Ginny to make an appearance. It wasn't their first date, but because they were going to the cinema, he would be expected to pay for their tickets, perhaps buy her some popcorn...it just seemed overly formal. He wondered – if the threat of Voldemort hadn't been a part of his life, or if there wasn't an arranged marriage looming over them – if they had been given a

chance at a normal relationship...Harry couldn't help but think that taking a pretty girl to the cinema would be the scariest thing he'd have had to face in his seventeen years of life.

Ginny appeared in the doorway as Harry ruminated and Tonks and Lupin stood to leave. His eyes fixed on the petite redhead as soon as she walked into the room and his breath hitched involuntarily as the sight.

She was dressed in a simple Muggle outfit that Hermione must have lent her, and Harry was sure that the way it conformed to her body was made possible by a fitting charm – Hermione was built too differently for any of her clothes to fit Ginny properly. Ginny's top was a light cotton fabric that ended at her elbows and the off-white colour offset her normally pale skin. Her tan skirt hung below her knees and was loose enough to allow her some level of movement, but Harry wasn't particularly interested in the skirt, his gaze was riveted on her legs.

"I'll take it from the way your tongue is hanging out of your mouth that you like what you see?" asked Remus with a chortle.

Nodding dumbly, Harry said, "You look fantastic, Ginny."

She walked over to him and took his hand. "You look good, too, Harry." They beamed at each other for a moment before Remus cleared his throat behind them. Harry led her to the door and out into the front garden, their escorts close behind.

*

The walk to the village was uneventful as there were no people on the narrow dirt carriage path that connected many of the cottages to the main road. Once inside the village proper, Harry noticed several small shops advertising meats, cheeses, beer, groceries, antique furniture, and even a small bric-a-brac store. The simplicity of life in the country was appealing to Harry, who had grown up in the city all his life.

As they walked hand in hand, Harry wondered if that simplicity had ingrained itself in Ginny as well.

The theatre itself was as old and worn as the rest of the buildings in the area, but captured a certain charm that Harry found alluring. There were only two movies playing. One was a recent release, which featured two men in dark suits and sunglasses.

"Not that one," Ginny said at once. "I don't fancy that odd American humour."

The other one had a small girl surrounded by a dozen newly-hatched geese. "But that one," Ginny cooed, "is perfect for a date."

Harry thought the first one would be more entertaining, but wasn't about to argue with her. There were just some things that weren't worth the fight, and which movie to watch wasn't one of them.

They approached the ticket counter and Harry was pleased to note that Tonks and Remus stayed an appreciable distance back. Having minders was one thing, but having them ever-present would have been too much for Harry and, he assumed, for Ginny as well.

"Two for *Fly Away Home*, please," Harry said to the attendant and was about to hand him a ten pound note, when Ginny took out some money for her purse.

"Let me pay for mine," she said suddenly.

The tickets printed and Harry shook his head. "No, that's okay, I don't mind paying."

"No." Ginny was adamant. "It's not okay. I *need* to pay for mine."

Harry was surprised at her vehemence. Maybe she was testing him? He *knew* she was supposed to pay for their date, according to Hermione's research anyway. He had at least read *some* of the books and research notes that she had brought back from the ministry the other day. The wizard was to assume all financial burdens during the courting period, though he couldn't recall if it was one of the punishable offences if he didn't.

"Ginny, it's my duty to pay for our date," Harry said, taking a hold of her hand to prevent her from paying and handed his money to the attendant. The tickets and his change came back through the tray along with a rather odd look from the cashier.

When Harry looked back to Ginny as they walked into the theatre, he was more than a bit surprised to see a tear running down her cheek. "Ginny? What's the matter?"

She didn't look at him, but kept her hands folded across her chest as they handed their tickets to the usher. Once inside the dimly lit theatre, Harry led them to the middle of the seats and waited for her to sit before he turned and hesitantly reached out a hand to her arm. "What did I say? Was it about the tickets?" Harry asked tentatively.

With her head turned to one side so Harry could only see her profile, Ginny nodded once, but still didn't speak.

"Look," Harry said in what he hoped was a soothing way. "I'm sorry.... I just...thought it would be the right thing to do."

She sat stiffly in her seat and didn't respond to any of his entreaties, so at last, he said, "How about I get some popcorn and a couple of fizzy drinks?" He smirked a little and added, "They say you can't enjoy the movie properly if you don't have some buttery popcorn and a bladder-busting beverage."

Much to his relief, she managed a small grin, but bit her lips and it instantly disappeared. He had hoped the reference to one of the hexes they had used yesterday on her brothers would have cracked her stony exterior. She nodded again and Harry hesitated before he got up, completely at a loss as to what to say.

An inattentive concessions worker had burned the popcorn, so he had to wait for another batch to pop before he was able to return to his seat. Something must have happened in his absence, however, because Ginny was no longer scowling or sitting stiffly in her chair.

"Here's your drink, Ginny," Harry said softly, handing her the large cup.

Her eyes bugged for a second before she took a long sip. "Thanks," she offered. "I just...never mind."

Harry stared at her for a long while as she munched on popcorn and sucked on her straw. "I honestly don't know what I did to upset you, but when you're ready to talk to me about it, I'll be here."

Their eyes met for a brief second before hers dropped to the tub of popcorn between them and she nodded. "Okay."

As the lights dimmed and the movie started, Harry looked over his shoulder and noticed Remus give him a questioning glance; Harry could only shrug in response.

*

Ginny was torn. Harry had been a perfect gentleman the entire afternoon and had treated her like a queen. But the way he had insisted on paying for their tickets gave her pause. Her conversation with Hermione that morning played in her mind over and over as the movie, likewise, played out on the screen. Duty or love?

Was Harry courting her out of duty, much like he said it was his duty to pay for the tickets? Maybe she was just reading too much into what he had said, but that single nagging question wouldn't leave her alone.

When the movie finished and they began to walk back to the Burrow, Harry tried to hold her hand and Ginny let him, but she found herself wondering if he did it because he was attracted to her, or if it was the right thing to do. Did his head swim with emotion when they touched each other, like hers did? When she was close to him, did his heart beat faster the same as hers when he came near?

They arrived at the bottom of the inside stairs where Tonks and Remus bid them farewell and Apparated away. Ginny thanked Harry and ran up to her room, where she knew her emotions would pour out of her like a sieve, and she couldn't let Harry see how much he was affecting her – not yet.

*

Harry was beyond confused. Everything had started off well as they walked to the theatre. Ginny seemed happy and as pleased to be with him as she ever had. Then after the incident at the ticket window, something had changed. It was as if a switch had been thrown and Harry was at a complete loss at how to explain it.

After Ginny went up to her room, Harry retired to the sofa for the evening until it was time to go to sleep, mulling over in his mind how he could have prevented her bad reaction.

As nine o'clock turned into ten, a sleepy Harry walked morosely upstairs, and paused by Ginny's room to listen, seeking some new revelation on what he should do for her. When no flashes of insight came, he continued up to the room he shared with Ron.

Swinging open the door, he stopped in mid-step and his jaw dropped. On Harry's camp bed, without a care in the world of anyone seeing them, Hermione was straddling Ron's lap and snogging him for England. In a fit of morbid fascination, Harry wondered how it would be to likewise be engaged with Ginny.

Finding his wits, Harry backed hastily and quietly out of the room and closed the door as gently as he could manage. He grabbed a pillow and blanket from the hall linen closet and made his way back to the sofa. It was going to be a long night.

*

August 6

Ginny awoke in the pitch black of her room after falling off to a fitful sleep. The usual sounds of Hermione's breathing didn't reach her ears and when she went to check on her, discovered that the brunette wasn't in her bed. Curious, Ginny crept downstairs to find out what was going on.

The lights were out and she didn't hear a thing from the kitchen. Ginny padded over to the window and peered outside, clutching her dressing gown to her body. There were no lights on and no movement outside, so she assumed that Ron and Hermione had likely fallen asleep under a tree after a moonlit walk.

Awake and still upset at her blemished date with Harry, Ginny walked into the living room and stopped dead when she found Harry lying on the sofa. His hair was mussed, his glasses were folded on the table next to him, and the thin blanket he was using had been all but tossed onto the floor.

With a sigh, Ginny walked over to where he slept and looked down on his unguarded face. Something pulled on her heart as he breathed deeply through his mouth. He was really quite perfect and she decided that she couldn't resist any longer.

She knelt on the carpet and leaned against the sofa. Her arm came up and rested on his chest and slowly, carefully, she pushed his fringe off his forehead, revealing his scar. Ginny's fingers automatically and rhythmically twirled his hair as she stared at every inch of his face. From his long, black lashes, to his round cheeks and solid chin.

His breathing hitched then evened out and Ginny lowered her lips to his forehead, relishing in this stolen moment, painfully aware that she still felt hurt and a little afraid for their future. A lock of her hair pulled loose and fell on the pillow next to his head.

As she drew back, Harry's dark, green eyes stared back at her.

"Hi," he said quietly, shyly. "I was just dreaming about you and here you are."

Ginny blushed, but this time, didn't try to fight it off. "I've never stopped dreaming about you, Harry."

His face remained impassive, but his eyes searched hers with an intensity that frightened her. "You've always loved me, haven't you?" he asked. "And you still do."

Unable to speak, Ginny simply nodded and moved her fingers from his fringe to his face.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, mirroring her movements by putting his hand in her hair. "For what happened last night. I don't know what I did, but I don't like it when we fight, and I'll do anything to keep from hurting you again."

Ginny wanted to tell him she'd forgiven him and that she was over it, but her throat wouldn't work. Looking in his eyes, she saw that same spark of something that she'd seen before, on the swing, only this time it was so powerful and deep that she couldn't deny it or rationalize it away..

"I want to love you, Ginny," he continued. "And I will, because you're funny, and smart, and...beautiful." He swallowed and pushed his fingers further into her hair, until they wrapped around the base of her neck. "If you'll let me into your life...into your heart, I will love you as you deserve."

Finally able to speak, Ginny asked, "How?" Her voice broke and she started again. "How can you know you'll fall in love with me?"

Harry didn't answer, but a steady pressure on the back of her head made her dip lower and she didn't resist. This time when her eyes fluttered closed, she wasn't left wanting. Their lips came together and at first, Ginny was disappointed by the tentative manner in which he kissed her, as if he would break her if they pressed harder. Then as they tried again, the hesitation was replaced with a deep longing – a need that would never be satisfied by simple kissing – and it terrified her.

Harry must have felt it, too, because he broke off at the same time she did. "That was..."

"Amazing," she said, a happy grin spreading on her face. Despite her fear, Ginny knew that Harry would not mistreat her, and it was slowly replaced by trust and hope.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, his eyes unfocused and altogether intoxicating to behold.

"But I think we need to practice it a bit or we'll have a horrible time at our wedding."

Harry nodded. "Very true. I wouldn't want to embarrass my bride-to-be on her wedding day."

She leaned over him again, this time pushing up on her knees for more leverage, and lost herself in Harry's warm embrace. Although he hadn't said it out loud, there was no longer any doubt in Ginny's mind about how he felt for her. Even in her limited kissing experience, Ginny knew that one didn't kiss like *that* if there wasn't some kind of feeling behind it, and a thrill of excitement shot up her spine at the thought of all the kissing they would be able to do in the future.

The Bargain 7: The Ultimate Domestic Test

Chapter 7 - The Ultimate Domestic Test

August 6

Suddenly, Ginny found herself on top of Harry and her hands traced down his arm as they explored different kisses. As Harry took the initiative in kissing her, a geyser of happiness shot up inside her.

Soon, Ginny was the one on bottom and their breathing came in shorter and shorter intervals. Harry's hands had been limited to running through her hair up to this point, a fact that Ginny relished, but she admitted to herself that she wanted him to be more generous with the rest of her as well. As Harry finally got around to doing so, Ginny felt a sudden and familiar build-up of magic centred where he was touching her.

"Harry," Ginny said suddenly, breaking their kiss. "Harry - I think we'd better stop...for now, anyway."

"What? Why?" came Harry's breathless query.

Ginny laughed at his obliviousness, at his eagerness, and at his still-unguarded attraction for her. "I don't fancy blowing you into the wall, for one, and I'm certain the noise would wake Mum and Dad."

This seemed to get through to him, and he sat on the far side of the sofa. "Oh. Right," he said, running a hand through his tousled hair.

They sat like that for a while, each lost in their own thoughts, when Ginny laid her head in his lap. "I don't want to go back to bed. I don't want to leave you."

He began to play with her hair and smiled in the dim light of the setting moon that spilled through the window. "I don't want you to, either, but I think your mum might take exception to finding us here in the morning, don't you?"

Ginny hid a smirk with her hands and then looked up at his grinning face. "I suppose you're right. What can we do about it? Stay up all night chatting? Frankly, I'd rather be kissing you, instead."

"Yeah, but that's going to get out of hand soon," Harry added.

"Exactly." Ginny frowned at the thought of finally being able to *really* enjoy kissing someone, and the fact that the someone she could kiss was Harry – her Harry – yet they could *only* kiss, and kissing Harry was not nearly enough to satisfy her. She sat up and thought for a moment, finding Harry's hand with hers. "What if I kip on the floor and you stay on the sofa? That way, we can still be with each other, and Mum won't have anything to accuse us of."

Harry seemed to think this idea through and finally nodded his head. "How about having me on the floor and you on the sofa?"

Ginny wrinkled her nose. "Can't – it's stuffed with horsehair – I can sit on it, but I can't lie down on it without swelling up like a balloon," she said.

"Well, then," Harry replied, "your original plan should work then."

Ginny hopped up and whispered, "Stay right here. I'm going to go grab a pillow and blanket from my bed."

When they were situated in their blankets, Harry on the sofa, Ginny on the floor beside him, he reached a hand down to her and she pulled it close to her cheek. Content to be this close to him and still gushing inside from their kissing, Ginny let her mind relax and soon found herself in a peaceful sleep.

*

The noise of heavy footfalls on the stairs awoke Harry later that morning. A pain in his neck forced him to turn over from his side to his back, and as he did, someone sucked in their breath from the kitchen door.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley," said Mrs. Weasley sharply and Harry turned to look at her, wondering why she was referring to him as Ginny. Then, with a start, he remembered his encounter with Ginny earlier that morning and how it had ended.... His cheeks burned as the image of Ginny's mum catching them snogging on the sofa flew through his mind.

Ginny's head shot up from the floor between the couch and table, her hair impossibly tangled, her eyes bleary, but panic-filled, and she squeaked, "Mum?"

“Sleeping with Harry, now?” her mum teased with a mock scowl on her face.

“Mum!” Ginny exclaimed, clearly not seeing the humour in the situation. “I was on the floor. *Harry* was on the sofa. We’re *both* fully clothed – nothing happened.”

“Umm-hmm,” Molly said, her eyes twinkling in the dim morning light.

Now that the tension of being caught had passed, Harry realized that his initial panic was caused mostly because he hadn’t realized that only he and Ginny knew of the change to their relationship. The look Molly was giving them indicated not only did she know, but she most certainly approved – at least he hoped that’s what the look meant.

“Mu-um,” Ginny whinged. Then something wicked flashed across her face and she said, “The whole reason Harry was down here in the first place was because his bed was occupied.”

Molly’s smile faltered and her eyes zeroed in on Harry. “Who was in your bed?”

Not wanting to get Ron or Hermione in trouble, he searched for a way to tell the truth while keeping as many details out of the conversation as possible. “Um, well...when I was going to turn in last night, Hermione and Ron looked like they needed some time alone, so I decided to sleep down here. Ginny came to check on me in the early morning.”

With lips pressed thin, Molly nodded and turned back towards the stairs. “I’ll be right back.”

Ginny beamed at Harry and slid a hand through her hair to straighten it out. Molly’s head peaked around the doorway and she said, “Don’t think you’re off the hook, either, Ginny. Harry told me why *he* was on the couch, and I anxiously await hearing *your* reason for being here, as well.”

Her head retreated and they heard her stomp up the stairs while Ginny sat heavily onto the cushion next to Harry. Ginny’s head found Harry’s shoulder and he automatically put his arm around her waist to pull her closer. She sighed and Harry smiled.

Soon enough, the sound of loud voices, a spell being fired, a yelp and two doors slamming filtered down through the stairwell.

“Thanks,” Harry said into Ginny’s hair, not quite able to breathe properly with her so close to him. “For coming to check on me last night.”

Ginny giggled. “It was certainly worth anything Mum’s going to do to me for sleeping so scandalously close to you. I’ll be branded a scarlet woman for sure.”

Fear fluttered in Harry’s stomach as the thought of it being all a dream popped into his head. Just as quickly, though, Harry realised that if it were a dream, Ginny wouldn’t have slept on the floor, wouldn’t be snuggled up to him, and he wouldn’t be able to still taste her mouth in his.

He shivered at the memory and Ginny looked up at him. “What?”

With another thrill of excitement, he leaned down and captured her lips with his. “Mmf,” she said just before she returned his affection.

Satisfied that it hadn’t been a dream, Harry pulled away and was pleased to see a wistful expression on her face. “Mmm,” she said. “What was that for?”

“Just to make sure I hadn’t imagined it,” he said slowly, still finding himself drawn to her lips.

Ginny seemed to sense this and kissed him, but she pulled away too slowly and he followed her face back against the sofa until he had pinned her to it. She didn’t seem to mind, but he knew that it was risky to be kissing Ginny in the open when her mum was awake. Reluctantly, he drew back and saw the dazed look had returned to her face.

He stared at her as she slowly came out of her trance. “I think it’s safe to say that everything this morning has been quite real, Harry.”

“Yes, and quite good,” he agreed.

Ginny blushed just then and Harry heard a noise from the kitchen, causing him to pull back completely from her. He stood, offered her a hand, and together, they folded their blankets and then tucked them along with their pillows under their arms.

“I’d better make sure Hermione’s okay,” Ginny said as they walked towards the stairs.

Harry nodded. “Meet you at breakfast, then.”

They held hands up the stairs and when they became unlinked as Ginny went into her room, Harry felt the joy in his heart diminish, as if something like a Dementor had sucked it out of him.

Grudgingly, Harry marched up to Ron’s room and prepared himself to face Ron with Ginny’s kisses still fresh on his mind.

*

In Ron’s room – after he had deposited the blanket and pillow back in the linen closet – Harry found his friend scribbling a long letter at his desk.

“Hey, Ron,” Harry said nonchalantly, “sleep well?”

Looking up from his letter, Ron gave Harry a withering stare and returned to his letter. "Ha, ha. I suppose you think it's funny that Hermione was caught sleeping in my bed?"

Harry pulled out a clean set of clothes and sat on his clearly just-slept-in-bed. "No, Ron, I don't. I do think the fact that you were caught sleeping with Hermione in *my* bed is hilarious, though."

Ron tossed his quill aside and turned to face Harry, his face glowing. "It was brilliant, though – even if I do have to write her parents and tell her what happened."

"You what?" Harry asked.

"I have to write a ruddy *letter* to Hermione's mum and dad, explaining that Hermione fell asleep in my bed..."

"My bed," Harry corrected.

"Fine," Ron replied with a sigh. "*Your* bed. Then I have to apologise and promise to never do it again." Ron stared blankly at one of the Canon's Beaters as he hit a Bludger over and over. "Where'd you sleep anyway?"

"On the sofa," Harry said automatically, thinking back to Ginny's kisses. As he did so, his face began to heat up and the world around Ron began to become unfocused.

"Why the happy grin? You like sleeping on that lumpy, horsehair-stuffed antique?"

"Huh?" Harry asked as Ron came suddenly back into focus.

Ron sniggered. "Your face," he explained. "It's like you..."

A strange tension materialized in the air, like the electrical charge before lightning struck, and Harry was suddenly afraid for what Ron was going to say next.

"Hold on. Where did Ginny sleep last night?"

Damn, Harry mentally cursed himself. "Um..." Harry stalled, but knew there would be no getting out of telling the truth. "On the living room floor."

Ron's face, instead of growing dark, lit up like one of Filch's torches. "I know that look!" he said, wagging a finger in Harry's direction.

"What look?" Harry asked sheepishly. "I didn't have a look on my face."

"Yes, you did," Ron retorted. "It's the face of someone who's been snogging!"

Another flash of emotion ran up Harry's spine and he let out a surrendered sigh. "Fine, Ron. I snogged your sister. It was lovely. Are you happy now?"

Instead of answering, however, Ron let out an excited, "Yes!" as he punched a fist into the air. He ran out the door and thundered down the stairs, laughing the whole way.

Harry followed, albeit more slowly, and with much less enthusiasm. Ron was in the process of pounding on the twins' door. "Wake up, you lazy sods," he said. "You owe me twenty Galleons."

Hermione and Ginny wandered upstairs just then. "What's all the racket?" asked Ginny.

The door cracked open and a sleepy-eyed Fred looked out at his brother. "What are you going on about now, Ronniekins?"

"You owe me ten Galleons, and so does George."

Another identically exhausted face appeared next to Fred. "Who are you again?" he asked.

Ron pushed into their room and pointed at a calendar hanging on their wall. "Today is August sixth. *You* said that Harry wouldn't have the nerve to kiss Ginny until the eighth. Harry just 'fessed up to kissing Ginny. That means you owe *me* ten Galleons apiece."

Harry heard Ginny and Hermione both gasp at the same time from behind him.

Ignoring the girls completely, Fred and George turned their heads as one and looked at Harry. "Are you saying that the Black-Haired Hooligan of Hogwarts has had his way with our little sister?"

"Just how far did he get last night?" Fred continued, looking back to Ron.

"Fred!" Ginny exclaimed.

"Have you been monitoring his progress?" George asked. Harry was impressed that neither of them showed the slightest bit of a smile. If it wasn't part of the Weasley genetic inheritance, he now knew where Ginny had learned her acting skills.

Ginny was silently fuming just behind Harry and he decided to attempt to defuse the situation. "Relax, guys, your sister's virtue is intact," he said.

We're both under a little restriction, remember?"

Fred scratched at his chin and struck a pensive look. "That's right. Just snogging, hugging, with limited physical contact above the shoulders, below the knee, the waist and arms," he recited. "Not much to worry about, then."

"I can't believe you!" screeched Ginny, who apparently had not taken the opportunity to calm down. "Betting on when Harry and I would kiss! It's bad enough that we've got to be *married* in a week, but you pinheads are making wagers on whether or not Harry scores on your sister?"

Fred and George immediately backed into a corner, obviously just noticing her presence in their room. "We made the bet *before* you hexed us!" George said defensively. "We'd completely forgotten about it, honest!"

Ginny's eyes narrowed and she whirled on Ron. "You know, I thought you'd be the least stupid of the lot, seeing as how you've *got* a girlfriend. But apparently you've not learned your lesson." She raised her hand at Ron, who flinched as she did so, and then she stormed out of the room and rushed downstairs.

Ron was frozen in place, his eyes scrunched tight. Hermione walked over to him and slapped his shoulder, sending a puff of red hair floating to the ground. "Ron, that was utterly immature and horribly insensitive. Since you obviously consider kisses to be horribly degrading, let's see how you like going without them for a while." Then she, too, walked into the hall and hastened after Ginny.

Risking a peek, Ron's eyes opened one at a time and he let out his breath. "At least she didn't hex me," he said, relief evident in his expression.

"Uh," Harry said with a smirk. "I wouldn't categorize what she did to you as a hex, per se." He gave Fred an inquisitive look. "More of a charm, wouldn't you say?"

Fred wandered around Ron, looking him up and down, then nodded once. "Definitely a charm."

George scrunched his nose and added, "*Abrado Pilus*, if I'm not mistaken. It's darn good, too."

"What?" Ron asked, his face suddenly ashen. "What'd she do to me?" He was looking frantically at his limbs, feeling his chest and hands.

"A depilitation charm, Ron," Harry explained, "You're bald! According to my recollection, you should be bald all over, too," he said with a broad smirk.

*

Luckily for Ron, his mum had a half-empty bottle of *Madame Margaret's Magical Hair Restorer and Lengthener*. Ginny silently hoped that it was out of date and wouldn't work, but was pacified when Hermione told her of Ron's additional punishment. It paid to have Hermione's support and Ginny was going to make sure that she knew how much she appreciated the older witch's backing in her ongoing struggle to educate her idiotic brothers.

Breakfast passed by in a blur and Ginny's mind was divided by her need to sleep and her desire to kiss Harry again. It was like a drug that Ginny couldn't get enough of – very unlike her other kissing experiences – and she mused over her scones and bacon whether it was healthy to be so attracted to one boy. As she popped the last of the fried bread into her mouth, she decided that it didn't matter much, as their love would either bloom or stagnate, but they were going to be married either way.

"Ginny?" Molly called from where she was making the day's shopping list by the kitchen secretary. "I need you and Harry to do some shopping for me. I just don't have time to spend in the village today. Would you take care of this for me?"

Ginny placed her dishes into the sink, made sure the brush and sponge began to clean them, and then walked over to the secretary. "Sure thing, Mum," she said, glad to have a whole morning to spend with Harry.

"Wonderful," her mum responded. "I'll just go freshen up, and then I'm off. Be sure to get the apples a little under-ripe, all right?"

"Yes, Mum." Ginny hated being lectured on how to pick fruit. True, she was abysmal at it, but she could certainly know when an apple wasn't ripe, couldn't she? "Two dozen under-ripe apples."

