

Fluffy Firsts: Tales of Harry and Ginny's First Kiss Molly's Best Berries

Molly's Best Berries

A light humming escaped Ginny's lips as she brushed her long tomato-red hair. The bathroom mirror was never as complimentary as she'd like it to be, but it hadn't yet told her she was an ugly bat as it had Percy the last day he'd spent at the Burrow. Her hand stopped pulling the brush momentarily as she thought about her older brother. Poor Percy had gotten his ambitions mixed up with his loyalties and now he was as far away from being a Weasley as he could be and still have red hair. The only thing that kept her from brooding about it yet again was the presence of the unofficial Weasley, Harry Potter.

He flooded in the night before from Mrs. Figg's house an hour after her mum had sent Ginny to bed. That didn't stop her from staying awake until he had made it safely there and she only fell asleep after his voice carried clearly up to her room. She smiled herself to sleep knowing that he was home at last.

The mid-morning sunlight shown through the light blue curtains in the bathroom and cast a pallid light on her face. She frowned at her reflection and finished running the brush through her hair until it fell in soft waves onto her shoulders. A hurried knock broke her thoughts.

"Hurry up, will you?" She put her brush back into the drawer marked, "Ginevra" and opened the door.

"What's the rush?" she asked her brother, Ron. He was hopping awkwardly from foot to foot, holding his crotch with both hands.

"I gotta use the loo! Now clear off." He pushed past her and began pulling his pajama bottoms off before she could close the door.

"Ahh!" she mocked. "I'm blind." The door clicked shut and she heard him sigh in relief as he did his business.

"Very funny, Ginny," came his muffled voice.

"Well if you didn't sleep until ten, you might be able to wait for a girl to freshen up," she shot back, enjoying giving him a hard time.

"Hah," he said, flushing the toilet. "You're just being girly because *Harry's* here." Ron's emphasis of Harry's name instantly caused her blood to boil.

"It's not like that any more Ron, and you know it," she said through clenched teeth. "I gave up on him a long time ago." And she *had* given up on him, but Ron didn't need to know that if Harry ever came around to asking her to be something more, she would jump at the chance. Harry would always have a special place in her heart.

"I'm sorry? Who'd you give up on?" With impeccable timing, Harry appeared behind her as she spoke to the closed door, muting the sound of a now running faucet.

For the first time since she was in third year, Ginny Weasley blushed in front of Harry Potter. She turned slowly around, intent on facing him as she had for the past year and a half. "You, Harry. I gave up on the idea of you falling in love with me."

A flicker of something flashed on his face. Surprise? Fear? She couldn't tell and it went away as quickly as it came. "Well, that's awfully sensible of you, Ginny. I mean, a girl as pretty as you can't wait around for a bloke as thick as a cauldron bottom, right?"

The bathroom door opened as she fought a blush for the second time in as many minutes. Ginny was about to tell Harry that he wasn't that thick, when he pushed past her and into the now vacant bathroom. "See you at breakfast, Gin," he said with a small smile and closed the door behind him.

Ron was smiling wickedly at her, with his arms folded across his chest. "What?" she asked.

"You still like him, don't you?" Ron said as he waggled his eyebrows annoyingly at her.

"Be quiet!" she whispered fiercely. "He can probably hear us through the door." She tried to push him down the hall, but he wouldn't budge.

"So," he said, not bothering to lower his voice. "You admit it, then?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and said in a low voice. "I'm not admitting anything Ron, now be quiet!"

He hid a snort in his hand and then held his side as he laughed quietly. "If you didn't care, you wouldn't be worried about Harry hearing you, Ginny," he said finally containing his mirth.

Ginny made a noise like an angry cat. "Don't make me hex you!" she said, a scowl on her face. "You know I'll do it."

Ron paled and held up his hands. "Come on, Ginny. Don't take it so seriously."

"Shove off, Ron." Ginny punched him in the arm and walked downstairs, just as Harry was finishing in the loo.

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After breakfast, Molly was levitating the dishes into the sink when she said, "I need you three to pick berries for a strawberry pie before lunch."

"I can't, Mum," said Ron looking distressed. "I told Hermione I'd meet her at the Leaky Cauldron at eleven."

"Really?" she answered, a faint look of pride on her face. "Well, that's all right, then. Harry, Ginny," she said, walking back to the table with a pot of flour and some utensils floating in front of her. "You two will have to get the berries for me."

"No problem, Mum," said Ginny, who was glad to be doing something outside for a change. She glanced at Harry, who seemed to be extra happy about something and said, "The sooner the better."

Harry walked to the door and held it open for her. "After you, Gin," he said with a sweeping gesture of his hand.

Ginny normally didn't like to be treated differently by boys, but somehow thought it was sweet of him and didn't say anything about it. On the way out the door, she picked up a large hat to keep the sun off her fair skin. It wouldn't do anyone any good to have her nose burned and peeling by the end of the day.

They walked to the berry patch, grabbing two wicker baskets from the shed on the way. The patch was partially shaded by two large Weeping Willows, whose branches hung limply over the ground around it. Several birds were pecking at some berries on the fringe of the patch and Ginny immediately shooed them away before sitting down to get started.

Harry followed her over to the same area and sat down by a particularly large strawberry plant laden with large berries. "Wow, look at the size of these things!" he said, clearly impressed.

"Yeah, mum works dragon dung into the soil every year and we always have a hard time eating them all." Ginny plucked a particularly succulent one and bit into it. She had to lick the extra juice off her lips as she chewed the sweet and tangy berry. "Umm," she said unconsciously. "They're really good."

Harry was staring open-mouthed at her and his eyes seemed unfocused behind his round glasses.

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What in the world, thought Harry, desperately trying to wrench his eyes of Ginny's strawberry red lips. *I can't believe she just did that*. He shook his head slightly and finally looked up to her face.

"What?" she asked innocently. "Is there something on my nose?"

Sweet Merlin. She doesn't know Harry cleared his throat nervously. "Nothing...it's nothing."

"Did you want some?" Her lips curved into a demure smile that sent worms squirming around his stomach.

Of your lips? Yes, I'd love to have some! He clamped his hands on his head and muttered to himself, "Stop it, Potter. She's just a friend. You heard what she said to Ron outside the loo. She's given up on you."

He looked back up at her to see her looked at him as if he'd gone mad. "Um...yes, I'd love to...uh, have a berry." *Smooth, Potter. Real smooth.*

Ginny's smile returned and as she reached to pick another berry, his nervousness seemed to ebb. She held out a particularly ripe one, deep red, and bulging with promised sweetness. *Just like her lips*, he mused.

Reaching out to take the fruit, he couldn't look away from her face and grabbed her hand instead, berry and all. She gasped slightly and they both drew their hands back.

"Sorry," he murmured softly, looking down to her hand. She offered it again and this time, he picked it up lightly with his fingers and bit into it. An explosion of flavor burst inside his mouth and he failed to contain the look of pleasure that plastered itself on his face.