Molly scrutinized her daughter for a moment, then stood and handed Ginny a small purse. "This is all the Muggle money we have until I have some more exchanged at Gringotts – be sure to spend it frugally."

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Ginny took the purse and tucked it into the pocket of her dressing gown. "Yes, Mum."

"Good girl." Molly patted Ginny on the shoulder then walked up the stairs, with Ginny following.

*

They waited until ten to make sure the shops would be open. Harry observed that in the city, most shops opened at eight, but Ginny knew the slower pace of small-town Devon would mean later openings and earlier closings. It was a rare, quiet morning in this mad week, and Harry enjoyed the chance to doze in the garden, enjoying the early morning sunshine and waiting until it was time for them to leave.

Ginny led Harry down the lane towards the village in the mid-morning sunshine. It followed the river's course until just before Ottery St. Catchpole began and then thrust itself into the village proper. The river, on the other hand, wound around the small town and through several private properties, including one very large castle that loomed to the south.

"Who lives there?" asked Harry, pointing at the overgrown walls and sloping lawn between it and the ancient structure.

"Dunno. Charlie claimed it was abandoned and goaded the twins to try to break in a few years ago," Ginny explained, fingering the small satchel slung across her back. "Mum was livid that day, I can tell you, but they never did get inside to see if anyone was home."

Harry stared a long while at the castle before turning back to Ginny and taking her hand. "Looks like an odd sort of place, don't you think?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Ginny snaked an arm around his waist. "Maybe. I'm more concerned about making sure Mum's apples aren't quite ripe. I'm miserable at selecting produce."

As they neared a shop entitled, *Volker's Victuals*, Harry gave Ginny's side a squeeze and said, "Let me handle the fruit. After having to pick fruit for the Dursleys, I reckon I've got a good enough eye to know what's ripe and what isn't."

The shop was small, but the produce selections plentiful and cheap. Ginny never bought anything here but fresh foods, despite having a deep fondness for the owner. Gertrude Volker was an immigrant from Germany who, like other first-generation transplants, found a niche in her family's new community and excelled at it. Gertrude always chose to sell from local farms, and had even sold green beans from the Weasleys' garden, back when there were more mouths to feed in Ginny's family. She was a kind, round woman with a head full of grey hair, and spoke with a faint accent.

"Welcome to Volker's," the elderly woman said, upon noticing them enter the store. "It is very nice to see you again, young Ginny." Then, noticing her proximity to Harry, winked at her and said, "Mind yourself by the vegetables. I've just watered them down."

"Thank you, Mrs. Volker." Ginny smiled at her and led Harry towards the apples.

"She seems nice," Harry commented, already picking through the Galas.

"She's one of the nicest people I know. I'm going to invite her to the wedding, you know."

Harry glanced at Ginny before moving over to the Macintosh bin. "I have a feeling there'll be a lot of people invited that I don't know but are very nice. That is, if you've invited them, anyway. You want me to show you how to suss out the ripe ones?"

He put a few apples into a plastic bag and began to look at the Gravensteins. "I don't know," Ginny said innocently. "I've got a few cousins that are nightmares to be around. There's one who's Muggle born – to my mum's cousin – who's an accountant, but their parents didn't want her attending Hogwarts."

"Isn't that a bit odd?" Harry asked, now completely ignoring the apples. "How many people would keep their kid from becoming a fully-qualified witch?"

Ginny sighed. "Yes, well, Mafalda's a handful by normal standards. I can't imagine if she had a wand and learned how to use it. She's a Slytherin in the making, if I ever saw one."

"A Muggle-born Slytherin, eh?" Harry mused. "That'd get Malfoy's hackles up."

"If she'd have gone to Hogwarts," responded Ginny, "Malfoy would have had so much trouble with her, he'd have no time to bother you."

"All the more reason for her to be in Slytherin, I suppose." He laid a hand lightly across the tops of the apples and said, "So...how can you tell a ripe apple from one that's not ripe enough?"

Ginny gave the bins of apples an appraising glance and tapped her lips with a finger. "By their colour?"

Harry smirked and picked up a piece of the dull-red fruit. "Colour is one of the things you need to look for, yes. This one is almost perfectly ripe – its skin is firm when you gently squeeze it." Which he did. "The colour is uniform instead of splotchy." He twirled the apple around between his fingers. "And most importantly, there aren't any bruises. Aunt Petunia must have boxed my ears for bruised apples at least a dozen times before I got it right."

"That wretched woman. I ought to box *her* ears for abusing such a wonderful young man." Then seeing the look on his face, she took the apple from Harry's hand, tossed it into the air and deftly caught it. "I'll eat this one, then," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Harry filled the bag with the right amount of apples and they walked to the bins holding the onions and carrots.

"Three onions and a dozen carrots," Ginny read from the list. "That's it from this shop. We need to go to the bakery and the grocers after that."

With another plastic bag, Harry put in the vegetables and they headed over to pay. "Why do we need to go to so many shops? Wouldn't it be easier to just go to the grocer's and be done with it?"

As Ginny paid for their purchases, she shifted against him and took the two bags. "Good bye, Mrs. Volker."

"Good bye, dear," said the shopkeeper and they left the shop with the bell jingling merrily on the door.

"It would be easier," Ginny explained as they walked between the fresh produce store and the adjoining tack and feed shop. "But it would also be a lot more expensive. We've got just enough money here to buy what we need, but *only* if we're careful about how we spend it."

She took a quick glance around and when she was sure no one was looking their way, Ginny tucked the two grocery bags into the satchel. They disappeared into its depths, leaving no indication it held anything inside, whether by weight or bulk.

“Charmed bag?” Harry asked as she buckled the lid.

“Yep. It makes shopping loads quicker and makes holding hands possible again.”

With a faint blush, Harry reached out a hand and said, “So, vegetables and fruits at Vokler’s, bread at the bakery, and...what about the meat?”

Ginny took Harry’s hand and led them around the corner and north along Maberly Way. “We only buy *some* bread at the bakery, and we still have peppers and garlic on the list. Cut meat comes from the butcher and packaged meat from the grocer’s.”

They passed a small flower shop and Ginny stopped to smell them. “Mmm,” she said, taking a deep breath from a bouquet of flowers. “I love the smell of pansies.” Then she ran a hand over the smiling faces of a nearby clump of daisies. “But daisies are my favourite.”

Harry took a bill from his pocket and walked into the store, leaving Ginny waiting outside. He quickly returned with a single daisy in his hand. “If they are your favourite, then you shall have one.”

Pleasantly surprised, Ginny took the flower and wrinkled her nose. “Thank you, Harry. They are my favourite, but I can’t say they smell very good.”

His face fell and Harry made a half-step towards the shop door. “Shall I get you a pansy instead?”

Ginny broke the stem in half and pushed it into the hair over her ear. “No, Harry. This is perfect.” She gave him a reassuring smile and was rewarded with a quick kiss.

They moved on to the bakery and bought a package of rolls, but not any regular bread. The grocer’s was next and Harry was astonished at some of the prices. Holding up a bag of rolls almost identical to the ones they had just purchased at the bakery, Harry said incredulously, “These are more than twice as expensive.”

“And that’s why we shop around,” Ginny explained, taking the rolls and placing them back in the bin. “We can buy the rolls *and* the bread with the money we would have spent on these.”

Shaking his head, Harry pulled on Ginny’s waist until they were hip to hip. He bent his face low and whispered into her ear. “And that’s one more reason why I love being with you.”

Ginny sucked in a breath and stared into Harry’s eyes, her vision becoming foggy from unshed tears. “You...really mean that?” she asked, wiping at her eyes with the sides of her fingers.

“Yes, Ginny,” Harry soothed. “How could I not? You’re funny and pretty and dead wicked when it comes to saving money.”

With a playful slap on his shoulder, Ginny let out a happy laugh. “You watch it, Mr. Potter, or I may have to forget how to be thrifty when I’m the fabulously wealthy Mrs. Potter.”

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The door to the Burrow burst open an hour later and Harry and Ginny literally stumbled across the threshold and into the kitchen. Harry was clutching a stitch in his side from laughing so hard and Ginny immediately slumped to the floor in a fit of unrestrained giggles.

“My, my,” said Mrs. Weasley, as she walked over to look at the laughing teens. “Had a good time shopping, I see.”

Once Harry had gained partial control of his vocal cords, he said, “Your daughter...is...unbelievable!”

Molly took the satchel from Ginny and began to unload it onto the table. “She is quite something, yes. Do you mind telling me what’s so funny?”

Harry opened his mouth, but Ginny was quicker. Suddenly free from her giggling, Ginny said in a stern voice, “Don’t you *dare* say a word, Harry. I told you in the strictest of confidence.”

Banishing the meat to the cold pantry and the bread to the dry one, Molly harrumphed. “When Arthur and I went shopping, we always ended up fighting. It figures that *you* two would end up in a laughing fit.” She grabbed the produce and walked to the sink.

“Oh, Mum,” Ginny said, standing up and brushing off her skirt. “Don’t be jealous. Harry and I are just different. I’m sure we’ll end up fighting over something just as silly.”

The carrots were levitated from their bag and dipped themselves into a sink full of water. Then they started to spin in the air as one and their peels corkscrewed off and into a waiting bowl. “Perhaps you’re right,” Molly sighed. “Never mind that. You get washed and help me make dinner. Harry, Arthur’s home and wanted to have a word with you – he’s in the garden.”

Ginny rolled her eyes, pecked Harry on the cheek, and then walked upstairs to her room.

Harry wonder briefly if Ginny’s dad wanted to talk to him about last night’s sleeping arrangements and had an involuntary shudder run down his spine.

“Don’t fret, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said with a glance at the door. “You won’t be lectured about sleeping on the sofa, or he’ll find himself there tonight.”

Pinching his lips between his teeth, Harry nodded and opened the door. “Thanks, Mrs. Weasley.”

Arthur wasn't in the garden, which made sense when Harry thought about it, because they had both seen him when they walked home. Instead, Harry found him in the shed and, with a nervous glance back at the window that marked Ginny's room, he turned the knob on the door and walked inside.

"Ah, Harry," said the elder Weasley as he looked up from where he was wrist deep in what looked like it might once have been a toaster. "Come in, have a seat, son." He motioned Harry over and resumed the task of pulling wires and knobs out from the depths of the Muggle appliance.

Not wanting to seem presumptuous, and still apprehensive despite Mrs. Weasley's warning, Harry found a somewhat-clear spot to perch and waited for his future father-in-law to start the conversation that he obviously wanted to initiate.

"Fascinating," Arthur said at length and pulled out a long, crinkled wire. "This seems to be the thing that does it."

"I'm sorry," Harry said weakly. "Does what?"

Putting down the remains of the toaster, Arthur brought the wire over to Harry and explained. "The bit that toasts the bread. Amazing isn't it – how Muggles have learned to do what wizards have been doing for centuries."

Arthur marvelled at the wire for a moment longer then set it down on the bench to his right. "Now, Harry," he began, placing a warm hand on Harry's shoulder. "I imagine you're not quite sure about why I asked you here."

Harry nodded his head. "No, sir."

"Ginny's mother is difficult to read at times, but she made it clear that I wasn't to discuss where you and Ginny were found this morning." Arthur folded his arms and gave Harry a lingering stare that made him want to never disappoint this man. "What I'd like to talk to you about is how you and Ginny are getting along."

Harry quickly shifted mental gears and let out a small sigh. "We're...closer now. She's brilliant, actually, and I wonder if I'm good enough for her at times."

Arthur nodded his head knowingly and began to slowly pace in front of Harry. "That's to be expected. We never tell women this, but men are almost always the dead weight in a relationship. They are smarter, wiser, more rational, and most certainly better looking than we will ever be."

Flashes of Ginny ran through Harry's mind as Arthur spoke – Ginny telling him off at Grimmauld Place, bringing him chocolate in the Hogwarts Library, demanding to be brought along to the Department of Mysteries, and more recently, her conniving plan to hex her brothers. She was definitely more intelligent than he, and Harry's feelings of inadequacy grew the more he thought about it.

"More importantly," Arthur continued, "men bring balance to women's lives. They may not realise it, and we would never point it out, but they need us as much as we need them." He sat down across from Harry and pulled out a small pipe, similar to the one he had seen Dumbledore use from time to time. "You're probably already noticing how important Ginny is to you."

"Yeah," Harry said, not really looking at Mr. Weasley, but very much concentrating on their conversation. "It's like I've found another half of myself that I never knew existed."

"Exactly." Arthur tapped the end of the pipe with his wand and a wisp of smoke trailed into the air, filling the shed with a warm cherry scent. "And now that you've found it, you can't imagine ever losing it. Am I right?"

Harry thought even more deeply about Ginny and found himself nodding again. "It would destroy me to lose her," he admitted. "It's only been a few days, but I look back at the person I was last week and it seems like I've changed almost completely. I mean, I'm *me* still, but I'm...better...more complete, somehow."

They sat together, each with their own thoughts, the hazy smoke from Arthur's pipe slowly filling the sealed shed. Finally, Arthur stood and approached Harry. "Don't let anything get between you, Harry. Cherish what you've gained with Ginny – build it into something that can never break and you'll never have to worry about losing it."

Looking into Mr. Weasley's face, Harry asked, "How? I mean, she's not exactly even-tempered, and I've been known to lose mine from time to time.... How do we keep what we have strong?"

The pipe seemed to have gone out, and Arthur tapped the back of it with his hand, depositing the ashes onto the floor between them. "Don't try to change Ginny – let her find her own way, or you'll end up with a resentful wife. Girls think differently than boys, thankfully, so you can expect there to be rough patches. Finances, raising children, how many children you want to have...they are all things that can lead to arguments. You'll have arguments," he said with a chuckle. "You've probably already had a few, and they'll get worse. The key is to never let what's bothering you fester. If you can resolve things quickly, you'll be able to keep the scars from getting too deep."

In the dimming light of the evening, in Arthur Weasley's shed, Harry made up his mind about Ginny Weasley. "I'm going to marry her," he said solemnly. "And I love her."

So intent at looking at his knees, Harry missed the grin that split Mr. Weasley's face. Knowing what he had to do, then, Harry stood and said, "Mr. Weasley? I'd very much like to have your permission to marry Ginny."

Arthur gave him a quizzical look. "Bit late for that now, isn't it?" The quizzical look morphed into a broad smile. "Harry – son," he said and took Harry into his arms, "I wouldn't have it any other way." They embraced for a moment and then stood apart. "In perfect hindsight, I wish things could have waited a while, but I know you'll treat her right."

"Yes, sir. I will."

The Bargain 8: Young Love

Chapter Eight – Young Love

August 7

“So where are we bound for today?” Harry asked Ginny as they tackled the morning dishes. Harry had planned their last official date, so Ginny had volunteered to plan the next one.

Passing a wet plate to Ginny for drying, Harry watched her wrinkle her nose. “I *had* planned to take a walk through the village and around the countryside....” She wiped the plate dry and slipped it into a dish rack on her left. “But since we just went into town yesterday to shop, I’m not sure if that’s such a grand idea.”

As she spoke, Harry rubbed his soapy sponge on a handful of forks and knives and rinsed them in the running water. “That sounds fun, actually. Yesterday we had a job to do and today it’s all about us,” he pointed out. “The village will look much different when we’re there to enjoy ourselves, rather than to pick up not-quite-ripe apples.”

“Hmm,” Ginny said as she dropped the wet silverware into the drying cup attached to the rack. “That might work.” Then with a twinkle in her eye, she lightly popped Harry on the backside with the tip of her towel and said, “Meet me back in the kitchen in thirty minutes.”

Harry lunged at her with soapy hands, but she ducked just in time. As she disappeared around the corner of the stairwell, laughing as she went, Harry called after her, “You’ll get yours, missy.”

Turning back to the rest of the dishes, Harry shook his head and absently thought of an appropriate method of vengeance.

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A stray breeze blew Ginny’s hair around her face as the sun rose higher over the Eastern horizon. She and Harry were taking a different route into town; one that took them past the Lovegood’s empty house (Luna and her father were abroad for the week), and onto the road shared by the grocers they had visited yesterday. Poplar trees loomed over them and shaded their journey, their rustling leaves providing a backdrop of gentle noise as they walked.

Harry’s hand rested comfortably in hers and the smile that split Ginny’s face was wide and welcomed. Ever since their relationship had become more intimate, she couldn’t help but look for black velvet boxes, or to spy out of the corner of her eye any intention for him to get down on one knee.

Such a moment had happened last night after dinner, and Ginny could still feel the bruise on her heart where it had hammered against her rib cage in anticipation. Unfortunately, he had only dropped a serviette and bent to retrieve it. The smile on Ginny’s face dwindled for only a second at the memory, but the bright blue sky and happy feeling flowing up from their joined hands made it impossible to entertain such melancholy thoughts for very long.

Ginny led Harry around a corner that took them towards the old castle on the edge of town. On the right was a series of small shops, similar to the ones that contained Volker’s Victuals and Mr. Trimble’s Bakery. These, however, were all dedicated to the art of romance. A chocolate shop, featuring several shelves of expensive-looking truffles and creams, was followed by a jeweller’s and formal dress store. At the end of the row, Ginny guided Harry to a stop in front of a narrow shop that barely had enough room for the door, and Harry looked like he clearly didn’t expect there to be much of a shop behind it.

“Besides the *Quibbler*, it’s the only magical building in Ottery St. Catchpole,” Ginny explained. “This is where Mum’s going to buy our flowers – for the wedding.”

“Really?” he asked nonchalantly, as if there was nothing in the world less interesting than a shop full of flowers.

Ginny, however, wasn’t going to allow him to burst her bubble of happiness today. “Let’s go inside. I wonder if we can get a peek at what Mum’s ordered.”

Then, without waiting for him give any kind of reply, she pulled him into the shop and was rewarded with the most dazzling display of fresh-cut flowers she had ever seen. Roses, daisies, lilies, mums, and a dozen other varieties sprung from every corner of the room, filling her nostrils with a heady mixture of sweet fragrances. With a giddy glee, Ginny stepped over to a dozen roses and stroked their velvet petals with her fingers.

The shop itself was much larger on the inside, due to it being magically enlarged. Ginny knew that the Muggles wouldn’t be able to even see the shop entrance and enjoyed having a Wizarding flower shop in her own village.

Catching a glimpse of Harry out of the corner of her eye, Ginny saw him looking back at her, a casual smile gracing his lips. She turned back to the roses and was imagining Harry giving them to her for an engagement present, when a door opened at the back of the shop.

"Oh, hello," came the friendly voice of a middle-aged woman. She had a long green apron covering her from neck to knee and a pair of gloves perched in the one large pocket on its front. The name Violet was stencilled in white across the upper-left portion. "Can I be of any assistance?"

Before Ginny could say anything, however, Harry opened his mouth. "Yes, actually. We'd like to see if an order has been placed for the Weasley-Potter wedding."

The clerk's face brightened upon hearing their names. "Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I was hoping that you'd come by."

"Hello, Mrs. Fawcett," Ginny said as she sat on a stool by the till. "How is Sarah feeling?"

Sarah Fawcett was a Ravenclaw in Harry's year, and had been suffering from Dragon Pox since the day before Harry's birthday. "She's almost better," Mrs. Fawcett replied. "Though I expect her to be completely healthy in time to help me deliver these flowers."

Mrs. Fawcett leafed through a box of order slips and pulled out one from the back. "It's not the largest wedding I've done," she explained over her horn-rimmed glasses. "Still, it's not the smallest, either. Did you want to look at the list?"

Ginny walked forward and took the paper from her hand before Harry could. She felt him gaze over her shoulder as she read down the list. It was small, but Ginny knew that her mum wouldn't be able to eat for weeks if the total at the bottom was accurate.

"What would you change?" Harry quietly asked into her ear. "If you could have all the flowers in the world at your wedding, what would you choose?"

Her pulse quickened at the thought of an extravagantly apportioned hall at the church, festooned with all her favourites. Then she realised that the reason Harry had approached the shop-keeper in the first place was that he had every intention of altering the order, and that the list wasn't going to get shorter.

The protest that welled up inside her must have been visible, however, for Harry placed a single finger on her lips. "Remember what we talked about after the cinema? Let me pay for these? I want you to be happy, Ginny, and I know that you won't be if you're distracted by the decorations. Please?"

Harry's sincerity won out over Ginny's ingrained frugality. She was used to getting by with very little and an unbidden wave of guilt crashed over her – there was something about spending this much money on things as fleeting as flowers that seemed to go against her very nature. But the emotions visible on Harry's normally-passive expression convinced her. He wanted her to be happy, and if buying her loads of flowers would do that, then for the first time in her life, she would let him splurge.

"All right," she relented and turned back to the older woman. "We'll need to see some of your brochures." Then, glancing back at Harry, Ginny said, "This might take a while."

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Harry walked out of the flower shop with a three-page receipt and a much lighter money-pouch. Ginny was absolutely brimming with delight and, to Harry, the money simply didn't matter as much as the bright smile on her face.

What's more, something had twigged in Harry's memory while they flipped through pages and pages of colourful and increasingly expensive flower arrangements – something to do with the ancient Wizarding traditions of arranged marriages. Hermione's research had been quite thorough and if Harry played his cards right, he might be able to prank Ginny for her cheekiness that morning.

They walked hand in hand down the lane and the businesses gradually melted into a small residential area. Small cottages and homey estates surrounded them, some with their owners busily gardening or relaxing on chairs and under umbrellas.

"Hello young lovers," said a cheery man who looked to be about the same age as Ginny's father. He had a full head of greying hair and a bushy brown beard streaked with grey. "It's a very fine day for a walk."

"Yes, it is," Ginny agreed. Her step was light and her happiness radiated into the air.

The man's wife stood up from behind a hedge where she had been pulling weeds. Several of the gangly plants were held firmly in one hand as she swatted her husband with the other. "Stop gawking at the young couple, Johnny."

Johnny wasn't perturbed by her command, however. "I'm not gawking, Caroline. They're obviously in love and a moment of staring from a dotty old man like me certainly isn't going to take any of the shine off of them."

Ginny held her hand to her mouth as they passed by, trying to hold in a fit of laughter as Harry nodded politely at the older couple.

"No," answered Caroline, "but you look at me the same way he's looking at her, and after twenty-two years I recognise mischief brewing when I see it."

Johnny didn't answer and when Harry turned back to see what had transpired, he fought off a blush and quickly faced forward.

"What did you see?" Ginny asked, resting her head on his shoulder as they continued on.

Harry cleared his throat. "Well," he began in a whisper, "if he catches her, I wouldn't expect there to be much more gardening today."

They turned another corner and were now face-to-face with the large castle from the previous day. The river coursed around the property, outlining the boundary between it and the village, and continued on to the sea. As they stood on the corner, admiring the battlements and turrets, Harry blurted, "Let's go check it out."

Ginny looked from the castle to Harry and back again. "Why?"

"I dunno," Harry answered sheepishly. "Because it's there and looks interesting?"

Giggling for no reason that Harry could imagine, Ginny nodded her head and said, "All right, but Mum will have a conniption if we're caught sneaking around there."

A flash of determination swept through Harry just then. "If Fred and George couldn't get in, then we'll just have to."

Ginny had been about to say something else when another, much older couple met them on the walk.

"Good morning," Harry said and made room for them to walk by.

"Hello, lad," the elderly gentleman said and began to shuffle past. His wife held onto his arm and followed his lead as they walked on. One of the bags she was carrying gave a stuttering ripping sound and fell from her grasp. It hit the ground with a dull thud and spilled its contents across the walk.

Harry and Ginny rushed to help them pick up their packages and Harry had to resist repairing the bag with his wand. It was hopelessly torn, but together, Harry and Ginny had enough arms to carry what was on the ground.

"Do you live close by?" Harry asked gently. "We could just carry these to your house for you."

The elderly man appraised the teens, his grey eyes matching his withered hair, and nodded. "You are very kind to offer your help, young man. I wonder what mischief you have in mind, however."

"Now, Harold," chastised his wife, with her tone and a matching severe look. "You'll take their help, or we'll have to leave our groceries strewn on the walk and come back with another bag."

Harold waved his hand and began to turn back around. "Let them help," he grumbled. "Probably going to try to rob us blind, as well."

"Never mind him," Harold's wife soothed. "He's just cantankerous and ornery. We're just up the street."

Ginny shrugged her shoulders as the older pair shuffled off and she and Harry followed them. Harry looked at how, despite his disagreeable exterior, the elderly man seemed to take extra care of his wife, and in the back of his mind, a flash of anticipation appeared – would he and Ginny be so dependent on each other when they were so old?

They deposited the groceries and left as soon as they could, but not without being cajoled into helping them with a jumble sale the following day.

"Why did you agree to that?" Harry prodded as they walked back towards the castle.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "You saw them, Harry. They could barely manage running out for groceries, there's no way they could load up those boxes for the parish, let alone stand about all day selling it."

The jumble sale would be held that Saturday, the eighth, at the old parish building that served as the village's local community centre. It happened to also be the location of their upcoming wedding, three days later.

"I suppose." Harry dismissed the argument and the nervous flutter that came every time he thought about the wedding. He looked up and was once again faced with the tall, proud lines of the weathered stone castle. He grabbed Ginny's hand and said, "You ready?"

She looked up at him and planted a kiss on his cheek. "You're mental, but yes, I'm ready."

"Excellent," Harry said, and they crossed the bridge and onto the sloping lawn.

*

The castle proved to be quite difficult to enter. Apparently, Harry hadn't counted on the medieval architecture, complete with moat, drawbridge, and high, thin windows. Now he knew why Fred and George had had such a difficult time with it.

"Bugger," he muttered after they had circumnavigated the entire structure. "I'd just Apparate us inside, but I don't know what the inside looks like; I could splinch us on a tree or something." He rubbed his chin for a second more and then snapped his fingers. "I could get in there with my Firebolt, though."

"Harry," Ginny scolded lightly. "Even if there's no one inside, you can't just fly up to the battlements – the Muggles will see!" Then a twinkle lit in her eyes and she rubbed Harry's arm. "But we could slip under your Cloak, broom and all..."

His determined face morphed into a smile. "I'll be right back."

Ginny wanted to scold him again, but the thrill of doing something illicit, yet harmless, captivated her. Perhaps it was the bit of her that was like the twins, or perhaps there was some gene that she had inherited from her parents that prompted her to be risky. Maybe it had been kept secret, but lived in her mum and dad as well, and manifested itself in her from time to time. Regardless of the reason, she longed to be on the broom with Harry, under the Cloak, and agreed.

“Okay,” Ginny whispered, squeezing his hand, “but don’t be long.”

He held her close for a second, and then disappeared with a *crack*.

With nothing to do but enjoy the scenery, Ginny sat down to wait.

The castle was on the top of a small rise that gradually sloped up from the river and back down, on the other side, to a glade. From this position, Ginny could see Stoatshead Hill, and to the south, a thin stretch of blue beneath a distant cloud that was the North Sea.

A light breeze blew her hair into her face and Ginny gathered it into a ponytail and used a rubber band from her pocket to tie it back. Another *crack* announced Harry’s return and Ginny stood, brushing bits of grass off her jeans as she did so.

“Are you ready?” Harry asked, mounting his broom and tapping the front of it where he wanted her to sit. His other hand held the smooth silky material that was his Invisibility Cloak.

A familiar thrill worked its way to the tips of her fingers and she hopped eagerly onto the Firebolt.

“Stay close to me,” Harry whispered into her ear, sending shivers up her spine. He whipped the Cloak over them and Ginny could literally feel them disappear from the world. “I won’t be able to cover the whole broomstick like this, and I’ll have to go slow to keep it from coming off.”

Ginny remained silent, content to let Harry lead them. He wrapped an arm around her middle and used the other one to steer. Ginny held onto the Cloak with both hands and felt abnormally unbalanced as they lifted off from the ground.

In the air, the wind whipped at the Cloak and Ginny was surprised it hadn’t already lifted off their heads. Soon, they were hovering over the battlements and descended into the courtyard.

A polished marble fountain gurgled quietly amongst an immaculately-pruned rose garden. There were statues of centaurs and unicorns on one side and topiary sculptures on the other.

“It doesn’t look very deserted,” Harry remarked as he wrapped the Firebolt in his Cloak.

“No,” Ginny agreed, “it doesn’t.”

They walked around the roses and towards one of the large, oak double-doors that must have been the main castle entrance. Harry approached it carefully, and took out his wand. He muttered something that Ginny didn’t recognize and a faint orange glow infused the knotted door.

“It’s not charmed or hexed,” Harry said and tapped the knob. “*Alohamora* .”

The door clicked open and Harry reached out a hand to push it open. Ginny took the invisible broom from his other hand and laced her fingers with his.

A large tapestry greeted them as they entered, literally. “Hello. Who might you be?”

“Ah!” Harry exclaimed and stumbled backwards, pulling Ginny with him. “It’s a wizard’s castle.”

The door slammed as they continued to back-pedal. Ginny began to hastily unwrap the broom so they could escape, when they heard someone yelling behind them.

“Oi! What are you lot doing here? This is private property, this is!”

They froze and turned to see a large man moving swiftly towards them, a long spade in one hand that he waved indignantly in their direction.

Harry pulled Ginny’s hand and they rushed around the garden towards one of the larger statues. When they were behind it, Harry crouched low so that they were hidden and pulled Ginny close. “Hold tight,” he said and Ginny felt the strange sensation that reminded her of an impending lightning strike before they were suddenly outside the castle again.

Standing abruptly, Harry made sure Ginny was all right and they took off running back towards the village. As they crossed the bridge that marked the edge of the territory, a giddy feeling washed over her and she started giggling.

They stopped and leaned against a small stone fence on the walk that led into the village and the giggles turned into laughter. Soon, Harry and Ginny were in stitches, holding onto each other to keep from collapsing.

“That was...so utterly...stupid!” Ginny managed to say between gasps of breath. “But I can’t...stop laughing.”

Harry just nodded his head and laughed some more. “I know,” he finally said as their laughter died. “But you have to admit it was thrilling.”

Ginny slapped his chest playfully and pulled his head down for a kiss. “Yes, Harry, it was thrilling, but I’d prefer to not get caught, next time!”

Well," Harry remarked with a twinkle in his eye, "next time, we'll just have to hide in the Cloak the whole time."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "There will be no 'next time', Harry Potter. Pranks are one thing, lawbreaking is another. There's no limit to what I'd do with you for good reason, but I'm not going to break into other people's homes just for kicks. If we're going to skirt the law of the land *and* risk the wrath of my Mum, it'll be for something worthwhile.

"Oh?" he asked with a raised brow. "And just what sort of mischief would qualify as being 'something worthwhile?'"

Smirking her best 'I-know-something-you-don't' smirk, Ginny handed his still-invisible broom back to him and said, "You'll just have to wait to find out, won't you?"

Harry snorted and took her hand. "I'll look forward to it. In the meantime, I'm starved." Ginny rolled her eyes and they began their walk back to the Burrow.

*

After they arrived home and had a small lunch, Ginny was pressed into helping her mum make dinner. It was the perfect opportunity for Harry to enlist his friends' help in pranking Ginny, and, if it went off properly, his future in-laws as well.

Not wanting to walk in on Ron and Hermione in yet another compromising position, Harry gingerly opened Ron's bedroom door to find them...studying.

"But I've got a whole two weeks to write it, Hermione," Ron whinged. "And since you insisted that we study *last* week for seven bloody hours, I've already finished all the rest of my homework."

Hermione was nonplussed, however, and from her sitting position on the floor, said, "Watch your language, Ron. The sooner you get it finished, the sooner *we* can get back to more important – oh, hi, Harry!"

Harry walked fully into the room and gave a sheepish wave. "Uh, hi, guys. Holiday homework not quite done, Ron?" he teased.

"I've got proper motivation for doing it, Harry, but a bloke can only take so much, you know?" answered Ron.

Hermione rolled her eyes and began packing away her things.

"Then you two might like to help me plan a little diversion tonight at dinner," Harry offered, hoping that he could count on them to support his idea.

"Oh?" Ron and Hermione chorused together. Then, alone, Hermione asked, "What have you got in mind?"

"It's like this..."

*

That evening, Harry and Ginny sat down at a fabulous array of his favourite foods. Roast lamb, meat pies, fresh green beans, mashed potatoes, and treacle pudding for dessert. All of Ginny's brothers were there, save Percy, and Harry was amused at the tentative glances they were all giving Ginny.

For her part, Ginny hadn't acknowledged a single time that she was still holding a grudge against them, but knowing Ginny like he did, he knew she wasn't about to diminish their fear of her quite yet.

The pudding was just about polished off and Harry noticed Molly's hands starting to edge towards the plates, her desire to get the dishes cleaning in the sink slowly pulling at her. It was time.

Harry caught Ron and Hermione's attention and cleared his throat. "So, Dad," he said to Arthur. "What would a pretty young witch cost nowadays?"

Mr. Weasley swallowed his last spoonful of dessert and placed the spoon onto his plate. "I'm sorry?"

"Well," Harry started to explain, "it's just that I was reading through some of Hermione's research on arranged marriages, and came across something interesting."

Ginny's foot pressed into Harry's and he quickly withdrew it. He knew that it was a warning and purposefully ignored it.

"What was that, son?" Arthur asked kindly.

"Back when arranged marriages were the rule and not the exception, the suitor often paid something to the family of the bride." Harry looked over to Hermione and she gave a curt nod. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Ginny's lips pressed thin.

"The Bride Price, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said at once, adopting her *answering the professor* speaking voice. "Usually, the fathers of the couple worked out an arrangement like cows, horses, or other domesticated animals. When an agreement was reached, the deal was finalised and the wedding all but a formality."

Molly's eye was twitching. "What do you mean 'all but a formality'?" she asked in a chilly tone.

Arthur was looking between Harry, Hermione, and Molly, a look of strained surprise etched on his face. "Indeed," was all he managed to say.

Harry turned to face Molly. "Why, after paying the bride price, the bride moved in with the groom," he said with a neutral expression. "Anyway, since my father isn't here," Harry interjected, "I thought I should do the bargaining. What do you say?"

The entire Weasley clan stared at Harry as if he'd suddenly grown another head and a tense silence followed Harry's question. Finally, Molly threw down her serviette and pointed a finger at her husband. "I'll tell you what I think of this...this preposterous notion, Arthur Weasley; if you think you are going to barter away my daughter for a *farm animal*, you'll have worse than the couch for sleeping arrangements!" she said, turning on her heel as she left the room.

Mr. Weasley made a sour face and Harry indulged in a secret smile. Ginny's foot found where Harry had been hiding his shin and he stifled a yelp, still not daring to look at her. Mr. Weasley caught this interaction, however, and narrowed his eyes.

"You're not serious are you?" Bill piped in, his fang earring dangling jauntily from its lobe. "You actually want to *pay* to marry Ginny?"

Harry was getting good at dodging Ginny's foot and was satisfied to feel his chair jerk when she caught its leg instead of his. "Of course," Harry replied. "It's only fair that I at least *try* to compensate for Ginny's loss to your family."

"That makes sense," said Arthur, rubbing his chin in thought. "It's not like we're awash in marriageable daughters, you know. She's the only girl to be born a Weasley in six generations – that's got to be worth more than a cow, don't you think?"

Harry winced when he heard what sounded like a stack of dishes falling in the kitchen. "Well," Harry said, risking a look at Ginny, "she *is* quite a looker – and I've often thought she's the perfect girl for me – but – she snores." Ginny's face was gradually becoming redder and redder and though Harry didn't know if it was from embarrassment or anger, or some combination of the two, he thought she looked quite cute that way. "Besides, there's the whole temper thing."

"Too right," Charlie and Bill agreed at once. George abruptly shifted in his seat, leaning away from his elder siblings. "She's as volatile as a seasick Welsh Green," finished Charlie.

"Quiet, you two," Ginny said with a glare, silencing her chortling brothers. "I don't need any of your kind of help."

Fred and George were now whispering furiously to each other, their heads bowed together.

"Hmm," Arthur said, still playing along. "You are right about the temper.... Perhaps a bicycle then?"

Molly's voice rang out from the kitchen, "Absolutely outrageous! In this day and age!"

Fred took this opportunity to break into the conversation. "Maybe it's just me, but it seems that Ginny *wants* to get married to our esteemed business partner."

"So if anything," George continued, "we should be paying *him*."

"For saving us the trouble of making sure someone else doesn't steal her away," explained Fred.

Suddenly, Ginny stood. "I can't bloody *marry* anyone else, you sods!"

"But even if you *could* pick..." Fred rejoined.

"You'd pick ickle Harry-kins, wouldn't you, Gin-Gin?"

Ginny glared at her brothers, but to Harry's immense relief, her face turned bright crimson. "Yes," she muttered. "Of course I would."

"Excellent," the twins chorused and then turned to Harry. "You're in for it, don't you know? Even if you pay us off, I don't think Ginny'll be able to...compensate you properly."

"Fred Weasley!" screeched their mum from the kitchen and the sound of a pot bouncing along the floor echoed into the dining room.

When Harry looked at Ginny, he found that she was no longer red, but had a subtle, almost-wicked smile on her face. She did a slow pirouette and held out her skirt with both hands as she curtsied. "Don't you think I'm worth more than a bicycle, Harry?" she said in a delicate voice.

Harry gulped, captivated by the gleam in her eyes. He was about to lose his nerve when Ron spoke up. "Nah," he said nonchalantly, leaning back in his chair. "She's not even worth that. Mum and Dad will save loads once they marry her off." He began counting off things on his fingers. "She never helps around the house. Her hair is always clogging the drains. And clothes, too! At least the twins and I could wear hand-me-downs."

Ginny's gaze was furious, daring Harry to agree with Ron's assessment. Harry let a small grin slip onto his face. "Now that I think about it, I don't think Ginny's in the bicycle class. Notwithstanding the temper and the snoring, she's probably worth more than a cow *and* a bicycle. How about a new Muggle automobile?" Harry offered, turning to his future father-in-law. "I was, after all, halfway-responsible for losing yours in the first place. Maybe a Bentley."

Arthur's eyes seemed to glaze over at the prospect of tinkering with a new machine. Ginny's eyes softened and were beginning to glisten.

"No more cars!" Molly yelled as she came in from the kitchen, looming large at the end of the table, training her wand on everyone in turn. "You lot are absolutely barbaric – bargaining for Ginny like common chattel. I won't have it! Until you've come to your senses, I won't hear another word."

She was about to do something rash when Arthur calmly stood and touched his wife on the shoulder. "Molly, dear. They were just having us on – it was all in good fun."

"What?" she said, turning back to face Arthur. "What do you mean – having us on?"

Harry nodded and, reluctantly, told them about his scheming with Ron and Hermione. "I was needling Ginny," Harry admitted, trying to placate both Ginny and Mrs. Weasley. "We've been pranking our way through the family, so I thought turn-about was fair play."

Molly threw up her hands, exhaling noisily in frustration, and then grabbing Arthur by the arm. "Right then. Ginny, you deal with yours and I'll deal with mine. The rest of you troublemakers can clear the table." With that, she stomped off to the garden, with her husband dangling helplessly in tow.

Ginny stared at Harry, her face an unreadable mask, while her brothers started to pile dishes and take them into the kitchen. "Thought you'd have a go at me, did you?" she asked with one raised brow. "Thought it'd be funny to pull one over on me?"

"Yep," Harry said unapologetically. "It was working, too, right up to the end."

The last of the dishes were cleared and Harry was dimly aware of Bill, Charlie and the twins walking past them and into the living room. Ron stopped at Harry's side and, chuckling, said, "Best let her hex you first, Harry. She'll soften up after that." Then he, too, moved off to join his brothers.

Ginny's eye followed Ron until he disappeared around the corner. "So," she began again, "think you're going to get off easy?"

Harry licked his lips and pushed his chair back from the table. "I hope not."

They eyed each other for a moment before Ginny walked slowly over to where he sat. "Give me one good reason why I *shouldn't* hex you." She leaned her bum against the table and folded her arms across her chest.

Harry swallowed. "Because I'm devilishly handsome and you know that I think you're dead sexy when you're angry. I really couldn't help myself, and deep down you know that it was affectionate."

Seeming to consider this, Ginny nodded her head and slowly drew her wand. Harry felt a moment of panic, then resigned himself to his fate and closed his eyes. Ginny muttered something unintelligible and Harry felt a spell hit his lips.

"That's four things," Ginny said as she sank onto his lap. "I never would have guessed that a day would come when I would think you talked too much." She wrapped her arms behind his head and Harry squirmed underneath her.

Harry tried to say something and although his lips moved, no sound came out – she had silenced him. Ginny smirked when he realized his predicament and said, "Hermione found out that the Underage Magic Office can't detect small spells performed with someone else's wand." She waved the holly wand in front of him and placed it on the table. "Besides, I *did* say you wouldn't get away with your prank," she said, drawing near to engage his lips while he was incapable of protest.

*

After being chased out of the kitchen a few minutes later by a sick-looking Ron, who clearly did not relish walking in on them in the middle of Harry's punishment, Harry and Ginny returned to the kitchen to tackle the dishes. Delighted by the after-dinner prank, Ginny wordlessly washed the plates while Harry stacked them. It was ironic that this had been the way they had began the day, and now, with the sun long set, and one less day until their pending marriage, they were at it again. It was daily drudgery, but she didn't mind. In fact, she kind of hoped that they'd repeat this for many years.

Ginny scrubbed the remains of their dinner from a plate and carefully rinsed it under the running tap, turning it slowly with her hands. She passed it to Harry, who had a distant smirk on his face.

She sighed as she thought about his prank. It wasn't terribly well-thought-out, but it was funny, and now that it was behind her, Ginny could appreciate what he had been trying to tell her in a stupid, awkward, clumsy-boy fashion. He thought she was worth more than what money could buy – that he felt deeply for her, and despite the newness of their relationship, she felt comforted by this gesture.

"I hope whomever you're dreaming of has red hair," she murmured and began scrubbing another plate.

Harry slid his clean plate into a drying rack and grimaced. "And if she had brown bushy hair?"

Ginny turned off the tap and faced him, making a gagging motion with her finger.

Still staring at the drying dishes, Harry pulled her into a hug. "No one but you has had much chance staying in my dreams anyway."

"Is that because of the hex, or because you really feel that way?" she asked, disengaging from the hug. The question came from idle curiosity, but Ginny found herself suddenly intent on hearing his answer.

Harry let out a breath and leaned into the counter with his elbows. "I used to think it was just a fluke that you were the only one I could daydream about for any length of time. I tried so hard to make things work with Cho, and then that bollixed itself up and I felt lost for a while."

"Hold on," Ginny blurted. "When was the first time you thought about me...you, know...that way?"

A shy smile crept onto Harry's face and his cheeks became slightly red. "Right after the, uh..." He ducked his head and mumbled.

"What was that?" Ginny asked, knowing it was hard for him to divulge this bit of information, but too interested to leave it alone.

The red patches on Harry's cheeks were larger when he raised his head again. "I said...after the Chamber. I had a dream about you that summer – one of *those* dreams, you know?" Ginny nodded her head to let him know what he meant. "After that, you popped into my head...I dunno, I guess every few weeks."

Ginny absently turned off the tap and turned around to lean against the sink. "So, you've been having dreams about me for five years?" she asked faintly. "How did you feel about me, then?"

Harry mirrored her and leaned against the counter, facing the pantry. "At first I thought I was a pervert – lusting after my best friend's little sister. I tried to bury those feelings and forget that I had ever dreamt those things about you. I was just thirteen, you know. I think most thirteen-year-old boys are pretty confused about girls when they first start to notice them. It got worse once you weren't so little any more."

This new information was startling for Ginny. He had *fantasised* about her for *years*. She shivered at the thought, and rubbed the backs of her bare arms. The real question wasn't so much how his feelings had evolved, or what he thought of her *then*, but what motivated him to feel the way he did *now*.

"What about...now?" Ginny asked tentatively, a sudden nervousness enveloping her. She had been so sure that he loved her only yesterday, but now....

"Now?" he asked. They were both staring at the pantry door, but Ginny could feel him shift closer to her. "Now..." he reached an arm around her shoulders, "when I'm with you, I feel complete, content. Washing dishes is mindless drudgery, but it's okay because I'm washing dishes *with you*."

Ginny leaned into him and willed him to know that she had always loved him, and that nothing would ever change that. He tightened his grip on her shoulder and circled her with his other hand. "I'm fairly certain that I love you, Ginny Weasley."

The Bargain 9: What a Witch Wants

Chapter 9 - What a Witch Wants

August 8

The Lovegoods were an odd sort of family that delighted in the strange, and the abnormal (even for Wizarding standards), and excelled at glorifying the seemingly mundane. So it was with some trepidation that Ron agreed to assist Mr. Lovegood in making repairs to his printing facilities in the village. Although he was a bit put out at the prospect of spending time away from Hermione, she was decidedly upset about it.

"Tell her you're busy," Hermione pleaded desperately.

Harry watched his friends warily as he polished off his porridge and toast.

"Her' who?" Ron asked. "Are you talking about Luna? It was Mr. Lovegood that Flooed Mum this morning, not Luna."

Ginny caught Harry's eye and tried to communicate something, but Harry couldn't quite catch on.

Hermione hesitated for only a second before she said, "But she will *be* there, won't she? Ron, you *can't* go; you – you have to finish your summer homework."

Ron pulled on a thread that hung loosely from his jumper and flicked it onto the floor. "What are you on about? It's not like they're *diseased* or something."

With a scoffing huff, Hermione poked Ron in the chest. "Just watch yourself while you're there. Don't let her get you alone and don't.... Just...be careful."

Ron stared at his girlfriend incredulously. "What's with you? Normally I look to Luna for disconnected weirdness, but you seem to be channelling her this morning."

Hermione huffed again. "Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you." Then she stomped off to Ginny's room, leaving them all looking after her.

"That was..." Harry began.

"Weird," finished Ginny. "You'd think Hermione's face had turned green the way she was talking."

"Huh?" asked a very confused Ron.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Nothing, Ron. Get along. You're going to be late."

Ron checked the clock on the wall, which read, "You're already late," and hurried to the kitchen fire. "The Quibbler!" he yelled, and was gone in a flash.

Harry budged over to Ginny and she rested her head on his shoulder. "Hermione's worried about Luna?"

"Sure seems that way," Ginny answered nonchalantly.

Warning bells started ringing in Harry's head. "You know something," he said at once.

Ginny blinked her eyes and Harry realised something about her for the first time: she always seemed to blink just before telling a lie. "All I know is that Hermione is jealous of Luna and doesn't want to compete for Ron's affections."

"Right," Harry said, polishing off his porridge with one large spoonful. "All I know is you're a big fibber and had better fess-up to whatever it is that you've done before I start tickling you."

Ginny's head shot off Harry's shoulder and her eyes became as round as saucers. "You wouldn't."

Harry placed his spoon primly into his bowl and folded his arms. "Try me."

They stared at each other, Harry trying not to laugh at the fear radiating off her, Ginny a quivering mass of guilt. Finally, she swallowed. "Okay, but you can't tell Ron, or you'll be without a bride come the eleventh."

Knowing that he didn't need to prod her, he simply waited for her to continue. She licked her lips and said, "I may have told Luna...that Ron sort of...fancied her."

Now it was Harry's turn to bug his eyes out, his glasses slipping down his nose. "You did what? But that isn't true."

"But I *had* to," Ginny explained. "If someone didn't help Ron and Hermione come to grips with their feelings, we would have all gone mad. I knew that all Hermione needed was a little push. Luna's fancied Ron for ages, so when I let slip that he might fancy her back, Luna started hitting on Ron at your birthday party. That did it. Hermione was beside herself with jealousy. When Ron finally asked her out, she jumped into his arms and kissed his lips off." Ginny had a satisfied grin on her face, and then shook herself into the here and now.

Harry considered this. "Hmm. Okay, so we all owe you for your services; still, don't you think Luna's heading for a fall? What if she still thinks that there's hope for Ron? What if she finds out that he's an item with Hermione? That's going to hurt her," Harry said cautiously.

"I – I guess I didn't really...think about that," Ginny admitted. Then, she quickly added, "She'll live – nothing seems to faze her."

"I dunno," Harry said, pushing his glasses back to their customary position on the bridge of his nose. "Luna's tough on the outside, but if she's really in love with Ron, this might hurt her worse than either of us can see."

Ginny's lip started to quiver and Harry had an odd craving to kiss it. "Do you think so?" Ginny asked quietly. "Oh, Mercy! What am I going to do? I've messed things up, haven't I?"

Stacking Ginny's bowl into his, he stood and walked over to the sink. If Luna was in love with Ron, and Ron tactfully let her down... Who was Harry kidding? Ron had all the tact of a wild boar. Harry rinsed the porridge out of the bowls before it congealed and walked back to the table. "We may have a problem. We'll sort it out when it comes. We'd better leave or we'll be late."

*

The walk to the church, where the jumble sale was being held, was quick and Harry and Ginny spent their time discussing solutions to the Luna problem.

"Ron'll be there all day," Harry was explaining. "So all we have to do is finish up the sale and nip back to the *Quibbler*. What time did the Johnsons say the sale would finish?"

A breeze whipped around them and Ginny took a deep breath as they walked purposefully along the lane into town. "Around two. It depends on how fast things are sold."

Harry wondered if he could somehow leave the church early, but when they arrived, that idea was quickly quashed. A huge queue of shoppers had already formed in front of the main entrance, and were quickly wrapping around the building.

"But it doesn't start for another half-hour," Ginny exclaimed, then looked thoughtful. "On the bright side, we may sell out quickly."

Harry nodded and led her to the back entrance, where they were to meet the Johnsons. Mr. Johnson was trying to help the Reverend and another middle-aged man unload a lorry. Harry rushed over to assist them.

"Let me get that, Mr. Johnson," Harry said amicably and grabbed the corner of a large wooden desk.

"Aye, lad," Mr. Johnson relented and shuffled away. "It is a task for younger men."

The Reverend was a kindly man with sandy brown hair and warm grey eyes. He had the slightly soft look of someone that hadn't done a lot of physical labour in his life and was winded after moving the first piece of furniture. "Thank you, son," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I had wondered if I'd see you here."

When Harry gave him an inquiring stare, the man took Harry's hand and said, "Reverend Miles Firth." Harry wondered if he was supposed to know him when Reverend Firth added in a low voice, "I'm also a member of the Muggle Relations Department. From what your mum said, Miss Weasley" he said, nodding to Ginny, "I'll be the one marrying you in a few days."