Her giggles broke him out of his reverie and his eyes popped open. "What?"

She covered her mouth with a thin freckled hand. Her eyes sparkled in the sunlight. "The look on your face," she said, still smiling. "It's like you've never had a strawberry before."

"Oh, well...that was no regular berry, Miss Weasley." He felt inexplicably comfortable around her just now. "I've had them before, but that...that was something."

She cocked her head to the side a little as she regarded him. "Yeah," she said slowly. "I guess they are something."

They stared at each other and something passed between them. "Well, I guess we better get picking or Mum will curse us for holding her up."

"Yeah," he said noncommittally and they began to pull the berries off their stems and place them in the baskets.

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That was odd, thought Ginny as she grabbed another large strawberry. She couldn't help but notice the strange looks he had been sending her the past few days, but shrugged them off as just being part of their increasing friendship. But she had felt something just now; an unidentified emotion that she'd never felt before, that quickened her pulse and filled her with a desire that she found difficult to control. It had never been like this with Harry before and she wondered what it all meant.

Looking at him now, she saw him frowning at the bush he was supposed to be picking berries from. He seemed to be muttering something to himself and when he noticed she was staring locked his eyes on hers.

There it was again; the strange feeling that both excited and scared her. It was thrilling to have his eyes on her in what she could only describe as desire. Yet at the same time, she was afraid that she was mistaken and he really didn't like her that way. With a small sigh, she broke her eyes away and resumed her task, but couldn't keep the smile off her face as he continued to stare at her.

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As Ginny resumed picking berries, Harry had a flash of brilliance. They didn't come all that often, but he silently thanked whatever deity existed in the universe for the timing of this particular insight.

"Ginny?" he asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice.

She dropped another couple of berries in the basket which seemed to contain many fewer than the time they had spent outside would seem to indicate and looked up at him without answering.

He swallowed down a lump in his throat and picked up the largest strawberry in the patch. "Will you taste this? I think it's the second sweetest thing in the garden."

She furrowed her brow, but nodded her head just the same and leaned forward, opening her mouth slightly. *So far so good. Just don't mess this up, Potter.*

Trembling just a little, he moved toward her and presented the pointy end of the fruit, placing it tenderly between her lips. She bit down and closed her eyes, a small drop of juice clinging to the corner of her mouth.

"Mmm," she said through her closed lips, red and moist. Then swallowing, said, "That was sweet, Harry, but why did you say it was the second sweetest thing in the garden?"

Harry mustered his courage and leaned in even closer, his head brushing the large brim of her hat. "Because, Ginny Weasley, you are by far the sweetest, most beautiful girl I've ever met and nothing in creation could compare to you." Then without waiting for her to reply, he closed his eyes and aimed his lips at hers.

He heard a small squeak of surprise, then a muffled sigh as she deepened the kiss, bringing her hands up to his neck. Harry promptly dropped the half-eaten berry and pulled her closer. A light breeze pulled her hat off and she grabbed for it, breaking the kiss.

Once again, they stared at each other, faces reflecting the wonder and happiness they both felt. Ginny touched her lips gingerly with her fingers. "Oh!" she said in surprise as if what they'd done just sank in. "This can't...this isn't right."

Harry's face fell with his hands as they hung limp from their sockets. "I'm sorry, Gin...l..."

"No, Harry," she said forcefully, bringing his gaze back to her face. "I mean, I'm over you. l..."

"Gave up on me," Harry finished sardonically. "I heard."

"But, Harry...", she said with deep emotion. "Let me finish?"

He nodded, trying to cling to the wonderful feeling of their kiss before she told him that she couldn't ever feel that way about him; that he was like a brother to her, and all the other things he had told himself over and over again for the past three weeks.

"You...you," she said seemingly trying to catch her breath. "I think you might have changed my mind."

His head snapped up to see her eyes twinkling again with mischief and a hint of mystery. "Changed your...mind?"

"There's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

Harry nodded dumbly, still trying to figure out what it all meant. But before he could get very far, she had brought her lips up to his, hovered for a moment as if deciding exactly how to kiss him, then he was lost in softness and strawberries.

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In the kitchen of the Burrow, an hour later, Molly Weasley was growing concerned. It wasn't like Ginny or Harry to keep her waiting. They both knew that she needed to get the pie cooked before lunch if she was going to have enough time to finish her other chores. Folding her towel on the counter, she slipped on her garden shoes and walked outside to see what the hold up was.

Turning around the shed, she stopped cold. In the middle of her strawberry patch sat Ginny and Harry, shaded by the long swaying branches of the

two willows, kissing. Their baskets lay to the side of them, with hardly a berry in them, but she could tell from here that they had eaten their fair share.

Tiptoeing back to the house, she congratulated herself once again for keeping her berry patch alive and thriving, though this time, it was for an entirely different reason. Yes , she mused, *those were definitely my best berries.*

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Fluffy Firsts: Tales of Harry and Ginny's First Kiss Seeker and Snitch

Seeker and Snitch

Pulling her overloaded backpack onto her shoulder, Ginny Weasley trudged slowly out of her last class of the day, Herbology, and made for the castle to shower before dinner. Then, she reminded herself, it was off to the Quidditch pitch to practice with the other two Chasers until the sun went down. It was days like these that she reflected that it was easier to be Seeker and not have to worry about set plays and endless practicing. As Seeker, she just had to catch the snitch.

With a resigned sigh, she followed her fellow- fifth years into the Entrance Hall and up to Gryffindor Tower. Her best friend and dorm mate, Julia Thompson, was walking beside her, ogling Colin Creevey. She almost tripped on a step, but grabbed Ginny's arm to steady herself.

"Careful, Jules," Ginny said regaining her balance with a giggle. Then in a conspiratorial whisper, "If you'd quit staring at Colin's bum, you might not kill yourself before we get back to the Tower."

"Shove off," she said with a playful slap. "I can stare at Colin's bum all I want."

The sixth years were coming down the stairs from their free period so Ginny and Julia budged over to make room. Unexpectedly, Harry Potter was among them and Ginny caught his eye just before he passed.

"Hi, Ginny," he said brightly as he followed Ron and Hermione down the stone steps. "Meet you at dinner?"

"Yeah," she said, suddenly light-headed. "I'll see you... there."

He turned around, still smiling and clapped Ron on the back. As she watched his retreating form, she saw him whisper something in her brother's ear and they both let out loud barks of laughter.

They turned the corner and Ginny found herself leaning against the stairwell, still staring after them. A sharp elbow to her ribs brought her back to reality.

"Ow!" she said crossly. "What'd you do that for?" Ginny rubbed her side tenderly and started back up the stairs.

An evil grin on her face, Julia said simply, "And you were chastising *me* for checking out Colin?"

Sending her friend a quizzical look as they topped the stairs and approached the Fat Lady, Ginny said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, don't be thick, Ginny," she said before giving the password, 'Wronski Feint'. "You were drooling over Mr. Potter so bad I was looking for a napkin."