"But," Ginny began, clearly curious and then lowered her voice to a whisper, "you're a wizard."

Reverend Firth simply chuckled. "Would you rather be married by a Muggle minister?" he asked good-naturedly. "I'm not privy to all the details of your arrangement with Mr. Potter, but I believe a wizard has to perform the ceremony to properly lift the hex."

Harry shivered at the thought and wondered why Lupin had never mentioned this particular detail before. "I suppose we don't have much choice."

Ginny shifted next to him. "Why haven't we seen you here before?" she asked. "Mum and Dad know all of the magical people in the area."

With a smile, Reverend Firth nodded at a passing volunteer and said, "I've been here less than a year. When the previous Reverend passed away, I applied for the job."

Ginny seemed to accept this and smiled at the clergyman. "I guess we'll be seeing more of you, then."

"That we will. In the meantime, Mr. Potter and I have a lorry to unload."

Ginny stood by as Harry finished removing other bits of furniture and boxes of knick-knacks into the main hall of the church. There was a group of women emptying the boxes and sorting them onto long, folding tables while the men arranged the furniture and appliances. On the far end, near the doors, were two small tables with a till on each one.

Mrs. Johnson spotted Harry and Ginny and called them over. "We'll put your pretty girlfriend to work at one of the tills," she said to Harry. "And you can help load the larger items onto lorries when they're purchased."

Ginny gripped Harry's hand extra hard and sent him a worried glance. Harry knew that she was afraid that she couldn't work a Muggle till. "Unload them so we can load them back, eh? Sounds good," he agreed and walked towards the entrance with Ginny. "It'll be all right, Ginny," he reassured her. "Let's go look at the till and I'll try to help you run it. They won't need me to load anything up for a while anyway."

Looking dubiously at the small, white contraption, Ginny gave a shaky nod and sat on the stool in front of the table.

The other till was unoccupied, but Harry was sure Ginny wouldn't be alone for long.

"Okay," Harry said and ran his eyes over the keys. "It looks pretty straightforward. You punch in the price with the number keys..." He pointed to the ten-key pad that dominated the centre of the till. "And then hit the addition button until you've put in all the items they're buying. The total will display on the top, here."

Ginny was murmuring to herself and pointing to the various buttons as he spoke. "I'm terrible at maths, Harry."

In the face of her insecurity, Harry bit back the snarky comment that appeared in his mind and pulled her into a gentle hug. "You'll do fine. The first few will be a little odd, but after that, things will be all right."

Ginny clicked the keys to test her knowledge and when the drawer slid open, she gaped at the odd bills and coins. "Harry," she said in a whispered panic. "I can't make change quickly with Muggle money!"

With a low chuckle, Harry reached in and took out one of each bill. "If you can read numbers, you can make change, Ginny. This one's a fiver – see the number five on the top? And each denomination has a different colour."

Harry went through each bill until Ginny understood what they meant and then covered the coins – two pound, one pound, fifty pence, and so on. When he looked up from the till, he realised that the crowds had already begun to mill around the chapel and it was almost time for Ginny to make her first sale.

Three young blokes were there first, followed by an elderly woman and what looked to be her daughter. The first man had a single purchase, a hideous-looking lamp that had a snake winding its way around the base. Harry wondered where he might have gotten it but was instantly aware of Ginny making nervous sounds next to him.

"A pound and a half," Ginny read from the tag. She punched in the amount and looked up to the man. He handed her a fiver and she fumbled with the bills for a moment before finally handing back a two-pound coin, a one pound coin, and a fifty pence piece.

The man walked off with a curt nod and Harry kissed Ginny's crown. "You did just fine, Ginny." The next man put his selections down on the small table and Ginny began to enter the prices. Noticing a group of people in the appliance section, Harry gave Ginny's shoulders a squeeze. "I'd better get going, Ginny. You'll be fine."

She was so focused on pushing the right buttons and making change for the set of dominos and paperback books, that she hardly acknowledged what he had said. With a small shake of his head, Harry walked over to the appliances to see if he was needed.

*

The jumble sale went smoothly, and by the time the afternoon was upon them, half the items were cleared off the floor and on the way to their new owners' houses. Harry stopped occasionally to check on Ginny and was pleased at how quickly she had learned the inner workings of both the till and Muggle money.

Harry pushed the last of the furniture onto a waiting lorry with the help of a large-framed man that could have been Uncle Vernon's brother had he been a few stone heavier and quite a bit ruder.

"Thanks," said the man as Harry closed the lorry's back door.

Walking inside, Harry immediately found Ginny arguing with an odd-looking couple over the price of a box of books.

"These aren't worth more than the listed price," explained the man. He was tall, well-dressed, and sounded extraordinarily familiar to Harry. He had short, slicked-back, black hair, narrow blue eyes, and a tiny bob of a nose.

The woman next to him only came to his shoulder, had her blonde hair coiffed into a bun on the top of her head and seemed unnaturally angry at Ginny. "It's not your job to question the prices on these...items anyway," she fairly spat out.

Ginny wasn't intimidated, however. "But you altered the tag! I can't honour the price for this when the tag has clearly been modified."

"Is there something I can help you with?" Harry said, standing behind Ginny and placing a supportive hand on her shoulder. The people in queue behind the man and woman were looking accusingly between the books and their prospective buyers.

"Harry, these people fixed the tag to read one pound, when it used to say ten."

Harry took the tag and looked at it. There was a smudge to the left of a hastily scratched one and underneath the one, what could have easily been a zero. "This looks dodgy to me," Harry confirmed.

The man caught Harry's eye and scowled. "Fine," he ground out, clearly reluctant to agree. "Here's your ruddy money." He flipped a ten pound note at Ginny and took the box from the table. As they left, Harry caught, out of the corner of his eye, a glimmer coming from the man's face. When he turned to look at him properly, the man was gone.

"Hmm," Harry said suspiciously. "That was odd, wasn't it?"

Ginny nodded her head and put the note in the till, waving forward the next person. "He was an idiot if you ask me. Trying to rip-off a charity sale. It's something Malfoy would try."

Harry did a double-take at Ginny's pronouncement and pulled her around to face him, interrupting the sale. "What did you say?"

"I said," Ginny repeated slowly, "that it's something Malfoy would do – try to cheat a church out of their money."

Letting go of Ginny's shoulder so she could go back to the till, Harry stared blankly at the church's door. "That's it!" he cried. "It was Malfoy." Ginny looked back to him, waiting for more explanation, but he hesitated. He could hardly talk about glamour spells and wizards who were supposedly imprisoned in Azkaban in front of a queue of Muggles. "I'll explain later," he finally said and walked back to help a young couple buying a washing machine.

*

Ginny was still rankled by the man who tried to swindle her at the jumble sale. She and Harry were walking towards the *Quibbler*, holding hands and talking about their experiences that day. It was mid-afternoon and Ginny knew that Harry would be hungry soon.

"About that guy," Harry began as they rounded their final corner and crossed the street.

"The one who pulled a Malfoy?" she asked sarcastically.

"Yeah. What if it was Malfoy?"

Ginny stopped walking and faced Harry fully. "What do you mean? He's in prison, Harry – there's no way it could be him."

Taking her cheeks in his hands, Harry took a breath. "But if it is him, we need to be on our guard. There's no telling what devilry he's up to – in prison, or not."

Ginny leaned into his hand and sighed. "You're right. I still think it's odd that he'd show up at a *Muggle* sale and try to cheat me out of a few pounds."

"Ginny," Harry said placatingly, "this is *Malfoy* we're talking about. He doesn't know *how* to be any different. As for being there in the first place...that worries me too. He would only be there to spy on us, and that can't lead to anything good."

*

It turned out that Ron had already finished helping Mr. Lovegood install new finishing rollers on his main press. After cleaning up, Ron'd talked briefly with Luna and then returned to the Burrow. Ginny took Luna aside for a private conversation, in which Luna shared that she was perfectly happy to see Ron and Hermione together. It baffled Harry to think that Ron could have accomplished such a delicate task, but Ginny confirmed that whatever he'd said had gone a long ways to improving the situation.

Once they were back at the Burrow, Ginny was pounced on by Hermione, Mrs. Weasley and Tonks, and Harry found himself shoved into a chair at the kitchen table.

"Ginny, dear!" Mrs. Weasley called. "We're so glad you're home. Let's get you freshened up so we can all go shopping."

"But..." Ginny protested weakly.

Harry shrugged his shoulders helplessly at her consternation and chuckled as she was shunted off to the loo. He had wanted to take Ginny on a walk around the Burrow tonight....

Sighing, Harry walked upstairs to his bedroom. A loud spate of giggles echoed from the loo as he passed and he found himself wondering just what they were up to. When he entered the room he shared with Ron, his eyes wandered over his trunk and the small lump that protruded from a particularly ugly pair of socks. With Ginny off shopping, Harry would have to reschedule his plans to the following night.

Deciding that he was clean enough to make a few appearances around Wizarding London, Harry scrunched his eyes and gripped his wand. Ginny wasn't the only one with a shopping list. With a *crack*, he was gone.

August 9

The next morning, Harry concluded he was living the previous day over again. As soon as they had cleaned up from breakfast, Ginny was herded away from him by her mum, Hermione, Tonks, and, oddly enough, Luna. Harry was torn between letting her have time with her mother and friends and a fierce desire to keep her all to himself.

"I'll be back before you know it," Ginny soothed, playing with a bit of his hair that was touching the back of his collar.

Harry didn't answer, but simply turned and took her into his arms and held her for a moment, heedless of the pack of onlookers. As she began to withdraw he planted a kiss on her forehead. "I'll miss you," he whispered so that only she could hear him.

"Me, too," Ginny answered.

Suddenly remembering what he had planned for that evening, Harry pulled her back. "Will you be back in time for dinner at six o'clock?"

Ginny seemed surprised by this. "Oh. Well, I suppose..." She cast an inquiring glance at her mum, who nodded. "See you at five."

"Bye."

Ginny trailed Hermione into the fireplace, and when the fire died away, Harry had to fight off an empty feeling that gripped his insides. He sat heavily in Arthur's recliner and stared mournfully at the smiling face on Ginny's clock hand, pointed at "Shopping".

*

Ginny needed an exhausting day of shopping. The past few days with Harry were exciting, fun, enlightening, and wonderful, but there was a secret something that whispered in the back of her mind – something that told her she needed to be apart from Harry every once in a while if this was going to work.

It was a strange sort of feeling to want to be away from him, and she battled with the notion that they needed to continue building their relationship or their marriage might be doomed. However, shopping let her centre herself in a way that wouldn't be possible if she were spending every waking moment with Harry. No matter how pleasant those moments might be, there needed to be a balance of time with Harry and time without.

So when five o'clock came, Ginny was both apprehensive and excited to return to the Burrow.

"Off to the Leaky Cauldron we go," Mrs. Weasley had said. "We don't want Ginny to be late for her engagement."

Ginny scrutinized her mother for that particular choice of words, wondering if she knew something that Ginny didn't. When Molly didn't catch her eye or make any other indication that she had said something provocative, Ginny concentrated on walking. She held a large, bulky package – one with a hanger protruding from the top – that had taken her the better part of four hours to choose, and only ten minutes to have it magically altered to fit her body.

Luna and Hermione Flooed ahead of her and as she stepped into the grate, Ginny clung to her parcel, resisting the urge to fold it in half to accommodate travel. "The Burrow!" she yelled.

When she skidded into her kitchen, Harry was at the door, goggling at her package despite Hermione's best efforts to push him back into the living room.

"You *can't* see it, Harry. It's bad luck!"

Harry's curiosity was not to be unsatisfied, however. "What is it? What's taken you all bloody day to buy that I can't see it?"

Hermione let out a frustrated groan as she whipped out her wand. "*Depulso*," she muttered and Harry was thrown back into the living room and onto the sofa.

Ginny heard the air leave his lungs in a *whoosh* as he hit and she had to stifle a giggle.

"Ouch, Hermione," Harry yelled indignantly. "What was that for?"

Hermione was now facing the living room, one hand on her hip, the other pointing her wand at Harry. "It was for your own good. You'll thank me for it later."

"I'm sorry, Hermione – I'm still not very good at this whole courting custom thing," he said contritely. His voice was so different when he was humbling himself and Ginny found herself strangely fascinated by it. Hermione waved at her to go to her room. She reluctantly bounded up the stairs with her package slung over her shoulder.

"We're going some place formal tonight – could you make sure she knows that? I've – uh – expanded her wardrobe a bit while she was out."

"Fine, fine," Hermione agreed. "Just stay in here until I've made sure Ginny's out of sight."

Freeing herself from her trance, Ginny giggled as she closed the door to her room, her purchase safely stowed away. The next time she would take it out of its bag would be her wedding day.

After a quick shower, Ginny opened her wardrobe to reveal a complete set of new clothes. Someone had been busy while she'd been gone. There were several sets of casual dresses, formal dress robes, new jeans, shirts, jumpers, and an entire stack of shoes. A mixture of panic (*what if Harry got the sizes wrong?*), anger (*how dare he presume to know what clothes I like to wear?*), and lastly, an odd contentment (*he must really care about me to spend this much time and money*) overcame her as she fingered the line of clothes.

Picking one of the formal dresses from the closet, not knowing if they were going someplace magical or Muggle, Ginny slipped into it and began to search for a matching set of shoes.

A knock sounded at the door and Hermione's head peeked in. "About ready?"

"Just about," Ginny replied. "I've got to do my hair and put on some makeup."

Hermione walked in and pushed the door closed. "Harry's on pins and needles downstairs," she informed Ginny as she walked over to the vanity and began to arrange the makeup.

"Oh?" Ginny asked. She found a set of heels that were surprisingly comfortable and reasoned that they were likely charmed to be that way.

"Yeah." Hermione was staring oddly at her friend. "I wonder why he would be so nervous?"

Ginny huffed and began to brush her hair. "He probably thinks I'll hex him if he doesn't propose tonight," she began. "Which isn't far from the truth. I've been lenient so far, but the boy just needs to get *on* with things." Ginny screwed up her face and began a complicated twisting motion with her hair. Soon, it was pinned into an elaborate bun on the top of her head.

Hermione smiled in a way that suggested she knew something that Ginny did not. "And I'm sure he's aware of that fact. Just make sure you're as patient as you are anxious. I wouldn't want you to hex him right before he gives you a ring."

Ginny was much too nervous to put on her own makeup and motioned for Hermione to help her. "Could you?" Ginny asked, waving at her face.

Hermione nodded and proceeded to apply foundation, mascara, blush, and lip gloss to Ginny's face, rendering them both unable to speak.

With the makeup applied, Ginny gave a wry smile and clasped a set of fake pearls around her neck. "Thanks, Hermione. We'll just have to wait to see if Harry's as aware as you think. Right now, I've got a *date*." She turned to face her friend and clipped a matching set of earrings on her lobes. "How do I look?"

Hermione stepped back and let her eyes roam around Ginny's face and body. "Beautiful. If for some stupid reason Harry *doesn't* propose to you tonight, *I'll* hex him. I've got some good ones that I've been waiting to try out, you know," she said somewhat seriously.

Ginny's grin faded as she held her gaze for a moment and then wrapped her arms around her friend. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for just being here."

They pulled apart and Hermione smiled. "I couldn't let you suffer through this all by yourself. It's bad enough that you're being forced into it, but to have to endure it with *Harry* of all people..."

A moment of silence followed and then they both giggled. "He is thick, but you know what, Hermione? He's perfect and I can't think of anyone else I'd rather be doing this with."

Hermione's smile grew and something glistened in her eyes. "You better get going. It's almost six."

Ginny nodded. "Right. See you later."

With that, Ginny grabbed her pocketbook and ran down the stairs.

Harry was waiting for her at the bottom. She could tell he had been pacing, but the look on his face transformed when he saw her. Whatever scolding she had been about to receive was gone and not for the first time in her life, she was glad to be a girl. She twirled, swishing the hem of her dress. "Like what you see?" she asked tentatively.

"Yeah, I like it all right," Harry said as he approached her. "I'd say you look like a million Galleons." He took her arm gently in his.

"You look quite handsome yourself, Mr. Potter." His bottle-green dress robes from fourth year, which she'd been quite taken by at the time of the Yule Ball, were now entirely too small for him, but Ginny was delighted to see him in something very similar. The major difference, however, was not the clothes, but the man that now filled them.

"Shall we?" he asked politely. She nodded and he clasped his other hand over hers. He took in a breath and concentrated. In that brief second before the world dissolved away, Ginny caught a glimpse of the boy that she fell in love with, and realised that she was no longer in love with that boy. Now, she loved the man that the boy had grown into.

*

Harry Apparated them into an alcove off the main entrance of an elaborately decorated building. Dozens of witches and wizards were milling about the foyer, all dressed in immaculate robes and expensive-looking dresses. Beyond the entrance, Ginny saw lavishly-set tables and crisply-dressed waiters weaving between them. She didn't think she belonged in such expensive surroundings.

Harry seemed to sense her hesitation as they walked towards the maitre d'. "Are you all right?" he asked.

No one seemed to have noticed them, and as Ginny realised this, she forced her nervousness aside. "I'm fine. I just didn't expect you to take me to such a high-class place."

"Oh," Harry said quickly. "I hope this isn't a problem. There's normally a very long waiting list to come here, but the owner was very understanding of our...um, situation."

Ginny smiled reassuringly, but felt the butterflies start to dance in her stomach once again. “No, it’s not a problem. It was just a surprise, that’s all.”

The concern melted from Harry’s face and he led her to where a man was checking off names from a list and issuing orders to the waiters with crisp commands. A wizard to their left appraised Ginny and with a baleful look sneered at her over his nose.

“Reservation for Potter at six o’clock,” Harry said to the maitre d’.

The man’s eyebrows rose for a split-second and his eyes flicked to Harry’s brow before he consulted the list. “Ah, yes. Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley. I have your table ready, now.”

He snapped his fingers and a slim man with a bottle-brush moustache appeared behind him. “Show Mr. Potter to table twelve.”

Ginny could feel the weight of several pairs of eyes on her back as she clung to Harry’s arm and followed their waiter through the crowded restaurant.

Harry held out Ginny’s chair as she sat and waited for her to get comfortable before taking his own seat. Despite the feelings of doubt and wonder that swirled around her, she could sense Harry’s own disquiet and wondered if he was just as befuddled by the opulence that surrounded them.

Dinner was wonderful. They ended up ordering separate meals that they both liked and shared them with each other. Conversation ranged from Quidditch to Gringotts and from Ginny’s new clothes to Harry’s hair.

After they polished off their dessert, Harry nodded his head at their waiter as he passed.

“What was that?” Ginny asked, pointing to the man who was now serving dinner to the table beside them.

“What was what?”

“You nodded at our waiter. What was that for?”

Harry hesitated for a split-second and then said, “Nothing. Just letting him know we’re all right.”

Ginny didn’t buy it and, as she daubed her mouth, couldn’t help but be suspicious. As the dessert faded from their plates, Harry became increasingly agitated. He was shifting in his seat as if there was something poking his backside. Soon, Ginny’s suspicions were confirmed as a man stood in the middle of the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Can I have your attention for just a moment?” His voice was carried magically through the room, but the light made it impossible for Ginny to tell who it was. The chatter and clinking in the restaurant died down as everyone looked towards the man. “There’s a very special couple here tonight and I wanted to give them the opportunity to make an announcement.”

The man sat down and Ginny thought she caught a glimpse of long white hair before he disappeared from her view. At that moment, Harry stood and nervously patted around in his pocket.

“Thank you, Professor. M-My name is Harry Potter and tonight, I’d like to let you know that I have the privilege of accompanying Miss Ginny Weasley to this fine establishment.”

As Harry stood there, Ginny suddenly felt her stomach drop to her toes. He was going to propose to her – in front of hundreds of strangers. A bead of sweat appeared on his face as he continued to speak, but the words became a blur. He glanced around and shoved his hand into his pocket.

“As you all know, Ginny and I have been promised to wed under an ancient law. Tonight...” Harry hesitated, a look of panic washing over his face as he looked down at Ginny. The nervousness left his eyes and was replaced with a firm resolve. He muttered something under his breath and took his hand out of his pocket. “Tonight, I wanted to tell you all... actually, I want to tell *you*, Ginny, that I love you.”

He stood frozen for a moment and then sat down to a surge of applause from the crowd. As the noise gradually ebbed back to its previous level, Ginny became aware of two things. Harry loved her. He’d said it in public with a conviction that he hadn’t had previously; and yet, he hadn’t proposed; there was no ring on her finger. The moment was lost.

Soon, a pile of Galleons was left on the table and Harry guided her back to the alcove. Ginny looked up and saw Hermione and Ron at one of the tables – Hermione looking at her with the saddest expression she had ever seen. Bill and Fleur were seated next to them, and everywhere she looked, she realised that the restaurant was filled with her family. They passed her parents and her dad mouthed the words *I love you* before she was whisked away again. All the while, Ginny could only feel the nakedness of her finger and the aching in her heart.

There was a flash of light as a photographer spotted them through a window and Harry moved to shield her. Then, without warning, Harry Apparated them away.

*

Harry was a wreck. He Apparated them to the first place that popped into his mind – Stoatshead Hill – and wondered how long he had left to live. It wasn’t that he didn’t *want* to propose to Ginny...but when he actually got up to do it, and looked into her eyes, he knew that his choice of proposal wasn’t right. Ginny *deserved* to be asked in private, because he knew that once they were married, her new last name would destroy all the privacy she had ever known.

They stood together on top of the hill, looking out towards the village. It was dark now, and the streetlamps, headlights, and windows were winking up at them merrily, exactly the opposite of how Harry felt. He had seen the disappointment on Ginny’s face when he sat down at the restaurant, and

knew that he only had the slimmest, faintest chance of making it up to her.

"Harry?" Ginny asked quietly beside him.

He refused to look at her just yet, as seeing her sad face might be his undoing. "Yes?"

"Did you mean what you said tonight? That you loved me?"

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Harry nodded. "Yes."

There was a pause and a slight breeze blew around them. Unable to take it any more, Harry turned to look at her. Wet tracks trailed along her cheeks and Harry's heart broke.

"Then why didn't you..." Ginny's voice failed her, but she remained strong.

"What?" Harry asked, knowing full well what she meant.

"Nothing," Ginny said and turned away from him. She rubbed her bare arms as the wind continued to blow in from the south.

Harry moved over to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Ginny, I..." he began, but his voice died in his throat. He wanted to tell her so badly that he loved her and that he was sorry, but it sounded so forced in his mind that he just couldn't bring himself to do it.

"No, it's all right, Harry." Her words were hollow and the sound of them wounded him even more. "I...understand."

A piece of Ginny's hair came loose and blew onto his face. Her smell enveloped him and Harry realised that he was at a crossroads: either he had to embrace what they had together, or throw it all away. "Ginny," he began again, this time with force. "I'm sorry for what happened at the restaurant. I..."

She turned to face him and the open, vulnerable expression there only served to reinforce the power he held over her. "I love you, and...I'm a horrible person. Still, I can't help but be who I am. I had every intention of proposing to you tonight, but...something stopped me." He took her arms with his hands and gently squeezed. "I need you, Ginny. I need you more than I ever thought possible and I don't ever want to let you go. When you left to go shopping last night and then again today, I felt - I felt like I was missing something, like part of me was gone."

Ginny nodded her head and whispered, "I know. Me, too."

"Your family means the world to me, too. I knew I had to involve them in the proposal, so I set up this whole evening. The restaurant, the announcement...even having Professor Dumbledore give me a lead-in," Harry finished with a slight smile.

Harry sighed. Ginny continued to stare at him, a myriad of unspoken feelings playing across her face. "But when it came time to do it, I...just felt like you needed to have this *one* thing be private - special; just between you and me."

The wind stopped and the moon appeared from behind a stray cloud. Harry released her arms and took a half-step back. He took a velvet-covered box from his pocket and lowered one knee onto the ground. The box lid snapped open and he presented it to her.

"Ginny Weasley, you've been my friend for only a short while, but you've always been there for me. We've only have a few days to sort out our feelings, and I haven't made the best choices, but I know that I can't live without you anymore." Harry's knee was starting to hurt as it was pressing onto a pebble and his palms were sweating. *What if she said no?* "Ginny, you aren't just a girl I have to marry. You are everything I want and I don't want to ever let you go."

The breeze blew again. "Marry me?" he asked, his heart in his throat.

From his position, kneeling in front of her, Harry could see the moonlight reflection off her face. The inky-black sky behind her was awash in tiny pinpricks of light that seemed to undulate as they twinkled. Yet in spite of all the beauty around them, Harry was only truly aware of Ginny.

Ginny knelt down in front of Harry and took the box from his hand. She closed it and placed it on the short grass in front of them. Her hands took Harry's and she smiled. "Harry. I've waited so long to hear you say those words. I've had dreams upon dreams of this moment and I can honestly say that they were nothing compared to the real thing. I love you, Harry. I always will, and it would give me the greatest pleasure to be your wife."

There was a moment of confusion when Ginny placed the box on the ground and Harry was sure that his chance with her had been lost. But when she took his hands and looked into his eyes, his heart thudded with a renewed hope, for her love for him was plain to see. "Really?" he exclaimed. "You will?"

A large grin split her face and she pushed him backwards onto the grass. "Of course, you great, stupid, prat! I told you I loved you! How could I not want to be your wife?"

Ginny plopped down beside him, playing with the box, opening and closing it. He grabbed her hand, and a moment later a ring was on the appropriate finger, leaving the box on the ground again. His hand traced along her jaw line and he felt happier than he could ever imagine. "I love you, Ginny," he repeated, before capturing her mouth with his. It was a long time before they Apparated home.

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The Bargain

10: The Department of Records and Statistics

Chapter 10 - The Department of Records and Statistics

August 9

Ginny convinced Harry to let them walk back to the Burrow. The peaceful night and bright, waxing moon made Ginny feel that it would be a crime to thrust herself back into her family's presence so soon after Harry's perfect proposal. From the demure smile on his face at her suggestion, she could tell that he wasn't keen to lose their privacy, either.

An owl hooted overhead as they walked. Harry held her close as she played absently with the smooth metal around her finger and Ginny was grateful. Her dress was perfect for fine dining, but utterly useless at keeping in what little heat she generated. Still, basking in the afterglow of becoming Harry's official fiancée, Ginny reckoned she could run starkers through the village and not feel a bit chilly. Harry's attempt at transfiguring a handkerchief into a shawl was appreciated, but it was still a cold night to be out walking in just a thin evening gown.

"You've been wonderful tonight," Ginny murmured, snuggling close to him, and willing the trip back to take hours instead of minutes.

Harry pulled the transfigured shawl tightly across her exposed arm and sighed. "You have, too. I thought I was a goner for sure at the restaurant."

Ginny allowed a smile to creep onto her face. "I wasn't going to kill you, Harry, just *maim* you a little. To be honest, I was in so much shock from what you were about to do – proposing in front of all those strangers! – that I did think of hexing you then and there, underage sorcery ban or not."

With a nervous chuckle, Harry stopped and turned to look at her. They were already at the lane that led to the Burrow's entrance. "I know," he said, his eyes pleading for forgiveness. "I'm sorry. I realised just before I stood up that it was one of the worst ideas I'd ever had and did my best to make it up to you. You deserved to have that moment be private and I hope you'll overlook my stupidity."

Having forgotten his indiscretions the moment he produced the ring on Stoatshead Hill, Ginny was in a forgiving mood; she wrapped her arms around his neck and proceeded to let her lips absolve him.

A good while later, the breathless couple entered the Burrow and were immersed in chaos.

*

No one noticed when Harry and Ginny slipped into the kitchen from the back garden. It was well past eleven, but despite the late hour, every Weasley was gathered in the living room, shouting or crying in varying degrees of disquiet.

"If Ginny hasn't hexed Harry six ways to Tuesday, I'll do it myself," came an angry growl from Bill.

"Did you see the look on her face?" asked Fred.

"Yeah," Ron piped in. "She was devastated."

"Ron, you don't know what happened," Hermione cried. "They aren't even back yet, so it doesn't do any good to speculate."

"We *are* back," Ginny said forcefully. "And we're fine. What's all the commotion?"

"Ginny!" exclaimed her mum and Ginny was promptly swept into an embrace.

As Ginny was passed from her mum to her brothers, Harry became aware of the angry stares from each one. Hermione was the most sympathetic, but even her eyes held a glint of disappointment. The elation he'd felt on the way down from Stoatshead Hill vanished, only to be replaced with a foreboding tingle in his fingers – things were going to get worse before they got better.

"Good of you to return our sister," Charlie said menacingly. "Since you obviously don't care about her feelings."

"Charlie!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "That's enough. Harry has her interests at heart, as you very well know."

Apparently unconvinced, Charlie crossed his arms and kept his icy glare fixed on Harry.

"Is that why he didn't propose, *like he said he would*?" Bill retorted, forcefully enunciating the last five words.

Ginny opened her mouth to speak, but was drowned out by her father. "Maybe we should let Harry explain?"

Arthur's tone was even and unassuming – Harry couldn't tell what his future father-in-law felt about the matter, but knew that he was at least going to give Harry the benefit of the doubt.

All eyes were staring at Harry, waiting for him to speak. "Yes, well...you see, when I was, um...about to propose to Ginny, in the restaurant, it hit me that I'd made a colossal blunder choosing someplace so public." Harry caught Ginny's gaze and she nodded for him to continue. "We needed this to be just – between us. There's been so much of my life that's been in the media and I realized – almost too late – that I didn't want that for Ginny's

special moment. And when I looked at Ginny, then...I knew she didn't, either."

When Harry stopped, the room seemed to collectively hold its breath.

"And?" demanded Hermione, who Harry guessed would be the last one to lose patience. "What happened?"

Ginny broke away from Bill and walked to Harry's side, her hands clasped together. She put her right arm around Harry's waist and stood on her tip-toes to kiss his cheek. Then, when Harry was sure Hermione was going to burst with curiosity, Ginny raised her left hand, wiggling her fingers to let the ring catch the light. "He asked, I answered."

"Ginnnee!" Hermione screamed and promptly smothered Ginny in an embrace.

There, perched on her ring finger, for everyone to see, sat a delicate gold band. Its polished surface reflected the light of the living room and seemed to capture the attention of everyone that looked upon it. On the top of the ring a single modest diamond glistened in the evening light, accompanied by two smaller emeralds on either side.

"It's lovely," Hermione gushed, pulling away to allow room for Ginny's mum. "I knew he had *some* sense left in his head."

Harry stuck his tongue out at her and then smiled.

Mrs. Weasley was crying, holding onto her daughter. "I'm so thrilled he made it official, Ginny, and that you accepted."

Bill, however, still wore a scowl. "Whatever happened to including the rest of us, Harry?"

"Yeah," echoed Fred, while George looked askance at Harry.

Ginny pulled her hand away from her mother and answered for Harry. "He did the right thing, Bill. You lot would do good to learn from my fiancé." A thrill ran up Harry's spine as she said this, knowing that she was referring to him. "At the last minute, he knew I needed to let this be special, and he made the right choice. He chose between making me happy and making you lot happy. If you think he made the wrong choice, then you can just sod off."

Obviously recognizing the warning signs, Bill let his eyes drop to the floor. "I...I just wanted to see my only sister get the right bloke, that's all," he explained. Then, Ginny walked over to him and caught him into a fierce hug.

"Thanks, Bill," she whispered, but the quiet of the room made it sound as if she'd spoken it aloud. "You'll want to make your proposal to Fleur in private, too."

A column of steam seemed to rise in Bill's face, judging by the colour of it. "There's...we're not..."

Mrs. Weasley turned her attention on her eldest, however. "Oh, Bill. That's wonderful news! I had been wondering when you were going to make her an honest woman."

Bill seemed even more flustered by this, having apparently thought his living arrangements were still unknown to his mother.

"She's quite a girl to overlook the earring," Mrs. Weasley said with a wicked smile, fingering the offending fang dangling from Bill's ear. "And the hair..." she added as she linked arms with her husband.

The rest of the family broke into raucous laughter and the tension melted away. Soon, the family was breaking apart and heading for bed. As Harry began to ascend the stairs, a hand stopped him.

"Son," Mr. Weasley said gently as Harry turned back to face him. "You did right tonight. I'm glad you saw the sense in taking matters into your own hands."

Harry nodded, not quite knowing what to say. "She's...wonderful."

Mr. Weasley smiled. "Yes, she is. I'm trusting you to take care of her for me." He clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Thank you."

Then, the patriarch of the Weasleys slipped past Harry and walked to his room.

Harry stood on the bottom step for a moment, thinking about what he was gaining and what he'd already lost; the fact that he didn't have a father to guide him through the courting process, or a mother to bestow bits of wisdom on how to love and cherish a woman. Yet, as he stood there, he couldn't help but feel like the universe had sent him a surrogate family that was just as good as any he could have hoped for.

"Hey, you," Ginny said and descended the steps. She wrapped her arms around his torso and inhaled deeply as she pressed her face into his chest. "You gonna give your fiancée a proper good-night kiss?"

Harry's smile widened and he pecked the top of her head.

Ginny's hand hit his shoulder. "Not like that, you git," she mumbled, still holding onto him as if he would suddenly bolt from the room.

"I know exactly what this witch wants," Harry said and lifted her chin with a finger.

They somehow found the means to walk to the next level and Harry bid Ginny good night a final time. It had been a long day, and yet Harry could

hardly find it within himself to feel tired.

“Good night, Ginny,” Harry whispered as the door to her room closed, and he walked slowly to his room, wondering what the future held for him and his soon-to-be-wife.

August 10

The next morning was the day before the wedding. Many things had been handled already, but there remained a hefty list of tasks to be done. Mrs. Weasley was making final arrangements with the caterer. As Bridesmaid, Hermione was busy with the decorations and the dresses. Ron – the Best Man – was being very secretive about something and Harry was keen to discover what it was.

“You ready to see your sister and best mate get married tomorrow?” Harry asked him at breakfast.

Ron took a sip of juice and stared at his toast. “It’s brilliant, but a little weird,” Ron replied. “And I don’t know whether to be happy or jealous.”

Just then, Hermione and Ginny took their seats at the table. Ginny kissed Harry’s cheek while Hermione snuggled up to Ron.

“It’s not too late to make it a double wedding, you know,” Harry offered, giving Ron a significant look.

“No way,” Ron said, making a cutting motion with his hand. “You can enjoy the media circus; my wedding will be nice and quiet.”

They chuckled together for a moment and then Harry cleared his throat. “So, what’ve you been up to, Ron? You come to bed late every night and Ginny say Hermione’s already asleep. There’s been loads of strange owls in our room, and Fred and George have been abnormally secretive about something. What gives?”

Ron shifted nervously in his seat. Even Hermione seemed to be curious about Ron’s clandestine behaviour. “Nothing,” he muttered, shoving a piece of dry toast into his mouth. “You’ll find out later.”

“Umm-hmm,” Harry said, knowing that he probably didn’t want to find out, especially if the twins were involved.

Ginny suddenly straightened beside him. “If this has anything to do with a stag party for Harry, Ronald,” she said, doing a reasonable impression of her mum, “you better get that notion out of your head right now.”

Looking defeated, Ron swallowed his toast and hung his head. “It’s out of my control, Ginny. Fred and George have invited about every male at Hogwarts – ‘cept Malfoy.” He looked up and continued, “It’s not that I didn’t want to have a send-off for Harry, here, but they’ve gone crazy with it.”

Ginny made to stand up, but Harry took her arm. “It’s all right, love,” he soothed. Harry rubbed her arm and she started to calm down. “I promise to be a perfect gentleman and be home by midnight.”

Sending him a withering glance, Ginny didn’t seem to believe him, but didn’t say anything else.

“Besides,” Harry explained, “we’ve got loads to do together today. You’ll want me out of your hair by the time the party starts.”

“Besides,” Hermione echoed from her position across the table. “You might have somewhere to go tonight, too, Ginny.” There was an unmistakeable twinkle in the older girl’s eye that spoke of long-planned mischief.

“Oh?” Ginny asked, suddenly excited.

“Maybe,” Hermione temporized. “It depends on how quickly we can finish decorating.”

With renewed vigour, the four teens began shovelling their food at top-speed. Ron and Hermione left to begin working on the reception hall at the church, and Harry and Ginny left for the Ministry of Magic.

*

Appearing at the designated Apparation point in the Ministry, Harry and Ginny were immediately inundated by a wave of reporters, journalists, and photographers. Apparently, word of their arrival had not taken long to get there.

“Mr. Potter,” barked a stout man in a long purple robe. “Have you proposed to Miss Weasley?”

“Why did you leave the restaurant so early?” shouted another man behind him.

“And what about the wedding?” a witch yelled, elbowing her way to the front. A flood of questions followed this and Ginny held her hands to her ears at the sound.

Harry gently took Ginny’s hand. “Yes,” he said curtly to the first man, silencing the rest of the crowd. He began to push through the throng of reporters towards the atrium, careful of Ginny as he proceeded.

“Was he romantic?” a witch with a tattered green shawl asked breathily, eliciting a flurry of parchment as the reporters scrambled to write down every word they said.

Ginny seemed to hesitate, then as Harry pulled past the witch, she turned and nodded. “Very.”

The questions followed them as they finally broke free from the crowd and began to enter the lift. Harry and Ginny smiled and kept the answers

short, but polite. When the lift door finally closed and they began to ascend, Ginny let out a weary breath.

“That was...intense. I've never experienced anything like that before.”

Harry shrugged. “You get used to it.”

The lift continued down and the door clattered open on the third level. Ginny rubbed her hand up and down his back, the hand that had his ring on it. “I don't know how you manage it.”

Smiling kindly at her, he guided her off the lift and onto the floor that held several offices that had one thing in common: they all issued some kind of magical license. There was the Department of Magical Transportation, the Office of Experimental Charms and Spells, and the Department of Records and Statistics – the one they were headed towards.

Several heads turned as they proceeded down the hallway, and when they finally stopped in front of the Office of Magical Marriage Licensing, Ginny let out a breath of relief.

Harry turned the worn brass door knob that seemed a staple of government buildings and they walked into a sparsely-furnished waiting room. A sign flashed magical words across a slate above a small window that read: *Please take a number...Now serving number 12*.

There was no one in the office with them, so it was with an odd sense of dread that they took number 456 from the dispenser. Oddly, the number directly underneath it was sixty-four. Taking a seat, Harry and Ginny settled in for what they anticipated would be a long wait.

Ginny leaned her head on Harry's shoulder and was about to wrap her arms around his waist when a chime sounded from somewhere behind the window. The magical sign flashed and then changed to read: *Now serving number 456*. A witch appeared behind the window and motioned them forward.

“Hello,” the witch said dryly, without bothering to look at them. She produced a roll of parchment and a quill, and then handed them through a hole in the window. “Fill these out and bring them back here.”

Harry took the papers and quill and returned to their seat. He scanned over them for a moment before he began to write. “Hey,” he announced, “this is a self-inking quill.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Of course it is. Let me fill this out,” she said, taking the parchments from him.

“Sure,” he said, sounding a bit relieved. “I'll just sit here, then?”

Ignoring his self-pity, Ginny scanned through the form. She wrote in their names, their birthdates, addresses (she listed the Burrow as both their places of residence), and answered a hundred other questions that the marriage license application asked about.

“Harry, what's the date of the Banns?” Ginny asked.

“That's the date our marriage was announced,” Harry replied.

“And that date was?”

“Before you were born,” Harry replied.

“Humph.”

“Why would they want to know how many other relationships we've been in?” Ginny wondered aloud. “I'm not answering that.”

Harry snorted next to her. “What?” Ginny asked.

“Nothing,” replied Harry. “It's just that you're not taking any guff from an application – it's not surprising since you don't take it from me.”

Ginny allowed a smile and returned to the task at hand.

Ten minutes later and four pages of questions answered, Harry and Ginny returned to the window.

“All finished,” Ginny announced and pushed the parchment back through the hole.

The witch took the documents and began to scan through them. She took a look at the names, widened her eyes, and for the first time, looked up at them, or rather, she looked up at *Harry*.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed. “I wondered when you might show up here.” Then she seemed to collect herself and finished reading through the application. She made several notations on the front page and said, “This seems to be in order. I'll need signed permission from Miss Weasley's parents, seeing as how she's still underage.”

Ginny produced a letter from her pocket and handed it over.

The witch read it and slipped it into a box on her desk. “To detect forgery,” she explained. The box let out a small ‘ding’ after a moment and the witch nodded. “Very well. That will be five Galleons to process the license and pay for the testing.”

Ginny caught Harry's eye. “Testing?” they asked together, and then looked back to the clerk. “What is that about?” Ginny queried while Harry fished

out five coins and paid the fee.

"It's standard for all prospective couples," the witch explained, stamping the application very loudly. "You have to undergo a battery of tests to determine compatibility. If you're not sufficiently compatible, there will be counselling on how to get along."

Harry spluttered next to her and Ginny just let her mouth hang slightly open.

The witch was nonplussed, however. "It's quite standard," she explained. "Just wait over there." She pointed back to their seats and without further protest or discussion, they walked over and sat down.

All too soon, they found themselves in an office adjacent to the waiting room with a wizard that looked older than Ginny's uncle Bilius – who had died long before Ron was born.

"Now," the ancient man croaked, "just relax and I'll perform the compatibility spell."

Harry held Ginny's hand; she found some measure of comfort with him there.

The man waved his wand and began to mutter something. Had his speech been comprehensible normally, the spell would still have been indecipherable. They were covered in a pink and purple light whose rhythm seemed to undulate until it turned a solid purple. The wizard seemed to think that the spell hadn't been done correctly, as he did it three more times with the same results.

He scratched his head and walked out the door without a word, leaving them feeling bewildered. Just when Ginny was about to go after him, he returned with another wizard, this one much younger and easier to understand. The first man performed the spell again and when the purple dominated once more, he spread his hands out. "See what I mean? The manual doesn't mention this as one of the possible outcomes."

"Hmm," the younger wizard muttered. "Do you have their paperwork?"

The older man handed the stack of parchment over, now very wrinkled from being read-through so many times. "Ah," said his companion, comprehension dawning. "They're *arranged*. It really doesn't matter then, does it?"

"What's the matter?" Harry ventured. "Why all the to-do with the compatibility spell?"

The men seemed to just notice that they were there. "Ah, well...you see, we always perform this spell to make sure you're suited for marriage. If it goes mostly pink, you're fine. If it stays mixed, then we try to pick out the bits that are incompatible and send you to a pre-marriage counsellor."

"And if it turns purple?" Ginny asked, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

The ministry wizard seemed to hesitate and folded his hands. "No one knows for sure. The wizard who invented the spell died a hundred years ago and never told anyone. Folks 'round here think it means you're doomed to a short marriage, but / think it means you're already in love – deeper than most folks get after decades of marriage."

Not entirely sure what to think, Ginny shrugged her shoulders. "So...we don't have to go to counselling, then?"

"No," the man said and motioned for them to stand up. "I reckon not, but I would recommend that you not tell anyone about the spell. It'll just give those reporters more cause to smear your name through the mud."

Harry nodded his head. "You won't have to worry about that. If I've learned anything, it's that reporters don't need help inventing new and tragic ways to muck up my life."

They were once again in the reception area, waiting for the clerk to process their license.

"All set," the witch announced. "You'll have to wait twenty-four hours until you can be legally married, and it expires in one week. Good luck."

Ginny took the folder that the license was in. "Thank you."

They walked out of the office and began the trip towards the lift. Harry took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "You ready to face the reporters again?"

Ginny squared her shoulders and stuck out her chin. "Ready whenever you are, Harry."

Then, together, they stepped onto the lift and nervously waited for it to open.

*

Back at the Burrow, Harry and Ginny arrived as the entire Weasley clan was immersed in a frenzy of activity. Molly was shouting orders to Ron, Fred, George, and Arthur. Everyone but Ron had taken the day off from work.

"Fred, George," she said when Harry and Ginny arrived with a muted *crack* in the living room. "Get these boxes of flowers to the cold pantry. Ron, your clothes are on your bed, dear. Arthur, your appointment is in fifteen minutes and you can't be late."

All of the male Weasleys, including the dark-haired one that was being inducted into the family the next day, were scheduled for robe-fittings at Madam Malkin's in Diagon Alley mid-morning. Arthur had arranged it and, as usual, they were almost late.

"Yes, dear," Arthur replied and put his copy of the *Daily Prophet* down on the living room table. Then gesturing to the paper, he said to Harry and

Ginny, "You've made it on the front page again, I'm afraid."

Harry groaned in the back of his throat and Ginny let out a harsh breath. She walked over to the table and snatched up the paper. On the front was a picture of them from the previous evening. Harry was partially-shielding Ginny from the photographer's flash as they walked out of the restaurant. In the moving black and white photograph, the last frame froze and a red circle appeared around Ginny's then-bare finger. A glisten could clearly be seen on Ginny's cheeks. On the top of the page were the words, "Will Potter ever propose? Weasley girl jilted in Ch�ez Carre's last evening." The article went on to speculate about the viability of their relationship and whether or not Ginny was suitable for Harry.

"What complete and utter rubbish," Ginny spat as she tossed the paper in a heap back onto the table.

Harry snorted behind her. "As if we didn't already know that?" He slid his hands around her waist and squeezed.

Ginny melted back into him and let the stress wash out of her. "I suppose you're right. It's still galling to think that they can print such tripe, knowing that people believe it."

At that moment, Arthur poked his head back in and an odd sort of smile appeared on his face. "It's...time to go, Harry. Meet you in Diagon Alley?"

Harry extracted himself from Ginny and gave a nod. "I'll be along in a minute, Dad."

A thrill of happiness sparked in Ginny's middle when he said that and her joy was mirrored on her father's face. "Right. See you there," said Arthur and he retreated from the doorway.

Turning around in Harry's embrace, Ginny snuggled into him and sighed. "Don't take too long," she whispered. He kissed the top of her head and hugged her one more time.

"Remind me to tell you a secret about that ring of yours when I get back," Harry teased.

"What?" Ginny asked peevishly as he took out his wand and stepped away from her. "You can't just tell me something like that and then leave."

Much to Ginny's annoyance, however, he smiled, winked and was gone with a *crack*.

With a furious huff and another glance at the rumpled paper, Ginny tore off her robes and tossed them over the closest chair. She straightened her shirt and then with a renewed determination, marched into the kitchen to await their trip to the church, unconsciously twiddling with the smooth gold band on her finger.

*

Ron was waiting for him in the Leaky Cauldron when he arrived and they both headed into the alleyway through the brick wall at the back. Diagon Alley was remarkably free of the usual traffic for a Friday morning and Harry was glad for it.

"So," Ron said casually, "you nervous about tomorrow?"

Harry kicked at a pebble, sending it skittering along the cobblestone walk. "Nah," he replied, but quickly reconsidered. "Well, I'm a little worried about the dancing thing."

Nodding his head in agreement, Ron shoved his hands in his pocket. "What about the curse? Ginny could still change her mind..."

It took Harry only a second to conjure a picture of that scenario in his mind. "I don't think Ginny would do that, do you?"

"Not unless you've done something to her that she thinks is worth it – not that anything is worth *that*, mind you. You know how irrational she can be, Harry."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Let's just hope I don't bollix things up, then."

They were already outside Madam Malkin's and Ron led them inside. Madam Malkin herself was doing the fitting and had the twins standing straight and stiff as she marked the hem of the robes they were trying on. Harry made a mental note to tell Ginny how obedient the normally-wild brothers were being.

"Right, you two," Madam Malkin said, pointing to Harry and Ron. "Stand over there." Her finger moved to point at an empty area by the changing rooms. "The tapes will measure you while I finish with this lot, then it's off to pick out colours."

Feeling a bit like a new Auror recruit, Harry walked sheepishly over to the indicated spot and a pair of measuring tapes began to uncurl and measure every part of Harry and Ron's bodies. Arthur, Charlie and Bill were on the other side of the twins, and were looking at hats, scarves, and gloves that were also on the list of things to buy for tomorrow.

"I'll tell you," Ron said to Harry when the tapes were done. "I would have never believed it if someone had told me I'd be getting ready for your wedding with a year left in school. Not to mention that you're getting married to my sister." Ron shook his head as he stared at the ground in disbelief. "Mental. That's what I'd have told them."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, well, you didn't hear this from me, but there's been a running bet on you and Hermione getting together since fifth year."

"Yeah?" Ron turned to Harry and scratched his head. "Who won?"

I dunno. One in Ravenclaw guessed it'd take you until seventh-year, so I don't know if this summer counts yet or not."

At that point, Madam Malkin appeared. "Onto the dais, boys. It's time to try some robes."

Ron was staring at the twins as they snapped each other with silk ascots and Harry began to reflect on how quiet the summer seemed. With all the preparations for the wedding – the fact that he *was* getting married – Harry suddenly wondered what was going to happen with Voldemort. Now that he was about to be magically and legally bound to someone else, his position as 'the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord' seemed a lot more complicated.

"You all right, mate?" Ron asked, now looking at his best friend.

"Yeah," Harry replied slowly. "Just thinking about how weird it's going to be...being married." He paused, ran a hand through his hair, and looked around to make sure no one was within earshot. "I mean...with Voldemort and all."

Ron's face fell. "I know what you mean. I was thinking about that, actually, and it seems like Ginny wasn't exactly unknown to...*him*, you know? Especially after last year."

Harry knew exactly what Ron was talking about. During their sixth year at Hogwarts, Voldemort himself had all but infiltrated the school and the target had been Ginny. It was only *after* Harry, Hermione, and Ron had discovered her missing and followed her into the Forbidden Forest that they realised who he had been after. Ginny was still susceptible to Voldemort possessing her and was bait for him to lure Harry out of the protections of the castle. Luckily, Harry had discovered her disappearance earlier than planned and was able to make a diversion while Ron took Ginny back to the castle; they lived, but not without consequences.

"Well," Harry said resolutely, catching his stern reflection in a nearby mirror. "He's not going to get her again. I'm going to make sure of that."

A heap of multicoloured fabric was thrust at both boys. "Go try a few of these on and we'll see how they look."

Harry took a stack and, with a nervous glance at Ron, walked towards the changing rooms. It was going to be a long morning.