Ginny screwed her face in disgust. "It's not like that, Jules, and you know it."

They crossed through the opening and went up the girl's staircase. "Sure, Ginny. I'm not stupid, you know." She stopped on the landing outside their dormitory and propped a hand on her hips. Wagging her finger, she said, "You're not fooling anyone into believing that you've given up on him, Ginny."

With a drawn out sigh, Ginny dropped her bag by the door and slumped to the floor. "I can't like him that way anymore, Jules. I just... can't."

"Why not?" she asked, sitting down beside her friend.

Ginny pulled at her ponytail nervously, searching for the right words. "It's – it's just that he... doesn't like me that way."

"Umm hmm," said Julia noncommittally. "And you know this how?"

"I just do," she said exasperatedly. "He's never *looked* at me that way. He's never hinted that I might be *that* kind of friend.... Not once."

"I see." Julia drummed her fingers on her knees, staring off into the stairwell. Then turning a serious eye on her, said, "I think you're a big chicken, Ginny Weasley."

"What?" said Ginny, her jaw snapping open in shock. She had expected sympathy, sure, maybe even some cagey advice, but this was unexpected.

"I said, you are a big chicken," she said, enunciating each word slowly, and then Julia stood up and grabbed both book bags. "If you really like him, and I know you do, then you need to stop pussyfooting around and go after him." Ginny continued to goggle at her friend. "He's not going to be available forever, you know."

It was true, and it wasn't the first time that thought had crossed Ginny's mind. Just last week, she had seen how he was looking at Amanda Foxworthy, a Hufflepuff in her year, and it had made her blood boil. She wasn't even going to begin thinking about the whole Cho fiasco.

"I'm hitting the showers. Meet you downstairs, Gin," said her friend as she walked into their dorm and let the door click behind her.

"But / don't know that I like him that way, Jules," Ginny said to the door. "How does anyone know?" she said as she buried her head in her arms and wished she didn't have to think about boys at all.

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The next day, Ginny had just left Charms to go to Divination when her aging bag burst and spilled its contents onto the floor of the Charms corridor. Muttering a curse under her breath, she bent down to pick up her things and turned the bag over. The tear was huge, following the seam on the side of the bag from bottom to top. With a frustrated groan, she slumped down on her bum and pulled at the rip with the tip of her finger.

She looked up to see her friends disappearing around the corner, Julia hypocritically following Colin like a lost puppy. She pulled out her wand to mend her bag for the third time that term and stopped when a pair of brilliant green eyes appeared in her vision.

"You all right, Gin?" Harry had taken to calling her that lately and she found that she didn't mind it.

Smiling a little, she tried to pull herself up from her rather undignified position, but froze when he plopped down next to her. "Same thing happened to me yesterday," he said, hefting his bag to show her the repair he had made.

Slumping back down, she nervously pulled at her skirt to ensure her modesty. "You – you broke your bag too," she said lamely, not able to conjure anything witty to say.

"Yeah," said Harry without the slightest waver in his voice. "I'm pretty hard on my bag."

Ginny sucked in a breath as he leaned over to inspect the tear for himself, brushing against her arm in the process. She couldn't help inhaling his scent as he did so, her eyes rolling back in their sockets from the pure thrill of being this close to him.

"That's a bad one alright." His voice brought her back to reality and she had to blink to see him properly.

She followed the curve of his arm, which was still resting on the bag in her lap and noticed his watch. "I'm late!" she squeaked.

Then waving her wand, she mended the tear and summoned her books, parchment, quills, and ink bottles into her bag with haste. They stood and faced each other, the awkwardness lingering around her. "I, uh... guess I'll see you later, then?" he asked sincerely.

"Yeah," she said taking a step towards Divination. "See you." Then she ran as quickly as she could, trying desperately to flush his smiling face from her vision and his intoxicating scent from her nostrils.

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That scene repeated itself several times over the next few days. Harry seemed to appear wherever she was, always helpful or sympathetic, but always there; as if he had her schedule memorized. It was causing her no end of grief and one day after a particularly nasty Potions lesson, she broke down.

"Are you following me, Potter?" she asked with a scowl on her face. He backed into a wall as she advanced and opened his mouth to say something, but she didn't give him a chance to answer. "Can't a girl get a minute's peace without having the bloody 'Boy-Who-Lived' stalking her? I'm just trying to pass my O.W.L.s and have a little fun on the side. Why do you have to mess it all up for me?"

"Wha – I don't – but you," so shocked by her outburst, that he didn't seem to know what to say.

Hermione stepped up to her and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You okay, Ginny? You seem a little tense."

"Am I okay?" she asked, turning to Hermione, hand shaking, eyes blazing. "Of course I'm okay! Why wouldn't I be okay when the one boy who drives me to distraction, who's always there to help me and be my friend, but is never the right *kind* of friend...." Ginny stopped suddenly, resisting the urge to cover her mouth, realizing that she was venturing into dangerous water. Julia pulled on her arm as Ginny caught Harry's eye again. The look on his face was no longer only one of concern; there was an element of surprise etched into it, mixed with... fear.

She let herself be dragged out of the dungeons, finally breaking eye contact with Harry as they went up the stairs. "What's the matter with you?" asked her friend as they walked behind two Ravenclaw fourth years.

"I... don't know. I just can't take it anymore, Jules." She pulled sullenly on the strap of her bag, needlessly adjusting it. "Something's got to give and I don't think it's going to be him."

"Ginny," she said, stopping in the middle of the hall. "You've got to at least tell him how you feel...."

"I can't!" interrupted Ginny.

"Yes, you can," she shot right back. "You can and you have to, or you'll waste your whole life wondering what would have happened if you hadn't."

"But what if he doesn't like me that way?" Ginny realized that her excuses were evaporating like dew under a summer sun, but bearing her soul to

Harry was as impossible as putting him out of her mind.

"What if he does?" Julia held Ginny's shoulders firmly, locking her with a piercing gaze. "He may be just as scared as you and if you don't tell him, you might lose him forever."

Ginny swallowed a lump in her throat but her dry mouth made it all the more painful. "I'm scared, Jules," she said with a shaky voice. "I'm afraid I'll lose him either way...."

With a smile, her friend said cheerfully, "Then you've got nothing to lose by telling him, right?"

A watery grin appeared on Ginny's face and she nodded her head. "I guess you're right," she admitted reluctantly. "Let me think about it, though, alright?"

"Yeah," her friend said. "I'll catch you up later?"

Ginny nodded again and her friend walked up the hall to Transfiguration, leaving the redhead with her head filling with the billion reasons why it was stupid to tell Harry she loved him.

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A week went by and Harry hadn't run into Ginny at all since she told him off that day in the dungeons. In fact, she hadn't seen him once since then, even at meals. When she asked Hermione about it a few days ago, she simply shrugged and said he wasn't talking to anyone.

Miserable with him and miserable without him, Ginny slowly sank into herself, aimlessly wandering from class to class as her grades started slipping.

The next Quidditch practice was scheduled for that afternoon so Ginny resolved to go early to get warmed up before the rest of the team arrived. With a shudder of fear, she realized that Harry would be there, or at least she hoped he would. Perhaps she could muster the courage to finally confront him and end her misery one way or the other.

Opening the castle doors, she was met with sheets of cold October rain. Ginny put her broom down and tied her hair back into a ponytail, as tight as she dared, then picked her broom up again and marched into the torrents and onto the pitch.

Glad for the imperturbable charm she had put on the clothes under her Quidditch robes, Ginny soared through the rain, letting the water splatter into her face and hair. Her heart swelled and for the first time in weeks, she felt light and free, as if she was a ten year old again, and Harry Potter was just a fleeting vision on Platform nine and three-quarters.

Ginny reached into her robes and extracted a shiny golden ball. It was the snitch she had captured to win the Quidditch cup last year. McGonagall had given it to her as a reward for helping out the team after Harry had been banned. She twisted it in her hand, letting the dim light reflect off its intricately carved surface, then opened her palm and let it take flight.

She waited ten seconds, almost letting it get lost in the drenching rain before she rocketed off after it.

It was difficult to follow the shiny fluttering ball; not entirely because of the rain, but mostly because she hadn't been a Seeker for over sixth months. Getting back into a rhythm, she was eventually able to predict its movements. She caught up to the snitch and was just about to grab it, when another hand appeared next to hers.

Startled, she gasped and pulled up on her broomstick, coming to a halt. The other player obviously wasn't expecting her to stop and flew around in an arc until he came up beside her, facing the opposite direction.

As he sat on his broom, Ginny had to work to keep her breathing normal. His messy black hair was matted down from the wind and rain, drops of water coursing down to his face and off his glasses. He wore a sly smile, belying their recent history and sending shivers up her spine that had nothing to do with the cold wind.

"Hey, Gin," he said, once again using her more familiar name. "I came out to practice early and saw you flying...." He stopped, seemingly distracted by something and Ginny wondered if there was something wrong with her hair. Shaking his head slightly, he continued, "I saw you chasing the Snitch and thought I'd see if you were up for a little competition."

Her eyes went wide. "You want to... to Seek against me?"

He nodded, sending more drops into his face, all but forcing her to stare at every inch of it. "What do you say?"

Ginny gripped her broomstick handle tightly, feeling the water slip between her fingers. "But why?" was all she could think to ask.

"Well," he hedged, green eyes flicking to her soaking wet front. "I... sort of wanted to see who was the best Seeker." He wiped some water from his eyes, pushing his glasses off his face for a second. *He looks good without them*, she mused. "If you win, you can play Seeker in the next game and I'll play Chaser."

Unable to stifle it in time, she let out a choked giggle. "You what?" He smiled sheepishly, but didn't say anything. "That's ridiculous, Harry."

His face fell. "I'm not that bad a Chaser, you know. My dad was one and they won the cup three years in a row."

"No, that's not what I meant," she said quickly. "It's just that you're such a great Seeker that it would be stupid to switch."

"You did pretty good last year," he said with a look that made her want to run away and hide. One that said he truly meant it and it shook something deep within her.

"I...thanks, Harry." She smiled, feeling warm inside despite the rain. "I'll Seek against you, but we're not making a bet out of it."

He turned his broom around to face the same direction as her and stuck out his hand. "Deal."

She took it and felt his light squeeze. Then he turned to where the snitch was flying lazily around the far goalposts and said, "On three?"

Ginny began counting, "One... two... three!" and they tore down the pitch towards the unsuspecting Snitch. Soon, however, it must have detected them and dodged low, speeding up as it came close to the ground, then veered off to the far stands.

Harry marked Ginny for a moment, and then pulled away, showing off the capabilities of his faster broom. She stuck her tongue out at him as he passed and was rewarded with a smile. She rolled over him to his right just before the snitch dodged that direction, continuing its turn around the pitch.

"Hey!" he called indignantly and was once again behind her.

They sped around after the Snitch for the next ten minutes, each showing off their unique skills and Ginny felt something familiar soar through her. She wasn't uncomfortable with Harry when they were flying. She didn't worry about her feelings or his, simply enjoying his company and the thrill of Quidditch. It was like she used to feel around him after she had left her crush behind; complete and at peace.

With a grin, she bumped his broom, sending him off course for a second before he could correct it and dove the same time as the Snitch. With the ground approaching at a startling rate, she reached out her hand and pulled the Snitch out of the air just as Harry's hand grabbed hers. Together, they pulled their brooms up from their dive and shot off around a goal post, still joined together, both grinning like idiots.

As they slowed their flight and began to hover, Harry said excitedly, "That was wicked! I've never had anyone that good to fly against, Gin."

She nodded, still panting from the dive and because Harry still hadn't let her hand go. "You're a great flier, Harry, but I guess we know who the best Seeker is, don't we?"

Harry guffawed, pulling her hand up between them. Then with his other hand, he slowly pried her fingers open to reveal the snitch. Butterflies returned to her stomach and she looked from the snitch to his face through her wet lashes. He wasn't saying anything, just staring at her and Ginny knew that this was a perfect moment to tell him.

"Oi!" came a loud voice from the ground below and Ginny had to repress a curse her mother would surely ground her for. "You two done playing around, yet?" Ron, who was the new Quidditch Captain, surrounded by the rest of the team, stood with his hands cupped in front of his mouth. "We'd like to get this ruddy practice over with and get back to the castle, if you don't mind."

She could hear Harry swallow and he slowly dropped her hand. Ginny reluctantly put the Snitch back into her pocket and gave him a sheepish smile. Harry shrugged and said, "I... guess we better go down and see what he wants us to do."

The lack of enthusiasm in his voice made her feel happy for some reason and she blurted, "Maybe we can get some hot chocolate together?" His smile returned and she found the will to continue. "A – after practice? You know... to warm up?"

"That sounds great, Gin." They pointed their brooms at the ground and flew to a now clearly agitated Ron. Her heart lighter, she found that even though her hair and robes were impossibly wet, she could stay outside forever.

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Practice was blessedly short and Ginny was only caught staring at Harry three times before Ron told her off for missing passes. For his part, Harry only set after the Snitch twice, claiming that he had already practiced enough for the entire week with Ginny. It didn't help her concentration in the least when he sent a cheeky smile in her direction.

The rain let up significantly as their team finished their last run through a new play. Ginny volunteered to put the Quaffle and Bludgers away and made sure to take an extra long time doing it. Ron and Harry were talking by the locker room entrance and Ron didn't seem happy. As she carried her broom and the team trunk towards them, she could hear Harry say, "... got to know, Ron and I'm going to tell her."

She stopped and in a deadly serious voice, Ron said, "You'd better not, or I won't be the only angry brother you'll have to worry about." Then he turned and stalked into the men's lockers.