*

At half-past eleven, Ginny's hands were so cramped from stringing gold and green streamers that she couldn't hold onto the thin paper any longer. "That's it," she declared, descending her step-ladder and finding a folding metal chair to collapse into. "I'm not hanging another one of those wretched things until I can feel my fingers again."

Her mother looked disapprovingly from her own ladder and clucked her tongue. "I just hope we can finish with the decorations before dinner. It won't do to have the hall half-decorated...and that doesn't even include you picking out the music."

Ginny rolled her eyes at her mother's attempts to guilt her back to work. "It's my wedding, so it'll do no good if I'm in St. Mungo's with amputated hands."

With another cluck, her mum sauntered off to the other end of the hall, where the boxes of decorations were stacked, and proceeded to begin sorting them.

Hermione, who had to this point been directing their hanging work, sat down by her friend, apparently not opposed to the idea of a break. "You holding up all right, Ginny?"

"Physically or emotionally?" Ginny queried. "You need to be specific, as I've got several lists of problems right about now."

Grabbing one of the younger girl's hands in her own, Hermione began to gently massage the numbness away. "I wasn't talking about these," she said. "I *was* hoping you could vent on me, however."

Ginny gave a hollow chuckle, very grateful for the conversation and massage. "You mean you're not ready to hex Ron yet? If I spent as much time with him as you have lately, I'd have replaced his ears with his..."

"The point," Hermione interrupted quickly, "is that you're a girl who's getting married tomorrow and I'm not. Besides, you aren't spending the...*kind* of time with Ron that I am – when there's less talking, there's less chance to argue."

Looking at her friend's pink cheeks, Ginny was torn between the urge to laugh out loud or merely empty her breakfast onto the church floor. She settled for a groan, instead. "That's *way* too much information, Hermione. I'm glad you and Ron are on the same road as Harry and I, but any hinting about what you and my *brother* are getting on to is not going to help my nerves any."

Hermione switched hands and Ginny was temporarily incapable of speaking, so wonderfully painful were her ministrations. "Fine, I won't tell you what a wonderful kisser he is, or how nice his pecs feel through his shirt, or..."

"GAH!" Ginny exclaimed, ripping her hand free to throw them over her ears. After a moment, Ginny chanced a glance at her best friend to see her laughing gaily over Ginny's reaction. "Very funny," she said, lowering her hands.

"I'm sorry," Hermione managed between giggles. "Ron was right, though; you Weasleys blush all over."

Ginny chose to ignore her and stood, walking slowly towards the middle of the hall. Luna was attaching radishes to one of the white lattice arches, her mum was now magicing boxes to float to various places around the hall and the reality of tomorrow's activities finally started to sink in. "I'm getting married," she said softly.

"Well spotted," Hermione replied, coming to stand beside her. "And if I'm not mistaken, your fiancé just arrived."

Following Hermione's outstretched finger, Ginny caught sight of a familiar shock of messy black hair. He was chatting with Ron and hadn't yet seen them. A surge of fear ran through her, mingled with a hint of comfort. "Hermione!" Ginny squeaked. "What am I going to do? I'm getting married!"

With a condescending chuckle, Hermione simply hugged Ginny. When she pulled back, Hermione's eyes were filled with tears. "Go to him. Take some time away from here for a while and things will be all better."

Ginny nervously chewed on her lip and fought off another wave of panic. "Right," she said uncertainly.

Hermione gave her a gentle shove and Ginny found herself walking towards Harry. He still hadn't seen them, but Charlie and Bill were waving behind him. As she approached, the nervousness melted into an intense desire to escape – to leave the trappings of the hall and get away from everything wedding-related. When Harry finally made eye contact with Ginny and a smile lit up his face, she knew exactly what she needed.

"Harry," she whispered, clinging to him as if he would suddenly disappear, "I'm losing my mind. Take me home; I need to get away from here."

Harry took her into his arms gratefully and kissed her forehead. "What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Take me flying."

*

It wasn't until Harry's Firebolt was close to top speed that he realised how truly tense he had been. If Ginny hadn't suggested flying, it would never have occurred to him that he needed a break. From what he had seen of his fiancée at the church, she looked like she needed one just as bad.

With a glorious whoop of joy, Harry pushed his broom up over the tree line until all he could see was blue sky and the occasional dot of a white cloud. He would have normally not been able to chance such a visible manoeuvre, but for the Concealing Charm he had cast the moment Ginny opened the broom shed. Harry made sure to learn that one in Flitwick's class last year for just such a day as today.

Ginny was miles behind him on her year-old Cleansweep twelve, hollering at him to come back down, but Harry was too elated to comply.

After a few Wronski Feints to get his head clear, however, Harry pulled alongside Ginny, a loopy smile on his face. "Ready to run some Chaser plays?"

For her own part, Ginny didn't seem the least bit perturbed by Harry's boyish display and simply threw the Quaffle she had been carrying at his mid-section. "Porskoff Ploy, two lengths of the pitch, then I want to see if you can catch the Quaffle while I do the Woollongong Shimmy."

Harry wasn't entirely sure, but there seemed to be a particularly mischievous glint in her eye as she said that last bit. Having seen Ginny's Shimmy – a high-speed serpentine maneuver used to throw off the opposing team's chasers – Harry didn't think it would be too hard to steal the red leather ball from her.

"Sounds fair," he deadpanned. "But then I get to do the Shimmy after that."

Ginny seemed to consider this as they went through their first round of the Porskoff Ploy. "You're on," she replied at length.

They passed the Quaffle back and forth for a few minutes as Ginny worked out some kinks and then it was time for Harry to try to steal it from her.

Nodding that he was ready, Harry threw the Quaffle in a large, looping arc and Ginny sped off after it. Trailing her wasn't difficult until she caught the ball in a single, smooth grab. With it tucked tightly under one arm, Ginny began a set of dizzying twists and turns that had Harry guessing. Finally, she made a mistake and Harry dived.

Just when he was about to pounce on her and take the Quaffle, however, Ginny pulled hard on her Cleansweep and darted up – directly into Harry's path. With a fraction of a second's hesitance, Harry was barely able to pull his hand back and divert away from colliding with the still zig-zagging girl.

With renewed determination, Harry narrowed his eyes and searched for a pattern in her gyrations, all while keeping pace with her. Harry began a series of feints, diving after her, only to pull-up right before they collided.

Ginny didn't seem to be phased by this at all. "Afraid to tackle a girl?" she taunted, only making Harry more determined.

Harry pondered that question in an instant. He'd scrimmaged with Ginny before, when she was just a fellow team-mate. In less than twenty-four hours she would be his mate for life. Snapping out of his reverie, he slammed into her and the Quaffle went flying. Harry rubbed his arm where they had connected and saw Ginny doing the same.

"About time," she said, wincing. "I was wondering if you'd ever get the nerve to hit me."

Harry paused, suddenly abashed. "I didn't want to hurt you..."

"Oh, tosh," Ginny said with a broad smile. "It's Quidditch! You're supposed to get hurt."

Shaking his head and laughing at the same time, Harry retrieved the Quaffle with a wandless Summoning Spell. "Now it's my turn."

Poking a pink tongue out at him, Ginny gave his arm a playful bump and said, "Don't expect me to be as soft with you as you were with me."

"No," Harry replied, "I would never."

They flew to the closest end of the clearing and hovered for a moment before he tossed the Quaffle to Ginny. "I'm ready whenever you are."

Ginny adjusted her position on her broom and pulled her arm back. The Quaffle flew from her hand and Harry automatically began to track where it would be when he caught up with it. In a burst of speed, Harry zoomed out and down, intent on making at least two laps of the pitch before he let her win.

The Quaffle sped into his arms and he began to jog back and forth until he could sense Ginny's approach. A sudden dive provided escape from her first attempt and the chase was on.

As they flew faster and faster, Harry was more and more daring with his avoidance tactics, drawing them so near to the ground that he was sure he would have grass stains on his knees when the match was over. He led them above the trees in a spiraling maneuver that no ordinary broom could match and had to laugh at Ginny's scowl.

Diving back down, Ginny resumed the chase without so much as a word, her face a mask of concentration. Then, knowing the perfect way to end the match, Harry pushed up on the foot pegs, presented his back-side to Ginny and promptly began to waggle it back and forth.

The last thing he heard as he was mowed off his broom and tumbled to the ground in a heap was Ginny's gasp of surprise and a spate of giggles. When they finally came to rest in the knee-high grass, Harry noticed that not only did Ginny have the Quaffle and a self-satisfied smirk on her face, but also that she wasn't quite done with him, yet.

"That was *not* part of the Woollongong Shimmy," she exclaimed.

Harry laughed at her pink cheeks. "Well, it should be," he countered. "It certainly distracted you."

Ginny's hand thumped Harry's shoulder and she smirked. "Only for a moment! I got the Quaffle in the end, didn't I?"

All thoughts of impending marriage flung far from his mind, Harry could only look at Ginny's windswept hair and glowing smile and wonder why he was the lucky one that got to be here with her. For the first time since his birthday, he thought that maybe arranged marriages weren't all that bad.

"What?" Ginny asked, breaking him out of his reverie. "Have I got a bug in my teeth or something?" She ran her tongue over them and Harry decided that the game wasn't quite over, yet.

"No," he said, sitting up fully. "But I think you might not have that Quaffle once I'm through with you."

"Is that so?" Ginny asked, rising to the challenge. She tucked the ball behind her back and thrust her chin defiantly at him.

"Yes," Harry replied and without warning, dived at her. His hands found a particularly ticklish spot above her hips and she was soon begging for mercy.

"I give!" she pleaded, tears of laughter streaming from her face.

Harry reached behind her and grabbed the Quaffle. "Ha! I won."

From her position on the ground, Ginny finally composed herself and arched an eyebrow at him. "Really? So what do you win?"

Harry contemplated this for a minute and then propped himself on an elbow next to her. "You."

"Me?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "I win. You're mine for the rest of my life."

They stared at each other and the giddy fun transformed into a gentle tenderness. Ginny's smile never waned as she turned to watch the sun paint the underside of the clouds red. "I was yours a long time ago, Harry," she whispered.

Harry rested his head in the crook of her shoulder and looked at the sky with her. "I guess I'm finally realizing that."

The sun set and the grass swayed with the soft breeze of evening, but Harry and Ginny stayed in the paddock as long as they could – with the promise of a stag party for Harry and a hen party for Ginny later that evening. They gave simultaneous sighs of contentment, each glad to be with the other on their last night as single people, and wondering what the next day would bring for them.

The Bargain 11: Deadline

Chapter 11 - Deadline

August 11

The morning of Ginny's birthday – and the wedding – saw a bright sun rise behind a veil of thin, high-level clouds. As Harry squinted out the attic window at the serenity of the Burrow's garden, he realised with a start that this would be his last day here, and that he'd be spending tonight with Ginny in a secret, secure place prepared by Dumbledore.

A headache was forming at the base of Harry's skull, a souvenir from his stag party the previous night. While Ron protested innocence, Harry knew that the Firewhisky, pounding music, and extra-loud fireworks hadn't diminished his best friend's enthusiasm a notch. Even Ron had been red-faced when a half-dozen strippers showed up halfway through the festivities and began to "strip" for the whooping, partially-inebriated, and very hormonal collection of young men. Harry allowed himself a smirk at the look on Fred's face when one of the strippers took out a wand and cancelled a glamour charm, revealing Angelina Johnson. The other girls did likewise, revealing Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell, and three other Gryffindors in their year. Abashed, the twins and Lee Jordan pushed the girls outside to "explain." The subsequent yelling could be heard for miles.

So when Harry arrived back to the Burrow with a heavily-slurring Ron across his shoulder, he could honestly say that nothing had happened, aside from a good party and a very put-out set of future brothers-in-law.

Focusing his eyes on a moving dot, Harry spotted an owl swooping low through the trees surrounding the paddock. It was followed by two more, each bearing a smouldering red envelope. They all aimed for the level underneath Harry's feet and disappeared through a window.

There was a desperate rustling and the deep voices of Fred and George could be heard through the floor. That noise was drowned-out instantly, however, when the magically magnified voices of three witches pierced the silence of the morning. So discordant were the messages that Harry couldn't make out a single word of them, but the anger lacing the Howlers was obvious.

Once the morning deliveries had extinguished themselves, Ron began to stir on his bed. "What was that all about?" he asked, pressing his palms to the sides of his head. "And why do I feel like Hagrid is standing on my head?"

Harry chuckled. "If I'm not mistaken, Fred and George are just now beginning to realise how foolish it was to contract for strippers from *Three Chasers' Escort Services*. That pounding you feel in your head isn't Hagrid; it's Firewhisky, and I'm certain that you won't be the only one at my wedding with a nasty hangover."

Ron groaned and fell back onto his pillow. "Wake me when it's time to go to the church."

"Suit yourself," Harry replied, grabbing his clothes and a small wrapped package and walking towards the door. "But I'm not going to explain last night to Hermione. You're going to have to tell her about the strippers all by yourself."

Harry slipped onto the landing and decided that a flask of pain potion would be the first order of business that morning.

*

Ginny Weasley smiled into her pillow. The previous night had revealed more about her best friend than she had thought possible.

Luna and Hermione had taken Ginny to a Muggle Pub in London, where they were met by twelve witches from Hogwarts. The Parvati twins, Lavender Brown, Susan Bones, three girls from her own year, a gaggle of passing acquaintances and – much to Ginny's surprise – Daphne Greengrass, the token Slytherin. After a few small drinks, they then went to Hermione's house – her parents were still on holiday in Paris – and the party *really* got started. It wasn't the drinking, loud gossip, or surprisingly hard music that made Ginny smile. It was the fact that when Hermione got tipsy, her character transformed. Instead of being rational, thoughtful, and quiet, the chemically-altered Hermione had become outspoken, and flighty.

With a stifled giggle, Ginny remembered how they had to forcefully drag Hermione from the kitchen table, as her dancing became more and more uncoordinated. When they finally got her down from the tabletop, she was clad only in her bra and knickers.

"*I was hot,*" she had said.

There was a stifled moan and Ginny peeked at her friend's bed. A mass of bushy-brown hair was all that could be seen atop the duvet.

As the image of her friend singing, "*Witches Do It With Magic*" appeared in her head, a current favourite on the Wizarding Wireless, Ginny giggled

again.

“Whasofunny,” Hermione mumbled. “Choo laughing for?”

Abandoning all pretence, Ginny threw aside her covers and sat up. “Oh, nothing,” Ginny sing-songed. “I was just...um, reliving your *dance routine* from last night.”

Hermione let out a loud raspberry and with an exaggerated movement of the duvet, covered her head completely.

“It’s not my fault you can’t hold it,” Ginny said with another laugh.

Soon, Hermione’s snores increased in pitch and volume. Knowing her friend would be a mess at her wedding if she didn’t get some more sleep, Ginny decided not to wake her. Her smile melted away as a sudden, nervous energy shot through her; in a few short hours, she’d be Harry’s wife and soon after that....

Ginny bolted out of her covers and ran to the loo. It was good that she made it, too, as what little was left in her stomach was deposited in the toilet just before she heard the muffled screaming of three female voices from somewhere near the twins’ room.

*

Cautiously spooning his porridge into his mouth, Harry tried very hard to keep it moving down towards his digestive tract. Mrs. Weasley was humming a light tune in the kitchen and the rest of the household was in a state of sleep-deprived paranoia.

“Mum?” asked Charlie, who had spent the night in Percy’s room. “Have you seen my dress robes?” Percy had been sent an invitation to the wedding, but as far as Harry knew, the estranged Weasley hadn’t replied.

“They’re in your closet,” she answered, not taking her eyes off the bread she was charming into toast.

Charlie mumbled a “thanks” and wearily trudged back up the stairs.

He was immediately replaced on the steps with Ginny, who looked as sick as he felt.

“Happy Birthday,” Harry offered, managing a half-smile at his future wife. He patted the spot on the bench next to him. “Have some toast?”

Ginny slowly descended the last few steps and slid onto the bench. Her hair was mussed and her nightgown was twisted around her in an adorable fashion. After a second, she leaned into Harry and gave a stuttering sigh.

“I don’t feel so good,” she uttered.

Harry wrapped a heavy arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. “Me, neither.” Then, Harry placed the small gift on the table and pushed it towards her. “Maybe this will help?”

Without a word, Ginny took the package and began to slowly strip the wrapping paper away. It revealed a small box that opened on a hinge. As she opened the box, a finely-crafted platinum heart adorned with diamonds and emeralds peaked up at them. It was attached to a thin white gold necklace.

“Oh, Harry,” she cooed. “It’s lovely.”

He took the pendant from the box and carefully placed it around her neck. When she held up her hair for him to clasp the catch on the back, he deliberately fumbled with it so he could stare at her neck. When he was done, she let her hair fall back down and placed the box on the table.

Picking at a piece of toast, Ginny sighed again, and Harry placed his nose on the top of her head, enjoying the singularly Ginny-like scent that her unwashed hair always held.

“This is better,” Ginny said, relaxing into Harry and taking a tiny bite of toast.

The twins appeared on the stairs next, looking like they had just tumbled out of a large Muggle clothes-dryer. Fred’s hair was sticking up at alarming angles and appeared to be smouldering; George’s shirt had scorch marks on it and was on backwards. They both were warily staring at their mother.

“I’ll just assume that those three Howlers were sufficient punishment for whatever devilry you’ve been up to, shall I?” Mrs. Weasley was re-filling the toast and porridge on the table as the two boys sat opposite Harry and Ginny.

“Yes, Mum,” George supplied sheepishly.

“Quite sufficient,” Fred agreed, holding his head in his hands in a manner that hinted at the inexorable consequences of his share of Firewhisky from the night before.

“Good,” Mrs. Weasley said, wiping her hands on her apron. “Then I expect you to be perfect gentlemen today and *not* ruin your sister’s wedding.”

Looking more contrite than Harry had ever seen them, they nodded their heads. “Yes, Mum,” they chorused.

As their mother bustled back into the kitchen, Harry watched Ginny catch Fred’s eye. He winked and nodded, the cheeky, mischievous look

returning all-too swiftly for Harry's taste.

"Do I want to know what you're up to?" Harry whispered.

Ginny smiled at Harry. "Not now, but you'll find out at the reception."

Harry was about to question her further, when a shriek came from the stairwell.

"Ginny! *What* are you *doing* down here?" Hermione rushed over to Ginny and began to pull on her arm, dislodging the young witch from Harry's side. "You can't let Harry see you until the wedding," Hermione explained. "It's bad luck!"

With a sad, but resigned, look on her face, Ginny mouthed, "Muggle custom?" to Harry, who nodded as she let herself be dragged back upstairs and Harry became decidedly grumpy. The prospect of eloping never looked more appealing than it did at that particular moment.

*

The one bright spot of the morning – after the chaos of getting the hung-over Weasleys dressed and ready – was when they walked outside to travel to the church. There, on the path leading from the main road, sat a gleaming, black Bentley. A red ribbon was wrapped around the middle and upon seeing it, a collective gasp came from the people surrounding him.

"Harry?" asked Mrs. Weasley cautiously. "It is a *normal*, Muggle car, isn't it?"

Harry didn't answer. With a smile of his own, Harry set his bag down, walked over to Arthur, and clapped him on the shoulder. "As we negotiated, Dad." He extended his hand and a set of keys dangled in front of the older man's eyes. "The bride-price."

Molly huffed and scowled at the pair of them.

The elated look on Arthur's face, however, was more than worth any brow-beating either of them would receive from Molly later.

"It's – it's – can I...drive it?" Arthur asked hesitantly.

Harry laughed. "That's why it's out here. I reckoned we needed to get to the church by something a bit better than our feet."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught a glimpse of red in a first-floor window. Ginny was beaming at him from her bedroom and his smile widened. All too soon, however, an arm pulled her away and the curtains were drawn once again.

"You'll need to make two trips, it looks like, Dad," Ron said, gesturing at the window.

For some reason, Harry thought Arthur didn't mind the prospect at all. "Shall we?" he asked eagerly.

He looked to Molly, who seemed torn, but the glow in Arthur's eyes must have swayed her. "Go on, then," she said. "I'll wait here with the girls. We'll pick Luna up on the second trip."

Arthur let out a whoop and walked over to his new car, Harry following closely behind.

"Oh, and Arthur?" Molly asked sternly. "No charming this one, or the inquiry you faced at work for the last one will seem like a picnic."

Arthur winced, but the gleam returned to his eye as soon as she disappeared into the house. "Of course, dear."

Harry took the front seat and Ron, the twins, and Charlie piled into the back, seeming to have plenty of room. "Must have been charmed already," Harry explained slyly. "Let's see if the man that picked this up for me finished with the rest of the charms."

If Harry thought Arthur had been happy when he first saw at the motorcar, it was nothing to compare with the child-like giddiness he saw displayed now. It was going to be a fun trip to the church and in the back of Harry's mind, he almost wished for them to never get there.

*

Ginny was ready to hex her best friend, and not for the first time that morning. Hermione was insistent that Harry not see her, even though being with him was her single greatest desire about now. It *was* her wedding day, after all; who wouldn't want to be with her intended? At one point, Ginny had had enough.

"Are you a witch or not?" Ginny exclaimed.

Hermione looked shocked. "Of course I am," she replied.

"Then what's with all this Muggle nonsense about me not seeing Harry?"

Seeming genuinely remorseful, Hermione sat on the bed and wrung her hands. "I – I'm sorry, Ginny. It's just so important that everything work well today, and I...well, I thought that you'd have a better experience if you and Harry first saw each other at the church..."

Hermione's voice trailed off and that was when Ginny knew that her friend's concern was *not* intended to cause her additional frustration. "You really mean it, don't you?"

Not answering with anything but a vehement nod of her head, Hermione stared at her still-writhing hands. "Sorry," she whispered.

Ginny budged over to Hermione and gave her a one-armed hug, feeling the awkward weight of her pendant under her blouse and thinking longingly of Harry. "Thank you. For caring."

The older girl's hands stopped and she looked up at Ginny. "So are you ready for some breakfast?"

After the boys left, Hermione and Ginny ate downstairs and the butterflies in Ginny's stomach seemed to relax afterwards. The relief was short-lived, however, as in a matter of minutes, she was seated in the back of the Bentley, with a bag of make-up, hair accessories, two changes of clothes, shoes, and a zillion other 'necessities' taking up an entire seat to her left. Her wedding dress was in the boot and Hermione was bouncing next to her.

"Such a smooth ride, wouldn't you say?" Arthur was asking his wife in the front.

Molly's narrowed eyes were sweeping the interior. "Very smooth," she replied distractedly. "It's also quite *roomy*, don't you think?"

"Y-yes, well...if there's been any charm-work done, it wasn't mine, I can assure you." Arthur's grip on the wheel tightened as he seemed to wait for his wife's reaction.

"I think it's brilliant," Hermione chimed in, sitting on her hands in an apparent bid to keep them from flitting about. "I wish my parents would let me charm a bit of their car – it would be loads safer for them and the other drivers."

Ginny was shocked. "You *want* to illegally charm a Muggle object?" She didn't know everything about her father's department, but one thing she'd gleaned from the Anglia incident was that charming cars was a tricky business.

Having the grace to blush, Hermione demurred. "Well...that's not *exactly* what I meant. But if there were some changes made to the laws, it would put a lot less people at risk..."

Hermione continued on for a while on the positive reasons for allowing Muggle-born witches and wizards to charm the Muggle objects of their relatives and friends. By the time she had come around to the car again, they had retrieved Luna from her house and the church was looming large on their left. At least Ginny hadn't been dwelling on the wedding, and for that, she was grateful for her friend's distractions, even if Luna had been supplying vapid interjections to Hermione's arguments from time to time. Even her mother didn't seem to be very annoyed with the obviously-enhanced vehicle.

Ginny stepped from the car once it had stopped in the small car park and dragged her bag behind her. Hermione held *the dress* high, keeping it straight and off the ground. Her mother and father were engaged in a hushed discussion near the boot. Ginny walked towards the changing room with Hermione in tow.

This particular church was built immediately after the Norman Conquest and had been re-built twice following the Glorious Revolution and World War Two. Its large, vaulted ceiling was held up by stone slabs, kept together by mortar and a wooden structure on the exterior. Three long, stained-glass windows dominated the southern face and depicted William III and his wife, Mary, in the side panels, looking reverently upon a portrayal of the Saviour.

Ginny wondered why she had never paid attention to the subtle and reverent feelings the hall evoked and decided that she had simply been overwhelmed before.

Walking to the back of the church, Ginny found the changing room and began to unpack her bags. Hermione followed and hung *the dress* from a hook on the back of the door.

Ginny's mum appeared in the room a minute later. "Ginny, dear, Reverend Firth wants a word with you and Harry before the ceremony."

Hermione began to twist her hands together, obviously despairing over this violation of the no seeing the bride rule.

Both relieved and anxious to see Harry, Ginny shot out of her chair and followed her mother to a cosy office adjacent to the chapel. Harry was waiting outside the door, his eyes filled with a longing that she was all too happy to fulfil; she went immediately into his arms. They held each other for a moment before a man cleared his throat behind them.

"I hate to break this up," he said quietly, "but I do need to finalise the paperwork and dispense a little hard-won advice."

*

The kindly man led them to a pair of plush leather chairs across from a worn oak desk. There were paintings of kings and apostles lining the walls and a single, modest window let in the late-morning light.