Walking cautiously forward, not wanting to seem like she had been eavesdropping. "Oh, hi, Gin," said Harry, clearly surprised to see her there. "Need a hand with that?"

She nodded and he grabbed one end of the trunk while she transferred her broom to the other. "Thanks," said Ginny. "Is Ron okay?" She intended the question to sound innocent, but as they walked into the shed, she could see his face lose its color.

"Wha – how much did you, um, hear?" he said with a squeak.

They put the trunk on its shelf and walked back out into the soft rain. "Just the very end... I didn't mean to, I was just..."

"It's alright, Ginny," he said hastily. "I'll meet you for that hot chocolate in the entrance hall?"

Still not satisfied with what was going on, but willing to ask later, she nodded and they walked into their respective changing rooms.

*

Ginny arrived inside ten minutes later, her hair still damp and her nerves on edge. As much as she didn't want to, she couldn't help but think this was actually like a date with Harry. Even though she was the one to ask him, he didn't seem to mind and that was something positive.

Harry turned around when he heard the door closing and smiled upon seeing her. She walked up to him, trying to figure out what to do with her hands and said, "Hi."

"Hi," he answered. "You, uh... want to go to the kitchens to get the hot chocolate?"

"The kitchens?" she asked, her eyebrows coming together. "The common room hot chocolate not good enough for you?"

He scratched his head and his hand automatically moved to muss his hair, something Ginny had always thought was adorable. "Well, I was sort of hoping that we could avoid, uh... certain people for a while," he said.

"It's no problem, Harry," she said soothingly. "I didn't realize you knew where they were."

"Huh?"

"The twins showed me where it was first year, Harry," she said knowingly. "I went down there loads of times when I needed some time alone. With the... Chamber and all." Visions of another handsome, dark-haired sixteen-year-old flashed in her mind and she had to force herself to relax.

"Right," he said, seeming to not know quite what to say.

"Well, let's go," said Ginny forcefully, pulling on his hand.

They arrived outside the portrait of the bowl of fruit, still holding hands when she reached out to tickle the pear. It gave out a series of mounting giggles before the painting swung open.

It was dark and there were no signs of the elves that were usually working. "Hmm," muttered Harry. "I guess they're off cleaning or something."

He flicked his wand and lit the sconces on the walls, bringing a cheery feeling back to the large room. They walked over to where the dishes were kept and Harry reached for two large mugs. Ginny searched through the drawers until she found the one with the chocolate.

Together, they melted it in a pan and mixed in the milk. Ginny dropped a dollop of butter and a couple shakes from the cinnamon jar into the pan just as they took the heat off. When Harry raised his eyebrow at this, she replied, "Mum's recipe. Don't tell her I showed you this or she'll have kittens for sure."

"Why is that?" he asked sincerely. "Some kind of family secret?"

"Actually," she said as she carefully poured the contents of the pan into each mug, stirring slowly to keep the mixture from separating. "It's tradition to keep it strictly in the family. But seeing as you're practically my brother, I don't think she'd mind."

"Yeah," he said, his face falling. "I guess I am sort of like a brother, eh?"

Ginny rinsed the pot and set it in the sink. Grabbing the mugs she ushered them to a table and sat opposite Harry. "Does that bother you?"

He curled his hands around the mug and stared through the steam rising from the still swirling liquid. "Yes and no."

When it was clear he wasn't going to say anything, she said, "Why is that?"

His eyes shot up to hers with a flicker of surprise. "Wha – oh.... I love the idea of being a part of your family, but not so much being your brother."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she said with a hint of anger edging into her voice.

"Well," he said taking a sip of hot chocolate. "It's like this.... I would love to be a Weasley, but there's no way I could ever treat you like a sister."

A sudden flash of something surged within her, but before she could understand it, it was gone. "What could you treat me like?"

He caught her eyes and a powerful emotion carried to her through them. It was as if he was testing her for something; peering into her soul, and after a moment, he looked back to his drink and took another sip. "Why did you ask me to leave you alone?"

Ginny's heart fell through the floor as the feelings of a week ago suddenly shot through her. The reason was that she couldn't stand to be around him, to be looked at and paid attention to with all these feelings swirling around her was that those feelings weren't reciprocated. But she just couldn't say *that* to his face. She churned the hot chocolate around in her mug and contemplated her answer.

"You said you couldn't treat me like a sister," she said using his words to make her point. "I was glad when you said that because I've got six brothers and I don't need another one." Ginny's voice didn't waver but her eyes remained fixed on her cup.

"Hopefully I'm at least a friend," he offered.

She looked up to him again and said, "That was never in doubt."

"So what else is there?" he asked, arms suddenly tense. "It seems like we're both looking for something besides friendship and we're not fit to be siblings...."

"No," she said with a slight chuckle. "We're definitely not cut out for that."

"What then?" As Ginny looked at Harry, she noticed that something akin to fear had taken hold of him. Things started to click into place in her mind. The sudden attention he'd been showing her, the looks, the casual touching and the exchange he'd had with Ron just a little while ago.

With an inward smile, she cleared her throat and said, "Can I tell you a story?"

Slightly surprised by the turn in the conversation, he just nodded. "A few years ago, a girl met a boy and fell instantly in love with him, but the boy had no idea that she felt that way. Over time, the girl gave up on the idea of him loving her and vowed to live her life without him. Then one day, the boy decided that the girl was something special... something worth paying attention to. So he started to be her friend and the girl didn't know what to think. She told herself that the boy just didn't want her to feel left out, that he was just being a good friend and that he would never love her as anything more than that." Ginny paused, trying to drown the butterflies in her stomach with the last of her now lukewarm chocolate and placed the empty mug lightly on the table. Then looking back into Harry's face, she said, "What do you think this girl wants from this boy, Harry?"

Harry hadn't moved the entire time she had been speaking and when she asked the question, he barely blinked in recognition. "Girl..." he said, still in a blank daze. "Wants..."

Ginny could tell that the wheels were turning in his mind and despite her rapidly beating heart, didn't blurt out what she so desperately wanted to say. Harry's eyes began darting around the table and his mouth moved almost imperceptibly, uttering small syllables every now and then.

Then, just when she couldn't take it any more, his eyes locked onto hers and they widened in surprise. "You mean..." he said in a barely audible whisper. "You don't mean that you..."

Her heart had stopped, her breathing hitched and at long last the words that she'd kept buried in her heart for five years came bursting out. "I love you, Harry." A single tear escaped her eye and trailed down her cheek.

He blew out a breath and sat back in his chair, staring at a point on the wall above her head. Then after what seemed an eternity, he looked her in the eye and said, "You can't love me, Ginny."

"Why?" she asked with trembling voice. "I've loved you since I was ten, Harry." It took everything she had to not sound pleading.

"Because loving me is the most dangerous thing you could do." Even through her muddled emotions, Ginny could tell that he was trying to convince himself more than her.

She grabbed his hands and their gazes came together again. "Tell me you don't love me, Harry. Tell me you've never loved me and you won't ever love me and I promise to leave you alone." Her heart thudded painfully in her chest and her lungs couldn't seem to get enough air.

He began to speak, but was staring at the table between them and hadn't let go of her hands. "I don't..."

"No, Harry," she said pulling on his hand. "Tell me to my face. Whatever it is you have to say, look me in the eye and tell me."

Dark green eyes blinked and turned upward to meet hers. She could sense his hesitance and debated whether or not to run now and risk not hearing the one thing that would surely break her heart.

Harry's face remained impassive for just a moment, and then a frown tugged at the corners of his mouth and leaned forward across the table. "I..." He screwed his eyes shut, then opened them and squeezed hard on her hands. "I don't...know what to say, Ginny." His face lingered close to hers and her vision went dizzy as she slowly realized what he hadn't said. His lips brushed hers, hesitantly, tantalizingly until her arm came up of its own accord and pulled his head until they made contact. Five years of pent up love and devotion; five years of repressed feeling, buried so deep that when it finally surfaced and went through her lips into his, it burned. Seconds ago, she couldn't find her breath, now she seemed to not need air at all.

"I'm sorry," she said, breaking their kiss. "I'm sorry for crying like this, but I just can't help it."

Harry had moved over to her side of the table and was sitting next to her. "Why are you sorry for crying?" he said. She looked at his cheeks and noticed that he had his own tear stains.

"It's just that...with Cho..." He kissed her again and she was surprised to find the same depth of emotion pass through their connection to her. It was just as deep, just as full as her love for him and she understood.

"Cho was nothing compared to you, Ginny." He tenderly wiped the tears from her eyes with the tips of his fingers. "Like the difference between scoring with the Quaffle and catching the Snitch."

Ginny laughed and cried and laughed some more, until her emotions found some kind of balance. Harry simply held her, letting her and she loved him more for it. She felt lighter than she'd ever remembered and would have floated away if it hadn't been for Harry's grounding presence.

They shared more kisses and talked about their newfound feelings, with more hot chocolate and permanent smiles on their faces. Yes, thought Ginny, *it was definitely easier being the Seeker.*

Fluffy Firsts: Tales of Harry and Ginny's First Kiss The Joys of Astronomy

The Joys of Astronomy

Professor Sinistra's voice pounded into Harry's brain in monotonic waves. He tried to pay attention to her lecture on globular clusters, but couldn't seem to keep his mind on task. A chill ran up his spine as cool midnight air streamed through the tower windows into the classroom. It was the only thing keeping Harry awake but as he glanced at Ron, he could see that even the cold breeze wasn't enough to keep him conscious as he snored softly into his Astronomy text.

"Let's review one more time class," came the suddenly intelligible words. "Which is the closest cluster to our solar system?"

Surprisingly, Hermione's hand didn't shoot into the air. In fact, no one's hand rose. Harry adjusted his glasses to look around the room. Ron wasn't the only one asleep as several of the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors were too busy counting sheep to pay proper attention to the lesson. Apparently, last night's raid on the caretaker's office was too much for some of them.

In an effort to buoy the spirits of the student population, Harry was trying to make his sixth year the 'Return of the Marauders'. Last night had been the first prank of what he hoped would be many – raiding Filch's filing cabinets to secure the means to pull off other pranks later in the term. She would never admit it, but it was all thanks to Hermione. If she hadn't pushed him to start the DA last year, Harry would not have become so friendly with Justin, Susan, Padma, and so many other non-Gryffindors. Their friendship was the main reason that he had been able to convince some Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs to assist him in distracting the elderly squib and his cat. Harry had even been able to convince Hermione that a little subterfuge was good DA practice. It was a brilliant operation and their haul awaited them in an unused hole behind Sir Cadogan's portrait, but he and his cohorts were now too knackered to think straight.

Mental note, Harry said to himself. No pranks on nights before Astronomy.

Professor Sinistra seemed miffed by her nearly-catatonic students and hastily scribbled something on the board. "I want each of you to write two feet of parchment describing the history, importance, and relevance to Astronomical calculations of the nearest globular cluster."

Harry scratched as much as he could down on his almost empty notes and packed his bag. Hermione nudged Ron in the back and he jerked awake. "Five hundred light-years, Professor," he called out loudly. Seamus snickered into his hand and Sinistra scowled at him from over her spectacles.

Dean stood and stretched behind them, saying, "Come on, you lot, let's get to bed."

Following Ron down the stairs, Hermione close behind, they overheard Seamus giving Neville a hard time about his crush on Luna Lovegood. Unfortunately for poor Neville, he had let it slip on the train to Hogwarts that he fancied her, but that he wasn't going to ask her out. Seamus and Dean had taken it upon themselves to needle him ever since.

"What do ya reckon?" Ron asked Harry sleepily. "You gonna go after Cho again this year?"

Hermione snorted. "She's not exactly stable, Ron. Harry needs someone who's going to keep him level-headed, not cry all over him."

"Too right," Harry said as they trudged down the corridor towards the Fat Lady. "You volunteering for the job?"

Ron gave him a critical look that made Harry pause, but then Hermione's laugh pealed out. "No, Harry. I'd probably just smother you with worry."

Harry and Ron continued to watch each other for a moment before they both smiled in understanding. "Yeah," Harry agreed, "you're probably right. I don't think I'm going to worry too much about girls this year."

"Good idea," Ron said with a glance at Hermione. "No offense, Hermione, but most girls are too much trouble to bother with."

Harry could almost feel Hermione bristle at that comment, even though she was still behind them. He let her pass to come level with Ron before she said, "What's that supposed to mean, Ron Weasley?"

True to form, Ron shot back with just as much vehemence. "They're dotty – make you think they're going one way, then change their minds mid-stream and the bloke doesn't know which way to turn."

"If boys weren't so thick, they wouldn't have to work so hard just to recognize that we're girls in the first place."

Harry let them walk even further ahead as they continued to trade barbs. He shook his head at their bantering and resolved then that he would keep clear of girls until he'd got his own feelings sorted out. Love wasn't something you just fell into anyway, right?

The following Saturday, Hermione and Ron were in the library working on their Astronomy essay, but Harry opted out, claiming that he needed to get his Potions homework done first. In actuality, the essay had been completed the night it was assigned, but he couldn't think of a better reason to skive off. The simple fact was that he just didn't want to be in the library, especially since he seemed to have developed a nasty block regarding Astronomy. Ever since his O.W.L. practical, when Hagrid had been run out of school and McGonagall Stunned, Harry had been unable to work through the subject at all.

Blocked or not, Harry still had to find a way to pass the class or he wouldn't be able to finish school.

After moping around the castle for most of the afternoon, Harry decided that he had better at least find out what the blasted cluster was named. Then he could start to think about the essay instead of honing his procrastination skills.

With much reluctance, he gave into his more studious half and walked back to the common room.