"Let's go over the ceremony quickly, so that there's no confusion when we're in front of your friends and family in a little bit." Reverend Firth smiled good-naturedly and they went through the vows and spell.

"But won't the Muggles think it's odd that you're waving your wand?" Ginny asked.

"Actually," Firth replied, "I'll have it up my sleeve here." He demonstrated by poking the wand into his shirt sleeve. "Like so. Then when I'm ready to perform the spell, I'll pull my hand inside my sleeve and perform the charm. The most anyone will see will be a blue light. My hand will be hidden by you two, and no one will be the wiser."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. "All right by me," Harry said.

Reverend Firth twiddled with a stack of papers on his desk and placed two in front of them. "Now, then. The one on your right is the Muggle marriage license. It's necessary should you ever need to deal with the Muggle world and I often find it easier to fill it out from the off, instead of waiting until it's needed." He cleared his throat and motioned towards the other paper, looking very much a magical document with moving type and pictures that changed from time to time. "That one is your *actual* license. It proves that you've been married and once activated through the ceremony, it will cause an entry to be recorded on the official register of magical marriages."

The magical license was quite ornate, with large, coloured letters across the top that reminded Harry of an old Gutenberg bible he had seen on a school field-trip when he was ten. There were figures of cherubs and stylistic hearts around the margins that moved when they thought you weren't looking. At the bottom, were two squares that were underscored with Harry's and Ginny's names.

"So what do we need to do?" Harry asked.

The Reverend produced two Muggle pens and placed them on the non-magical license. "Sign this one first. Then, we'll take care of the Ministry license."

Harry signed his name in the appropriate spot and was followed by Ginny, who used her maiden name. When they were done, the pens were placed back in the drawer of the Reverend's desk and he took out his wand. "Now, let me see the pads of your thumbs."

They extended their thumbs and held them up to Mr. Firth. He moved them over the magical license and muttered a quiet spell at each thumb. Harry felt as if a small needle had been pressed into his flesh. "Now press each thumb into the correct box on the parchment."

Harry pushed his blood-dripping thumb into the square above his name as Ginny did the same. Mr. Firth passed his wand over their hands and then quietly cleaned spare droplets of blood from his desk. With another wave of his wand at the license, the messy splotches transformed. Harry's morphed into a rust-coloured stag and Ginny's into a slightly more crimson unicorn. They pranced around their boxes, seeming restless and powerful – quite unlike mere blobs of dried blood.

"That's it," Reverend Firth said, finally. He scooped the papers into a plain manila folder and stowed it in a satchel at his feet. "When you're properly married and I've lifted the curse, the blood-Patronuses will be bound together in the same square, much like you will be bound to each other."

Ginny found Harry's hand under the desk and gave it a squeeze, bringing a smile to Harry's face. "So...do we need to do anything else?" Harry asked.

With a gentle smile, the older wizard rocked back in his chair and said, "Not yet. I wonder, though, if you've talked about things together. I've never married an arranged couple before – thank heavens – and I have to admit that I'm rather pleased with the two of you."

Ginny's brow crinkled in thought. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not often that I see a couple of young folks who are as much in love such as you are. I had expected that you'd be a little more, ah...disagreeable." At their still-confused looks, Mr. Firth leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk. "You see, there's a lot going against you two. You're young, you've been forced into marriage, you'll be the subject of unending media spectacle, and above all, the target of a very powerful wizard. So it's no small wonder that you're sitting here in my office, about to embark on one of the finest institutions devised under heaven, and the two of you seem to me to be as calm as a summer's evening."

Throughout the talk, Harry was nodding, agreeing with everything the Reverend had said. "I guess...I guess I just feel more..." He furrowed his brow and concentrated on how Ginny made him feel. "I don't know, complete when I'm with her."

"If it weren't for Harry," Ginny said next, "I'd have killed my maid of honour a long time ago. He's not perfect," she admitted, appraising him with her eyes, "but he's training nicely."

The smile on the Reverend's face grew. "That's exactly the way it should be." He pushed his chair back from the desk and stood. "If you don't mind, I'd like to impart a small bit of wisdom that I tell everyone I'm about to marry. It seems from the little I know about you, you seem to be very passionate. That's a good thing, in its place, but under no circumstances should you ever go to sleep angry at one another."

Harry and Ginny shared a look, but let him continue.

"*When* you have disagreements – as I don't know of a couple that's not had them – you need to work them out together. It is not love that sustains a marriage, but marriage that sustains the love between you. Don't let the anger of a momentary argument separate you. The husband and wife act as the core of a family, and when children come along, you'll need to be undivided in everything you do. The world, as you know," he said with a significant glance at Harry, "is full of things devised to destroy happiness, and central to that happiness is the family. No matter what external forces attack you, don't let the little things break you apart, it will only make those who seek your death more capable of accomplishing it."

Harry swallowed and nodded his head. "I understand," he said, looking down at the hand held in his, and he did understand. Having had no family to speak of, Harry knew all too well how much happiness he had missed, and the one responsible for taking that from him was intent on causing him yet more pain and suffering. With a renewed determination, Harry rubbed his hand along her arm. "I promise I'll try to not bollix things up too bad."

Ginny's smiled with her eyes. "Me, too," she replied, bringing her free hand up to Harry's cheek. "I can't promise that I won't get angry with you, Harry, but I won't let my anger ruin what we've got, either."

The clock on the wall chimed one time.

"You'd best be off," Mr. Firth said gently. "You'll need to get ready for the wedding, and I have other things to attend to."

Harry rose and embraced Ginny. Then, keeping his arm across her shoulder, he led her back to the changing room, where a frustrated Hermione clucked her tongue and shooed him away. With an hour left until the ceremony, a wave of nervousness descended on Harry's middle, like a room full of freshly-caught Cornish Pixies.

*

The next hour flew by like a speeding Bludger for Ginny. Her mother had joined Hermione in getting her makeup and hair done while Hermione listed off the things that she should and shouldn't do during the ceremony.

"But no matter what, just relax," Hermione said finally as the last of the buttons were fastened up the back of Ginny's dress. Then, with a smile and a hug, Hermione fled to another changing room to get her own gown on.

"Just relax," Ginny muttered, wondering why her dress seemed to feel so much tighter then, when it had fit fine in the formal shop.

Her mother, sensing her unease, waved her wand at the silk and lace fabric covering Ginny, and she could suddenly breathe. "Thanks," said Ginny, before she promptly began to cry.

Molly gathered her daughter into a warm hug and sat them both down on the long, padded pew that was in the bride's room. "There, there," she soothed. "We're almost ready."

"But I'm not ready!" Ginny exploded, breaking out of her mother's embrace to stand. Ginny caught her reflection in the mirror and stared defiantly at it. "I'm not ready to get married!" All the pent-up emotion from the past ten days seemed to flood into her at that moment and it was all she could do to hold herself together.

Standing beside her, Molly reached an arm out to touch Ginny's shoulder. "You're as ready as I ever was." When Ginny's eyes found Molly's in the mirror, she continued. "I was only three years older than you when I married your father. He was a new assistant in the Department of International Cooperation and I was fresh off a three-month trip across the continent with my brothers." Molly's smile faltered a bit at the memory and then returned. "He was handsome and confident and I remember being deeply in love with him from our Hogwarts days. When he finally asked me to marry him..." Molly turned Ginny around, each looking at the other properly, and touched her cheek. "When he asked, how could I have said no?"

Ginny's lip was quivering and another tear found its way onto her cheek.

"And despite your protests last year, I know you've always loved Harry," Molly continued. "This summer has only made that more apparent. Ginny?" Ginny looked up and wiped the wetness from her face. "There's nothing else required. You and Harry have what it takes to get married, and while I would have liked you to wait a bit, too, I think it's going to be just fine."

With a single, wet burst of laughter, Ginny threw her arms around her mother and whispered into her ear. "Thank you, Mum. Thank you for being the best mother a girl could ever wish for."

They pulled apart after a moment and Molly's eyes began to sparkle. "Just...when the time comes...after you leave school, of course...I hope that you and Harry will have lots of babies for me to spoil rotten."

Another spate of laughter was followed by Molly's wand repairing the damage to Ginny's hair and makeup from the crying session. Then, Ginny scooped up her bouquet and opened the door.

"Hello, angel," her father said. There was the distant sound of a pipe organ playing and although Ginny was still nervous, the reassuring presence of her mother and the love radiating from her father helped her push it away.

"Hi, Daddy."

*

When Ginny and Arthur appeared at the back of the chapel, the wedding guests rose and the organ began to play the wedding march. Almost every member of the Order of the Phoenix was in attendance, some invisible, some outside. Remus Lupin stood by the front pew in the seat normally reserved for the father of the groom. On his right was Tonks, shockingly normal-looking with straight brown hair tied into a bun and topped with a modest hat. Albus Dumbledore was on her left, with several of the Hogwarts professors, most notably, Rubeus Hagrid standing behind him. Several of Harry's and Ginny's classmates were also there.

On the opposite side of the chapel sat the Weasleys, including, much to Harry's shock, Percy. His brothers were sending him suspicious glances, but their mother seemed to accept his presence well enough. There were also several cousins and distant relations that Harry was sure hadn't spoken with Arthur or Molly in some time, but had shown up to witness the wedding. In the back, after a few empty pews, was the visitors' section. There were several of the villagers in attendance, many of whom Harry recognised from the last week he and Ginny has spent shopping there.

Next to Harry was his best man, Ron. On the other side of the altar was Hermione and Luna. None of that mattered to Harry, however, for walking slowly down the aisle was a vision in white so captivating that time seemed to stand still.

Her solid white dress was made of silk, gathered at the waist and a solid piece was stitched across the breast. Lace was tastefully added along the edge of the train, on her veil, and on the arms. The dress covered Ginny from her neck down, exposing her arms from the elbow to her hands and nothing else. She wore a collection of white and yellow flowers that Harry couldn't identify to save his life, along with some Baby's Breath, all covered lightly by her veil. Ginny's red hair seemed more alive than it ever had and he knew that magic had to be involved in making and keeping it

In place. There were small, clear jewels fastened on the dress every so often that added to her ethereal appearance. Harry felt like he was in the presence of an angelic visitor.

Yet, all too soon, she was beside him, and had taken his hand. Arthur stepped beside and slightly behind Ron. Harry had to force his eyes to leave Ginny's when the music stopped and the Reverend noisily cleared his throat.

"Sorry," Harry whispered as Ginny squeezed his hand and then promptly let go.

"Dearly beloved..." Reverend Firth began the ceremony as Harry and Ginny faced each other once more.

Harry hardly heard what the Reverend was saying; a distant buzzing started in Harry's ear, and a kind of strange uneasiness filled him. Harry tried to surreptitiously scan the chapel for anything odd, but he couldn't detect anything. Ginny seemed to notice, however and hit his foot with her own.

"First," the Reverend continued dryly, "It was ordained, for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

"Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

"Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace."

There was a pronounced silence and Harry was briefly surprised that there wasn't a rush to the pulpit to stop the wedding.

After a moment, when Reverend Firth seemed to be satisfied, he continued. "I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a glance and a smile and shook their heads.

"Harry James Potter. Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Harry stared deeply into Ginny's eyes, searching for any hesitance, any sign that she wanted to back out of their arrangement. Instead, he only found love – a love for him that he would never understand, but accepted nonetheless. "Yes."

"Ginevra Molly Weasley. Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

Ginny stared at Harry in the same, questioning way that he had. He thought of the way she made him laugh, the fierce loyalty to him and their friendship she had displayed and all the wonderful moments they had shared over the last ten days. His smile grew with each memory and Ginny seemed to understand. "Yes."

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"

Arthur moved forward, took Ginny's hand and, after exchanging a smile, gave her right hand to the Minister.

Reverend Firth then took Harry's right hand and joined it with Ginny's.

Harry cleared his throat and, looking at Ginny, tried to sift through his happy mind to find the words he had memorized with a spell just a few moments ago in Mr. Firth's office. "I, Harry James Potter take thee, Ginevra Molly Weasley, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

Harry gave himself a silent cheer for not messing that bit up, then they let their hands fall apart.

Almost immediately, Ginny took Harry's right hand with hers once more and said, "I, Ginevra Molly Weasley, take thee, Harry James Potter, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth."

Their hands broke apart and Harry saw a small tear course down Ginny's cheek. He almost brushed it away, but Ron stepped forward and held out the rings on a red velvet pillow. Harry fumbled as he placed a slim gold band onto Ginny's finger. It seemed to melt into the ring already there, as it was charmed to do. "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

When Ginny placed his ring on, he felt a rush of magic from the connection between the two.

Harry and Ginny then knelt on special pillows provided for that purpose, in front of Reverend Firth and he spoke one final time.

Forasmuch as Harry Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to the other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a Ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

Harry half-heard the Reverend quietly mutter an incantation. He knew that this was the part of the ceremony where the hexes binding them to be married would be partially lifted – the hex would not be fully broken until they consummated their marriage – but he only had eyes for his bride. There was a muted flash of blue, Ginny's arms swept around his neck and he was kissing her. The hall erupted in applause, the organ began to play again, and Harry found himself being dragged away from the altar, suddenly aware that he was married.

*

The reception hall on the other side of the church was at least as big as the chapel. Even so, the place was packed with friends, family, and well-wishers. Ginny looked on the crowd with a sort of delight that made her insides melt. She was finally Harry's wife.

She and Harry had welcomed most of the guests during the first hour of the reception, accepting gifts and well-wishes. Even the press had been fairly well-behaved. Once the music started, and the dancing was well underway, Ginny had begged off Harry's attentions for a stop in the loo and to make sure her brothers were behaving themselves.

Appearing in the hall after cleaning up, Ginny spotted Percy and made a bee-line for him. He and Penelope Clearwater were chatting nervously with each other when she approached.

“Hi, Perc,” Ginny greeted and nodded at his girlfriend. “Penelope. I'm glad you decided to come.”

Percy fidgeted with something in his pocket and then with a smile, said, “Congratulations, Ginny. Although it *is* a bit unusual, I suppose you've made the right decision.”

Ginny tilted her head slightly as if seeing her brother from a different angle would help her understand him. “Harry and I are happy, Percy. What more could anyone ask for?”

Penelope was eyeing Ginny warily, but stayed silent. Percy, however, puffed his chest out, and pulled out a fold of parchment from his pocket. He handed it to her and said, “I pulled some statistics from a friend in the Records Department on teen-aged marriages from 1900. You'll see that you've got a twenty-five percent chance of staying together. I know there's no such thing as divorce in the Wizarding world, but that doesn't mean all marriages last.”

Looking between the parchment and her brother, Ginny realised that this was Percy's way of telling her that he approved, that he loved her, and that he wanted her to be happy. She stood on her toes and wrapped him in a fierce hug. “Thank you, Percy,” Ginny whispered. “Thank you for coming, and thank you for caring about me.”

After a moment, Percy stepped back, breaking the hug, and made a show of sniffing loudly. “Yes, well, Penny and I must be off to visit with Father and Mother.”

Percy bustled away and Penny gave Ginny an apologetic glance as she was led through the crowds.

After taking a moment to dry her eyes, Ginny put the parchment into a small pocket in her dress. She scanned the crowd, looking for another person she was determined to right a wrong with. Spotting Neville, she stepped into the throng of dancers and made her way to him.

He was standing shyly by the punch bowl, looking longingly at the dancing couples, among which were Ron and Hermione.

“Neville?” Ginny inquired, tapping him on the shoulder to get his attention.

The tall man before her looked nothing like the stuttering boy that had asked her to the Yule ball three years ago. He was still quiet, and dropped things from time to time, but she would never forget the careful way that he had treated her that night – even if her feet were silently protesting what she was about to do.

“I'd love it if you'd dance with me tonight. For old time's sake?”

Neville, bless his honourable and courageous soul, stood in a quandary for a full ten seconds before he managed to say anything. “S-sure,” he mumbled and took her offered hand with a smile.

They merged themselves with the rest of the swaying bodies on the dance floor and Ginny took the lead as they danced – just like she had at the Yule Ball. “*The Great Pretender*,” by The Platters, was currently playing on a Muggle CD player and Ginny thought it appropriate.

As she guided Neville among the other dancers, she caught a glimpse of familiar white silk and turned him away from it so he didn't notice. “Neville,” Ginny began when his silence became too much to bear, “I never really thanked you for asking me to the ball. So...thanks.”

Neville blushed and smiled. “It wasn't a problem, Ginny. I'm j-just glad you said yes.”

“How could I not?” Ginny countered. “You were quite adorable, you know, and I'm sure the right girl will come around for you some day.”

Ginny steered them clear of a gyrating Lee Jordan with his date Angelina Johnson, as the song changed and Buddy Holly's warbling voice filled the hall.

They danced one more song together and Ginny knew it was almost time to find her husband again. "Thanks for the dance, Neville," she said and gave him a peck on the cheek, leaving a faint imprint of lipstick there.

It quickly melded in with the flush of embarrassment, however. "Y-you're welcome."

Ginny turned to leave when he caught her arm again. "Ginny?" he asked tentatively. "You and Harry... You'll be good for each other."

Ginny smiled and lightly touched his hand. "I know." They stared at each other for a while, as a pang of something distant flashed through her and was gone. There was a surprised cry from somewhere across the hall and Ginny knew it was time. "Come with me, Neville. There's something over here you'll enjoy seeing."

Taking a steadying breath, Ginny turned and walked towards a growing disturbance, centred around her husband.

*

Ten Minutes Earlier

After having fielded hundreds of questions from people who really didn't know him and friendly gestures of support and love from those that did, Harry said goodbye to Ginny as she went into the loo. He, however, headed for the punch bowl. He nodded at Neville, who seemed reluctant to ask anyone to dance, and poured himself a glass of the red liquid.

The punch was cool and refreshing, but the flavour didn't linger long enough to register. Harry placed the bland beverage on the table and began to search for Ginny again. Spotting her by the cake, he decided that a good dance with his new wife was just the ticket.

"Hello, love," Harry said as he approached her. The dress was so conforming that Harry couldn't help but flash his mind forward to the evening where they would take care of the last bit of the hex that had hung over them for their entire lives. With a shiver of anticipation, he took his wife by the hand and led her to the dance floor.

"Having a good time?" Ginny asked as they waltzed around to a slow tune.

Harry pulled her close and began to show off his new dance moves. "I am now."

They made an almost-complete tour of the dance floor when the music changed to a more upbeat song – something about a Pretender. Harry had heard the song a few times on the Dursleys' wireless, and he changed their dance steps to accommodate the change in rhythm.

Ginny seemed a lot more uncoordinated than he would have guessed, but when she started to blow in his ear, he lost all conscious thought. The song changed again and they started to dance apart from one another, the tempo now calling for a faster dance than their previous closeness would allow. Ginny's dancing became much better as they stepped along with the music. When the dance was over, he gathered her to him, intent on kissing her properly. It had been over an hour since the wedding kiss, after all, and he thought he was due.

Harry puckered up and dipped low towards Ginny, when he felt her stiffen. "Not here, not now, Harry," she hissed.

"But we're married, the hex is lifted," he replied.

Ginny smiled at him. "Do you like surprises?" she asked impishly.

"Not particularly."

"Then you probably don't want to kiss me right now," she said, sighing deeply. She stopped dancing for the moment, looking up into his eyes, moving her hand to his cheek. "Harry, I have a confession to make," she said.

"You can tell me anything, Ginny," he said, his stomach turning to ice.

"You are married," she said, "just not to me."

"What are you going on about?" he asked incredulously.

Another cry of surprise rang out in the hall and a twittering of laughter rippled across to them. "What's going on here?" Harry demanded.

Across the hall, arm-in-arm with Neville was Ginny. Coming in from the kitchen with Arthur was Ginny. Each version of Ginny had on the very same wedding dresses, and looked identical, but Harry detected a slight difference in the way they were looking at him. He turned to the woman in his arms. "Bloody hell, what's going on?"

"Maybe you should ask your wife," the woman who looked like Ginny replied, before she slipped from his grip and made her way to the centre of the hall.

The Ginny on Neville's arm called out, "Daddy, Harry? May I have a word please?"

A huddle formed in the centre of the hall, Ginny, Ginny, Harry, Ginny, and Arthur at the core. The hall was ablaze with guffaws and shrieks of disbelief at the three identical brides.

The Ginny next to Neville broke free from him and said, "I wanted a word with you, Daddy, for getting me into this fix in the first place, and with you, Harry, for thinking that my love could be bought and sold. So, gentlemen, which bride said her vows today? Are you really married, Harry?" she

asked tauntingly.

Harry felt faint. The ball of ice in his stomach was growing to glacier size. He looked to Arthur who gaped at the three Ginneys. Arthur then covered his face with his hands, taking a deep breath. He then began to chortle and then guffaw, sliding into a paroxysm of belly laughs. The laughing proved to be contagious. The ice in Harry's stomach began to melt. He'd been the victim of a gigantic Weasley prank at the hands of the smallest and, he was beginning to discover, most cunning Weasley. The Ginny that previously had been with Neville turned to the Ginny on her right and said, "Show's over, lads." The Ginny that previously had been dancing with Harry pulled a wand, not Ginny's wand, he noticed, and pronounced a complicated charm at the Ginny next to Arthur, who lengthened considerably into the form of George Weasley, complete with the sound of a few seams popping as he strained against the now too small wedding gown. The gown was transfigured into a lemon yellow dress robe with the flick of a wand, leaving George to transfigure the other Ginny into Fred, complete with a matching lime green dress robe.

Arthur turned to the remaining Ginny, pulling her into an embrace, kissing her forehead. "Most excellent prank, daughter of mine," he said, before his demeanour changed. "I am so sorry that things worked out this way, Ginny, please forgive me," he said plaintively.

Ginny wiped a tear from her eye. "Things have worked out pretty well considering." She glanced at Harry, and he could tell by the way her lips moved that she was the genuine article. "Just know that I still love you, and that Harry and I are going to work hard on making this a success."

Arthur hugged her again. "You've been a marvellous example of loyalty and determination these past few days." He pulled back from her and continued, "You're the best daughter a man could ask for and I think you and Harry have got a bright future together."

Ginny reached on her tip-toes and kissed his cheek. "I love you, Daddy."

They held each other for a moment longer and the crowd began to disperse. When they broke apart, Harry took Ginny's hand, and Molly took Arthur's. "Shall we dance?" Harry asked. "I've been practicing for days for this very moment and so far, I've only danced with Fred! Forgive me?" he asked.

There was another roll of laughter among the family and the music began to play again.

Ginny looked deeply into his eyes. "Of course," she said softly, before mouthing, "I love you," to him silently.

They swayed back and forth to a slow tune that Harry didn't recognize. Dancing with the real Ginny was decidedly better than with the Fred-turned-Ginny, and in retrospect, he wondered how he had ever confused the two.

"I never told you about the rings, did I?" Harry asked and, as there was a break in the dancers, sent her into a small twirl.

Ginny shook her head, but kept eye contact.

"I had them charmed with all the usual spells," he explained. "Sizing charms for when you get fat...OW!" Ginny's smile never faltered as she expertly ground her heel into his toes. "I – I mean for when your ring-size changes. They're also charmed to be scratch resistant, and unbreakable."

With a sigh, Ginny wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled him closer. "I have a feeling there's more, isn't there?"

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, wrapping his own arms around her waist. "I also had the manufacturer include a charm to prevent them from falling off, or being forcibly removed. Only you or I can take them off."

Ginny nodded. "That sounds sensible."

Harry hesitated for a moment before continuing. "There's more, but I think we'll save it for later tonight."

She seemed to agree because she laid her head onto his shoulder as they continued to dance. Harry never wanted the night to end.

*

After most of the guests had left and a throb of pain had started in Harry's feet from near-constant dancing, Dumbledore finally began to shut down the evening. Reverend Firth was nowhere to be seen, and Harry assumed he had retired for the night as well.

"Why don't you two get changed and I'll dismiss the last of the guests," Dumbledore had told them.

They waved their good-byes to family and friends, and then walked back to their changing rooms. When Harry didn't immediately leave the Bride's room, she raised an eyebrow.

"I can't change with you here, Harry," she explained.

"Sure you can," Harry pointed out. "We're married now, you know."

With a roll of her eyes, Ginny forcefully pushed Harry into the hall. As she was shutting the door, she said, "That may be true, dearest Harry, but I don't intend for any of that to go on in the church changing room. Besides, I think Dumbledore would get suspicious if we took an extra hour to get changed."

Harry waggled his eyebrows, but the door shut and he was alone once more. His own changing room was empty but for his luggage. After changing into jeans and a button-down shirt, he charmed his single bag to be feather light and walked back to Ginny. The door was still closed.

"You finished yet?" he asked through the solid wood.

"No," was the muffled reply. "More buttons, it takes longer."

"Oh," Harry said, mostly to himself. Then louder, he asked, "So how much longer then?"

Harry thought he heard a frustrated groan. "I'm having a problem with the blessed buttons..."

"I could help you out..."

"No! And if you keep pestering me, it'll take even longer." Ginny sounded angry, but there was a bit of amusement in her voice in reply to his entreaties.

"Okay, but know I'm always here to help you undress."

"Very funny, Harry."

A few minutes later and there was a cry of success from Ginny; a few minutes after that she re-appeared in the doorway. "All finished," she pronounced. "But it'd be a lot easier if I could have used magic to unfasten the buttons."