Several third years were having a boisterous game of Gobstones by the fireplace, so he went up to his dorm to read, becoming more and more irritated about the whole affair. Unfortunately, Seamus and Neville were playing Exploding Snap on Neville's bed, so the prospects of getting any serious studying done became slimmer and slimmer. Nevertheless, Harry closed the curtains on his four-poster, propped his astronomy text up on his feet and covered his ears with his hands.

The last straw came when Seamus started boasting about his exploits with Lavender in the Astronomy Tower in between hands. Even with his ears clamped tight, Harry could hear every word. He threw the curtains open with a flourish and started to pack his books and parchment in his bag.

"That's disgusting!" shouted Neville. "How can you stand doing that?" Neville tried to act appalled, but he leaned in closer when Seamus started to divulge even more details.

"I'm off," said Harry loudly, trying to ignore their conversation. Having a girl as one of his best friends put a serious damper on Harry's ability to enjoy these sort of "bloke's only" conversations that Seamus especially seemed to enjoy.

Seamus grinned and waggled his eyebrows as Harry left, while Neville guffawed at learning something about Lavender that Harry could have lived forever without hearing.

The third years had apparently been chased off as the common room was now deserted. He settled for the most secluded corner and roughly set his bag down into the chair next to him. Pulling his book and essay out, he noticed that it had been wrinkled in his haste to get away from Seamus. Harry gave an involuntary shudder when thoughts of Seamus and Lavender in the Astronomy Tower came unbidden in his mind and he had to fight off the heat he could feel rising in his cheeks.

Thumbing through his book, he looked for anything on globular clusters but after several minutes of fruitless searching, was about to toss the whole thing away. Deciding that he better at least check the index, two entries seemed to appear out of nowhere and he hastily flipped to the first. With a resigned sigh, he began reading:

Globular clusters are gravitationally bound concentrations of approximately ten thousand to one million stars, spread over a volume of several tens to about 200 light years in diameter.

The first globular cluster discovered, but then taken for a nebula, was M22 in Sagittarius, which was probably discovered by Abraham Ihle in 1665. This discovery was followed by that of southern Omega Centauri by Edmond Halley on his 1677 journey to St. Helena. 1

Harry's eyes began to close as the words seemed to swim in front of him. Sunlight beamed through an open window next to him and filled the area with warm, sleepy air. Globular clusters faded from his mind and were replaced with the feeling of his Firebolt, flying happily through the trees. His head was about to hit the table when he heard someone sitting down in the chair opposite him.

"Hello," came a bright voice. "Bloody hard to study with noisy kids around."

Harry's head jerked up and he looked at the redhead sitting across from him, forcing his eyes to focus on her face. "Hey, Ginny," he said groggily.

Her face scrunched in concern. "All right, Harry? I didn't mean to wake you."

Harry waved a hand in the air. "It's fine. I was actually trying to read." He yawned heavily and shook his head to clear it.

"Sounds like a real page-turning subject," she said with a small smile. "History of Magic?"

"No," said Harry sardonically. "Astronomy."

"Oh." Ginny brightened up even more. "I'd be happy to help you out if you want."

Harry furrowed his brow. "But you haven't even taken your O.W.L.s."

Ginny huffed. "Well, that doesn't mean I can't understand what your book says, Harry," she said somewhat peevishly.

"That's not what I meant...I mean..." Harry sighed heavily, deciding to head off an argument before it started. "I'd love to have your help, Ginny."

Her smile returned and she nodded her head. "It's all settled then. Essay?"

"Yeah," he said as he sat back in his seat, slouching a little.

Ginny was twirling a piece of her hair with her index finger. "What on?"

"Globular clusters," he said with some disdain, wiping his face with the open palm of his hand.

"Ah," she said knowingly, pulling the twist from the lock of hair she'd been playing with. Then with some thought, looked at Harry directly and declared, "Meet me in the tower tonight just before midnight and we'll see what we can do."

Harry blanched. Meet Ginny in the Astronomy Tower? Boys didn't just meet girls there for anything...innocent. Seamus' ribald comments -- that Harry thought he had successfully ignored -- suddenly came bubbling up from Harry's memory. "But, what about...It's just that..." he spluttered.

Ginny laughed and a light, bell-like noise rang in his ears. "Don't be silly, Harry. I'm not asking you out on a date or anything. We just need to use the telescopes to see the clusters properly."

Heartbeat returning to normal, he let out a breath. "Thanks. I've heard what goes on up there...I just didn't want...."

Her face seemed to fall ever so slightly, but she recovered and forced a smile. "It's no problem, Harry. I'm glad to help you with your Astronomy homework."

She made to get up and Harry felt guilt course through his veins. "Wait...I..." he said, but couldn't find the right words to apologize.

"No, Harry. It's fine. Let's just be two friends helping each other study, okay? I've got some Astronomy homework myself." Her eyes were on her books as she packed them back into her bag.

"Sure, Ginny. I'll see you tonight, then?" he offered, not really understanding what had happened.

She caught his eyes for a moment and nodded her head. "Midnight," she re-affirmed and walked off to the girls' dormitories.

*

The rest of the day was torturous for Harry. He agonized over his conversation with Ginny, wondering what it was that he had said to set her off. The tower was notorious for romantic encounters and although he knew Ginny had given up on him, he didn't want her to assume that he felt *that way* about her.

Not that she wasn't attractive...but he banished that thought as quickly as it came. He needed to focus on not sticking his foot in his mouth when they had their study session that night. Besides, hadn't he sworn off of girls and the confusions of romance just the other day?

Dinner came and went with Harry catching Ginny's eye several times during the meal. She would always be the first to turn away and he found himself watching her to see if she would look back. When she did, they smiled at each other and went back to their food.

This seemed to lighten Harry's mood considerably because Hermione caught onto it on their way back to Gryffindor Tower.

"All right, there, Harry?" she asked innocently.

A little suspicious, he replied, "Yes...why?"

She grinned and elbowed Ron, who was still working on one of the three rolls he had taken away from dinner. "Nothing. It's just that you're practically skipping."

"Am I?" he asked sincerely. "I hadn't noticed." He looked over to Ron, who shrugged, mouth too full to speak, and kept moving towards the Fat Lady's portrait.

Not willing to let the subject drop, Hermione continued, "Yeah, you are. Did you eat something the rest of us didn't? Or maybe...see a certain person?"

Her smile was disconcerting and made him suddenly self-conscious. Harry looked to Ginny, who was walking slightly behind them with Neville and Dean. "No. I just feel...happier...I guess," he added lamely.

"Hmm," she said and followed Ron to the portrait. "Triskedellian," she pronounced with a grin still plastered on her face and the frame opened.

Scratching his head, Harry struggled to understand their conversation. Dean and Neville followed Ron into the common room and Ginny walked slowly behind them. "Ginny?" he said with a sudden burst of inspiration.

She turned slowly around to face him. "Yes, Harry?"

He fidgeted with his robe pockets and said, "Um...I'm sorry if I said anything that upset you earlier."