"Perfect timing," came the voice of Dumbledore over their shoulder. His eyes were sparkling in the dim light of the hallway. "With the recent change in your legal status, *Mrs. Potter*, you are legally allowed to use magic outside of school."

"Really?" Ginny squealed. "I can do magic now?"

"According to the provision for married minors," Dumbledore explained, "your legal status grants you most of the rights and privileges of a witch of seventeen. You can't vote yet, however, but you can hold a position in the Ministry, apply for an Apparation license, and, most importantly, use magic."

Ginny set her bag down and rubbed her hands together. "Wicked."

"Indeed," confirmed the Headmaster. "If you are ready, we can visit your accommodation at Hogwarts."

Harry cast a Featherweight Charm on Ginny's bag and she scooped it up. "We're ready, then."

Dumbledore produced a small key and held it out between the tips of his fingers. "Touch this and it will transport us to the cottage."

Harry and Ginny reached out a finger and as soon as Harry felt the cool, smooth metal of the key, a hook pulled on his body, somewhere around his navel, and propelled him, his wife, and their professor towards Hogwarts.

*

They appeared in front of a simple dwelling next to what appeared to be the Forbidden Forest. It was white, with a thatched roof and large, paned windows on each wall. A single wooden door sat in the middle of the wall they were facing and had an ancient-looking brass doorknob.

Harry pulled himself off the ground, while Ginny snickered at his less-than graceful landing. "Shut it, you," he teased.

"As you may have guessed," Dumbledore explained to Ginny, "this cottage is on Hogwarts grounds. Your husband has expressed a desire to take you somewhere...more exotic than this, *Mrs. Potter*, but arrangements have yet to be finalised for that trip. In the interest of safety, and to prevent any unwanted visitors from exploiting your new family, we thought it would be best to make this available to you."

Ginny eyed Harry carefully. "Have something planned, do you?" she asked him.

"Maybe," Harry evaded.

With a peck on the cheek, and a careful twirl of his hair with one of her fingers, Ginny said, "I'm so glad; I love surprises."

The grin on Harry's face was only dwarfed by the glow from his cheeks.

Dumbledore pushed the key they had used as a Portkey into the lock and turned it clockwise. The door clicked open and he motioned for them to enter.

The entry opened into a spacious living area. There were two sofas, a table, two empty bookshelves, and several magical lamps. The living room was connected to a small, fully-stocked kitchen, and their bedroom.

"I shall need to lock you in for the night as a precaution," Dumbledore said as they continued to explore their house. "Dobby will check in with you in the morning, however. Oh...and the bookshelves work something like the Room of Requirement's. Just think about what you need and it will appear there. Good night."

Harry nodded mutely, still excited and a little frightened of being alone with Ginny.

"Good bye, Professor," Ginny said for them, and the old wizard closed the door behind him.

Harry took their luggage and set it next to the large king-sized bed in their room. A clock on the wall told him it was half past eleven.

Back in the living room, Ginny had taken a seat on one of the sofas and was smoothing out her dress. Harry sat stiffly next to her, suddenly as nervous as he had been just before the wedding, though he could safely say it was for an entirely different reason.

"So..." Harry began, "Dumbledore really came through for us, didn't he?"

"Yeah," Ginny confirmed. "It's a nice place...for us to be together." Her voice had dropped an octave and her eyes were half-closed, sending chills up Harry's spine. Before Harry had a chance to react, however, her fingers were walking up his arm and he found himself frozen to the sofa. "Now that we're married..." her lips started to kiss their way up his arm, following her hand, "...and the hex is lifted..." She shifted a leg over him so that she straddled him, bringing her lips to his neck. "We don't have to wait any more. I hate to wait, I always have."

Something hot burst inside him, and his lips were on Ginny's. He reached a hand under her chin for support and she snaked her hands behind his neck. Harry's other hand inched its way up under her shirt and when he touched skin, his world exploded – literally.

A giant *crack* echoed in the room and Ginny flew through the air, landing on the other sofa. Harry was blown backwards as well, but since he was already on a sofa, it toppled over and he went sprawling across the hardwood floor.

"Ow," said Harry, rubbing a growing knot on his head. "Are you okay?"

"What happened?" Ginny asked from the far sofa.

Harry stood and righted the sofa they had been sitting on. "I don't know. Is this what happened to Dean?"

Ginny's eyes bugged as she stood and walked over to him. "Y-yes."

A lead ball materialised in the pit of Harry's stomach. "Oh, no."

"The hex," Ginny supplied. "It's still active."

"That means Reverend Firth bungled the hex removal at the end of the ceremony." Harry's eyes narrowed and accusingly, he said, "Unless it wasn't you that walked down the aisle, or you've been having me on all this time."

Rage flashed across Ginny's face as she slapped him on the shoulder, hard. "Harry, don't ever question my love for you. Now is not the time to bicker, we're in this together, I might remind you. One other possibility is that it wasn't Reverend Firth at all. I hope we're still married."

Harry felt a wave of shame as he rubbed the spot where she hit him. "Right then, what now?"

They looked at each other, then at the clock. It was now eleven-forty. They had less than twenty minutes, or they wouldn't be able to have children, or get married to anyone else, for the rest of their lives.

Harry leapt off the sofa, bounded over the second one and slammed into the door. The knob was locked tight. He whipped out his wand and shouted, "*Alohamora!*" but the lock didn't budge. He tried a few other unlocking spells, and was met with similar results.

"Damn," Ginny said from behind him after the seventh spell. Harry began to pull at his hair, and considered a Reductor curse when she spoke again. "The window! I bet it's not been charmed closed."

As one, they sprinted to the nearest window, only to find it physically welded shut. They tried each window, and when they got to the one in the bathroom, found it opened.

"You first," Harry offered. "I'll help you up."

Ginny looked at him dubiously. "Just watch where you put your hands, or you're likely to become embedded in the wall."

"Right," confirmed Harry. He cupped his hands and pushed on Ginny's foot, giving her the lift needed to reach the slim window on the top of the bathroom wall. She slid it open and shimmied her way out.

"Hurry!" Ginny yelled from the outside, and Harry pulled himself up by the sill, grateful for his upper-body strength.

Soon, Harry was next to Ginny, running as fast as they could towards Hogwarts, calling for Dumbledore, in the hopes that they could Reverend Firth and reverse the hex before they ran out of time.

The Bargain 12: Flight and Fight

Chapter Twelve – Flight and Fight

August 11

Ginny ran as fast as her cursedly-short Weasley legs could carry her. Even if she'd applied for and been granted an Apparation license, it wouldn't have transported her any faster on the Hogwarts grounds. Harry, still probably smarting from the slap he had so richly earned, was making sure she didn't fall behind, causing her to feel the briefest inkling of sympathy for him. As they finally approached the castle doors in the cool evening air, she was once again fully consumed with the panic of their situation. They began to shout for Dumbledore.

Harry shot a spell at the opening to the Entrance Hall. After a worrisome moment, the metal hinges creaked open, allowing them to enter the castle at full speed.

"Professor!" Ginny yelled, only able to get a single word out from breathing so hard. "Dumbledore!" she finally gasped, panting in the hall as Harry led them into the darkened school.

They turned a corner and flew up a flight of stairs. Finally, they reached the Gargoyle statue and were surprised to see Dumbledore waiting for them.

"Is there a problem?" he queried, looking as unflappable as ever.

"Yes!" Ginny managed, more out of breath than ever.

"The hex!" Harry gasped, clutching at a stitch in his side. "It's not...lifted."

Dumbledore's happy visage twisted with concern. "Are you certain?"

"Yes!" Ginny confirmed. "We couldn't – couldn't..."

With a wave of his hand, the Headmaster indicated that further comment was unnecessary. "I believe you. There is little time. We must find Reverend Firth immediately." He extracted a sherbet lemon from his pocket and waved his wand over it. "*Portus*," he intoned. The sweet shook in his hand, glowed momentarily, and then settled. "A finger each, please."

They complied and after a brief whirlwind of sound found themselves back in the Reverend's now-darkened office. The lights were re-ignited with a wave of Dumbledore's hand. Ginny's breathing was almost back to normal and they began to search for Mr. Firth.

It was only a second before they found him. Dumbledore was kneeling next to a partially opened cupboard in the back of the office. "I believe he's been attacked," he observed.

The Reverend was bound with ropes, had been knocked out, and was stuffed barefoot into a small cupboard. With surprising strength, Dumbledore picked the man up and sat him on the floor. The ropes were vanished and an *Enervate* brought him back to consciousness.

"Dumbledore!" he exclaimed immediately. "Malfoy's here. We've got to warn Ha – " but he stopped speaking when his eyes landed on Harry and Ginny's worried faces.

"Time is essential, dear Reverend," Dumbledore urged, offering a hand to help the man stand. "It is nearly midnight and the hex is still active."

Ginny was casting nervous glances at the clock, which read eleven fifty-eight. Anxiety overcame her. "There isn't time!" she blurted. "We haven't been properly married, either!"

Reverend Firth seemed to lose his worry in an instant. He smoothed out his shirt and stood. "Nonsense," he replied. "Did you go through the ceremony as we discussed?"

Ginny nodded. "Well...yes."

He pointed at Harry, but kept his eyes on Ginny. "And did you mean what you said when you agreed to marry him?"

Again, Ginny nodded, feeling a swarming sensation of comfort enfold her. "Of course."

"And did you, Harry, mean what you said?"

Harry straightened and the clock-hand ticked loudly in the office, showing eleven fifty-nine. "Absolutely." Ginny didn't doubt his sincerity in the

slightest, but there was something about the concentrated look on his face that Ginny think his mind was only partially focused on the activities in the Reverend's office.

"Then you're married," Firth declared. Relief swept Harry's eyes, but he still didn't seem fully invested in their conversation. "It doesn't matter that I wasn't the one performing the ceremony; I'm merely a witness to your vows." He found his attaché and pulled a folder from it. "Go on, look."

Ginny extended a trembling hand and took out their Wizarding Marriage license. There, in a single box above their names were two animated blood-Patronuses. The crimson unicorn was nuzzling the rust-coloured stag lovingly as he stood watch. Even their names had changed. No longer did hers say 'Ginevra Molly Weasley'; now it read 'Ginevra Molly Potter'.

"Oh, thank Merlin," she cried as she replaced the document, the swarm of comfort intensifying a hundredfold.

Firth smiled, and patted her on the shoulder. "It's the hex that's important right now. We've not a moment to lose with the deadline." He found his wand in the back of the cupboard and pointed it at the two teens. Dumbledore took a step back as Harry's hand found Ginny's.

When the beam of blue light struck Ginny this time, she felt as if a thousand threads were being pulled from a thousand seams inside her. As the spell faded, the clock began to chime twelve times, and Ginny's heart started to beat again.

"Did it work?" Harry asked and Ginny could hardly bear to hear the answer.

Firth simply chuckled. "Well, I'm afraid there's only one *reliable* way to find out..."

A smile split Ginny's face, despite the desperate circumstances they found themselves in, and she let out her breath in a rush. "We'll have to let you know, then. Come on, Harry, we have something we need to do."

But Harry wasn't looking at her. "Where is he?" he asked Firth and Dumbledore. "Where's Malfoy?"

Dumbledore sighed. "We've had reports that he's been seen in Hogsmeade, but he's evaded capture for two weeks."

"Reverend Firth, are these your boots?" Harry asked, pointing to a pair under his desk.

"These? No, they must be Malfoy's," he said, lifting them up to examine them in the light of the table lamp.

Harry ran his finger along the heel of the boots, crumbling a clump of clay between his fingers.

"I know where he is. I'm going after him," Harry declared and took out his wand.

Ginny grabbed his arm and stomped her foot. "Oh, no you don't, Harry Potter. You and I have *things* we need to take care of. I told you I don't like waiting, and you're not about to make me wait another minute. Dumbledore and the Order can handle Malfoy. It's time to start our honeymoon."

Harry's face never lost its hard look as he regarded her. "No, Ginny. I can't let him come after us again. I know where he is and I can take him out right now."

Hot tears coursed down her cheeks. "Please...don't..."

A resolved expression passed across Harry's face as he shook his head. "I must." Then he was gone with a *crack*.

Ginny whirled on Dumbledore, her anger boiling to the surface. "How could you let him *do* this? Why didn't you stop him?"

Dumbledore took a deep breath in the face of her accusations. "Your husband is an adult now, Mrs. Potter. I could no more stop him than I could not stop you from becoming his wife. I will, however, escort you back to the cottage and then see to Harry's safety."

Ginny was hurt, and scared, and lonely. She didn't want to be taken anywhere other than to where Harry was so she could give him a piece of her mind. She knew her emotions were scrambled just then, and she decided that a cooling-off period might be best. "All right. But I want you to make sure Malfoy doesn't kill him. That's my privilege."

*

August 12

Harry Apparated a block away from a complex of flats in Hogsmeade. He'd ruined a pair of trousers here after falling into a mud puddle rich with very distinctive clay during his sixth year. Walking behind the Post Office, he Disillusioned himself. The flats were converted from an old industrial building, perhaps a mill, and Harry knew they were rarely completely rented-out. It would be a perfect place for Malfoy to hide.

His wand slippery with sweat, he had to hold it extra hard as he pointed it at the six-unit building. A soft orange glow emanated from his wand, the Revealing Spell doing exactly what Mad-eye Moody said it would. Harry looked in the inside of each flat, looking for clues to Malfoy's whereabouts.

He turned his wand towards the next flat and without any warning, Harry's Disillusionment charm ended and he heard a calm voice from some distance behind him.

"Looking for something?"

Harry whirled around to find a pair of cold blue eyes staring back at him.

"I had hoped that you'd discover my...intervention in your wedding plans," Malfoy continued. "It was terribly tedious to recite that wedding drivel, but at least it was for a purpose."

Malfoy's hair was tousled and dirty, his clothes shabby, and there was a hollowness in his face that spoke of too-little sleep. "Azkaban not suit you, Malfoy?"

The older man sneered, and then coughed. "No, Mr. Potter. Though I'm happy to say I'll soon be rejoining my brothers in the Dark Lord's service."

"Is that so?" Harry started to calculate duelling scenarios in his mind. Malfoy wasn't someone to be trifled with, even if he was sick and alone. "How do you reckon that?"

The sneer widened to a leering smile as he looked at his gold pocket watch, and then snapped it shut, replacing it in his robes. "Because it's past midnight and I know the hex wasn't lifted. I was the one who 'married' you and that blood-traitor in the first place. The Dark Lord will gladly take me back into his service when he learns that the Potter line will finally fail."

Not wanting to tip his hand yet, Harry changed the subject. "So how'd you escape Azkaban in the first place? Even with the Dementors gone, the Aurors aren't just going to let you walk out of there for a bag of gold."

"No," Malfoy replied, widening his stance and shifting his weight in a way that told Harry the conversation was about to be over. "It wasn't gold that bought my freedom, but the foolish loyalty of Gilbert Goyle. With no Dementors there, all he had to do was remember to take the Polyjuice potion and I've been free ever since."

Harry gripped his wand tighter as a plan formed in his mind. "Your freedom is about to end, Malfoy. You've come after me and mine for the last time."

Without warning, Malfoy shot a yellow spell at Harry, who ducked but it sliced a gash in his left leg. More spells shot at him, but Harry was able to roll away from the closest of them, and the rest went harmlessly off into a nearby wood.

Harry's instincts took over, and with robotic precision, he began to wear the older man down. Unlike the last time they'd fought in the Department of Mysteries, Harry was fit and prepared, while Malfoy was haggard and exhausted. Malfoy cast a Disarming Charm at Harry, who erected a solid shield. The red spell ricocheted off and struck its caster square in the chest. Malfoy gave a surprised scream as his wand was ripped from his hand and he went sailing into a tree.

With careful steps, Harry approached the elder Malfoy. He was about to Stun him, when another voice broke through the night air.

"That will be sufficient, Harry."

Albus Dumbledore walked into the light of a waxing gibbous moon and towards the fallen Death Eater. "I will make sure he is well taken care of."

Harry's breathing sped up, as the adrenaline from his duel began to wear off. "He said Goyle had taken his place in Azkaban."

Dumbledore nodded. "Goyle has already been apprehended and placed in custody elsewhere." Ropes sprung from the Headmaster's wand, binding Malfoy tightly. Another spell was fired and Malfoy slumped into unconsciousness. Dumbledore turned back to Harry and said, "Right now, you have more pressing matters, the most important of which is a very irate bride waiting for you on the grounds of Hogwarts."

With a groan, Harry's head slumped forward. He'd heard a slight warning voice when he'd made his hasty decision to pursue Malfoy, but now that the deed was done, the voice was screaming at him. "I'm in trouble, aren't I?" he asked timidly.

For a brief second, the moonlight twinkled in Dumbledore's eyes, but Harry didn't feel remotely cheerful about his situation. "I'm afraid so, Harry. The sooner, the better, I always say." He produced a lemon sherbet and handed it to Harry. "It's the same Portkey as before. Just tap your wand and say, 'Safe'. It'll save you a long walk from the village."

Taking the sweet, Harry contemplated Apparating to the Maldives, or somewhere equally far away from Ginny. In the end, however, he knew he couldn't, and tapped the sweet instead. "Safe."

*

A very weary and wounded Harry walked from the Castle towards the cottage and his wife. He was exhausted from his duel with Malfoy and from being up since seven the previous morning. Even the prospect of consummating his marriage with Ginny seemed like a distant sunrise that threatened to break over the mountains, but never quite made it.

Despite the slow gait imposed by his bleeding leg, he reached his destination and unlocked the door. It was dark inside, save for a single torch burning on a sconce over the fireplace. Shadows danced across Ginny's face, making the anger he saw there seem a hundred times worse than he hoped she really felt. She sat on a chair that had been turned to face the door. Her arms were folded tightly across her chest and a crossed leg was bouncing rhythmically in the air.

He closed the door and stood fully in the living room.

"Oh, good," she said with forced sweetness, "I'm glad you're not dead, because now *I'm* going to kill you." She stood and rushed at Harry, her fists clenched. Harry braced himself for the blows that he knew he deserved. He wasn't going to stop her. Instead, she suddenly stopped, her hand raised, her eyes fixed on the blood on his trousers. "W-what happened to your leg?"

She bent low to examine him, fingering the gash in his trousers. She whipped out her wand and jabbed at the cut. "Malfoy," he said through gritted teeth. Ginny's healing technique was none-too-gentle. "Got me with a cutting hex when I wasn't expecting it."

Ginny finished her impromptu healing job and stood. She balled her fists again, but kept them at her side. Her anger returned with full force. Her cotton nightdress clung to her body and her hair was a wild tangle that would have normally distracted Harry from what she was saying, but he had no such weakness now. He stared into her fiery eyes and let her fury wash over him. "Since you're a dense prat, and don't know why I'm angry, let me *tell* you what you did, Harry Potter. I promised to obey you today - you promised to love me and take care of me." She had backed Harry into the corner by the unlit fireplace and was jabbing her finger into his chest. "Yet, the *first time* I needed you to honour those promises, you went haring after Malfoy instead!"

"B-but I *had* to," he pleaded. Anger was starting rise in his own chest and he took in a heated breath. "If I hadn't gone after -"

"NO!" Ginny interrupted. "I know your destiny, Harry, but I've got to come first sometimes. There is an endless supply of bad, evil men in this world, but only one woman who's pledged herself to you. If we're going to make this work, you've got to stop acting like you're the only one in this relationship."

Ginny's words had all the impact of smacking into the ground at full speed. He abandoned the quick retort he'd crafted about how she should be grateful for his protection as he realized she was absolutely right. He felt his anger drain out of him. His head drooped and his shoulders slouched. "You're...right. I shouldn't have left you, Ginny. I'm -"

At that moment, Ginny did something that he'd never seen her do, and that completely disarmed him. She began to cry. Not knowing what else to do, he took a step towards her, extending his arms to embrace her, but she stepped back. "N-no, Harry. Not now," she said before turning to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Harry let out a weary breath and slumped into the chair Ginny had just been in... *Why wouldn't she even let him apologise?*

He sat there for what seemed like the rest of the night, staring at the door, trying to work out how he was going to get himself out of his mess. A faint glow on the Eastern horizon told him that the sun was only an hour or so from rising.

Finally, Harry rose and slowly made his way down the hall to the narrow bathroom. Harry worked as quickly and silently as possible to remove the sweat and grime that he'd earned that day. Had it really been less than twenty-four hours since he'd been struggling into his dress robes at the Burrow? Finally, he stood nervously at the bedroom door, still not completely sure how to approach Ginny, or how she would receive him. He turned the knob carefully so it made as little sound as possible. His shoes were left in the living room, to enable him to pad silently to the lump-less side of the bed - they hadn't even got around to talking about who would sleep on which side. He removed his dressing gown, then slowly lifted the duvet and slipped underneath.

As his breathing slowed, Harry noticed that the light outside was steadily growing. Soon, a single beam of sunlight found its way between the drapes and the window frame, touching the bathroom door, even as it moved towards the floor. It was time for him to make amends.

The space between them was cold. Ginny's breathing was regular, but Harry could tell by its rhythm that she was now awake. Feeling brave, he shifted his leg across the space between them, penetrating the cold until he found her foot. When Ginny didn't move, Harry breathed an inner sigh of relief. Evidently she wasn't mad enough to hex him any more.

Keeping contact with Ginny's foot, Harry rolled over into the frigid sheets to look at the back of her head. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Everything you said was true. I was stupid and proud and worst of all I was reckless with your feelings."

Ginny still didn't move and a stab of panic shot through Harry.

"Yes, you were," she answered after some time, relieving Harry immensely. Ginny rolled over towards Harry, until their faces were close. He felt her other foot rest on top of his, creating a sandwich of feet under the blankets. Her expression wasn't hard any more, but it wasn't soft, either. "You hurt me, Harry."

Ginny's face crumpled ever-so-slightly and tears pooled around her eyelids. "I try so hard to understand what it's like to live with your burdens, but still, I just..." she paused and squeezed her eyes, sending the restrained tears onto her nose and pillow. "It hurts, Harry."

Harry found himself nodding and a flash of something appeared in his mind. It was only a simple impression, but that feeling went deep and stirred up long-ignored emotions. "I'm sorry that I didn't place you first, Ginny. I'm not the only wizard who could have tracked down Malfoy, and I failed my first husband test miserably, Ginny, I..."

Ginny's finger shot out from the covers and pressed against his lips, silencing him. "Wait, Harry. I need to tell you something first." Harry's mind protested at her actions, wanting only to finally be relieved of the burden he had been carrying. Emotions were swirling around in his mind so fast, he could barely keep track of them, and he knew he needed to let them out before the power of it faded away.

Harry nodded and she withdrew her finger. "We've been through a lot in the past couple of weeks and there have been some rough patches, but I think that now - now, I can honestly tell you that we're strong enough to make this work." A small curve appeared in the corners of her mouth and she looked away. When she brought her eyes back to his, he stomach flipped. "I know I didn't treat you very well, either," Ginny continued. "In the beginning.... Though you have to admit, you were a bit of a prat."

They shared a laugh and Harry nodded, raising a hand to push her hair back from her forehead. "I was a prat. I'm sorry for... for everything." After listening to Ginny, and seeing the relief in her eyes, he knew that was all he needed to say, and that anything more would likely be too much.

"I forgive you. For everything," she confirmed. "But, Harry. I need to tell you one more thing. No matter what happens between us, because you're

going to be a prat again at one point or another, and I'm likely to spout off how stupid you are for something you've no idea about...." Ginny trailed off, her eyes boring into his as if trying to communicate something important. He sucked in a breath. "What I'm saying is...I love you." She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her head into his chest, letting her emotions loose.

When she had regained her ability to speak, she looked back up and said, "I love you, Harry Potter, and even if I wanted to stop myself, I couldn't ever stop loving you."

Then she kissed him.

Ginny's warm, soft lips were on his in a way that he had never experienced. Harry, being inherently opportunistic, returned her kiss with all the tenderness he felt for her. She had given herself to him willingly, had sacrificed the rest of her childhood to him and was now offering her heart without reservation. Ginny's lips parted and Harry's mind exploded.

"Ginny," Harry said, panting as he broke the kiss. "Ginny, I.. I.. I love you. I've only just realised that, but it seems like I couldn't love you any more than I do right now." He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers, their breath mingling together, her taste slowly disappearing from his lips.

When Harry opened his eyes again, he saw something primal in Ginny's expression. "We don't have to stop at kissing anymore, Harry," she said. "You know that, don't you?" Her hands found the skin of his bare chest. She pushed her hand around until it found his shoulder and then onto his back. She seemed to be relishing the contact as much as he was. There was a glint in eyes that banished all rational thought from his mind. "There is one more duty that my *husband* has to take care of..."

"What's that?" Harry asked, licking his lips.

Ginny pushed him onto his back, reached her arm over his torso and pulled herself up on his lap. Despite his severe sleep-deprivation, the contact was driving him crazy. "It may be something that you'll have practice over and over again before you get it right."

"Okay," Harry agreed, not sure he could find a word in his head that was more than two syllables.

"Close your eyes," she commanded, and Harry obeyed. If Harry had ever doubted Ginny's heritage, those doubts were soon obliterated. Magical was the only way to describe what they did together that morning and Harry hoped that he would be allowed many opportunities to work long and hard at fulfilling this duty.

The End