"Don't worry about it Harry. I understand how you feel." Light from the torches reflected in her eyes, as if they were dancing.

"No, I don't think you do." He paused, considering his words carefully. "I'm not really great at talking with...girls, and I know I somehow messed up today. The whole Astronomy Tower thing is just a little awkward for me and..."

"Don't worry about, Harry," she said, now looking as happy as he felt. "Like I said, let's just be two friends getting some homework done."

Sighing, he smiled back at her and said, "Meet you there, Ginny."

*

When midnight came, Harry's eyes automatically came open and looked at his clock. He pulled himself wearily from the bed and straightened his robes. After a visit to the loo, he grabbed his book bag and checked the Marauder's Map. Filch was walking along the Charms corridor and Snape, oddly, was nowhere to be seen, so he tucked the map in his bag and walked down to the common room.

The fire was burning low in the grate, its dancing flames sending an ethereal glow throughout the room. Although they had decided to meet in the tower, Harry secretly hoped she would walk up there with him. Forcing down his nerves, he opened the portrait hole and made his way up the stairs.

Harry paused outside the observation room and a slight chill ran up his spine as his ears caught the sounds of someone humming. Ginny was already there, setting up a telescope on its tripod. She adjusted the legs to the right height and secured the instrument with a twist of the knob on its side. Harry took another step forward, hesitantly, as if his body didn't want to enter the room. Ginny had moved over to a stack of books that was perched precariously on a desk in the middle of the room. As she grabbed the stack, the top two books teetered off and fell to the floor with a clatter, skittering off to the wall where the telescope was positioned. As she bent over to pick up the books, Harry was presented with a very different perspective of his flame-haired friend and averted his gaze to the floor just a moment after the mental picture was firmly lodged in his brain.

Almost tripping over the threshold, Harry caught himself on the doorframe and tried to walk nonchalantly into the room. Ginny whirled around at the sound of his stuttering feet and smiled brightly up at him. "Good. Glad you made it." She set the books in her hands on a desk away from the telescope and motioned for him to sit down at the table she had cleared off.

Harry set his bag down and slowly removed his text and essay materials. Ginny watched him calmly, her hands folded on the table, back straight against the chair, waiting for him to signal he was ready. Finally done unloading his things, Harry sat down across from Ginny and said, "All set." His voice broke unexpectedly and he noisily cleared his throat. "Sorry," he said sheepishly.

Ginny grinned with a sparkle in her eyes and said, "So, globular clusters, eh?"

"Yeah," said Harry, a little more composed now that they were beginning to delve into the material.

"Anything specific about them? Or are you supposed to write a general essay?" Harry pulled out his notes, the ones with the assignment written on the bottom of the parchment and passed it over to her. Her lips pressed together as she read them. "Seems simple enough, but you don't have any notes here," she said, looking up at him. "Do you remember anything that Professor Sinistra said in class?"

Harry stared at the book in his hands and he slowly turned its pages as a distraction. "Not really," he said with a slightly guilty feeling. He looked up to see her scowling and offered a weak defense. "That was the night after we raided Filch; you remember that, don't you? Most of the class was probably asleep. Besides," he said in a lower voice, "Astronomy is useless."

"Well, that's really mature." Ginny blew at a stray hair that was dangling in front of her face and sat back in her chair.

"I'm just not cut out for charts and...stuff." Harry was whinging now, and he knew it.

Ginny didn't even give him the pleasure of a witty reply, instead, she continued to stare at him with her maddeningly calm face.

"Fine," he said as he let his exasperation get the best of him. "I...uh, sort of have this block against Astronomy."

Ginny's brow furrowed, but he could detect a hint of softening in her eyes. "Go on."

"Did...did Hermione or Ron ever tell you what happened during our Astronomy O.W.L.?" he asked gently.

She shook her head slightly, then her eyes widened and her mouth formed a small 'o'. "You don't mean...Hagrid?"

Nodding his head, he added, "And McGonagall." He let his words sink in before continuing. "Ever since then, I've not been able to study the subject properly. It's like I can't stop thinking about what happened every time I'm up here."

Sitting up in her seat, Ginny reached across to grasp his hand. "I didn't realize...I'm so sorry, Harry. If I had to see that, I'd probably try to block it out too."

"It's kind of funny, really," he said with a stiff laugh. "Hagrid's back teaching and McGonagall's as feisty as ever, but I'm still holding on to that blasted memory and can't concentrate on Astronomy to save my life."

"Too bad it wasn't your Potions O.W.L.," she said, suppressing a grin. "What I wouldn't give to block out the last four-and-a-half years of time in the dungeons with Snape!"

They chuckled together and the mood lightened considerably. The twinkle of mirth in her eyes helped to unclench Harry's feelings and he began to relax. He turned his hand around under hers and they clasped them together. They continued to smile at each other until a noise from the doorway caused them to jerk around.

"Oh!" said Lavender Brown, as she giggled into her hand, staring at the two with a look of suspicion.

"Why'd you stop, love?" came Seamus Finnegan's voice from behind her. His short brown hair appeared over her shoulder and he repeated his girlfriend's exclamation. "Oh!"

"It seems that this spot has been taken," she said with a knowing smile.

Harry flushed red and tried to pull his hand away from Ginny, but she wasn't having any of it and clamped down tightly. "We were just studying!" protested Harry. "Astronomy!"

Lavender's eyes darted back to their entwined hands and she said, "Um-hm. You don't have to act embarrassed, Harry. It's great that you two finally got together." She looked over her shoulder at Seamus and asked, "Right, Seamus?"

The Irish wizard nodded his head and said, "'Bout time, Harry! We'll jus' be leavin' ya then." Without giving Harry a chance to correct him, he turned and pulled on Lavender's arm until she followed him downstairs.

Harry turned back to look at Ginny, who was now decidedly amused. "But...but..." was his inarticulate reply as he looked down at their hands. For some odd reason, he didn't seem to mind the contact; it was the rumors that were sure to fill the Great Hall tomorrow that he was worried about.

"But we're not together!" he finally shouted at the door. Then he turned back to Ginny, who was smiling at him. "You know Lavender...she'll have everyone's tongue wagging before we get to breakfast." Harry groaned and let his head sink to the table.

"You say that like it's a bad thing, Harry."

Harry looked down at their hands and jerked his free. "You did that on purpose!" he accused.

Ginny's eyes were gleaming in the bright light of the tower's sconces. "Of course I did," she declared. "Pulling the wool over Lavender's eyes is a sport in Gryffindor – we have regular bets on who can catch her at gossiping with the worst lie."

Goggling at her, Harry was annoyingly aware of the cool air where his had had been touching Ginny's. "But we're not..."

"No, were not," Ginny replied steadily. Harry thought he detected her battle with something before she continued. "But why should we worry about what other people think? We know the truth and that's good enough for me." Her hands expertly found the page on globular clusters and she started to scan through the section.

Harry's mind was whirring, and it wasn't about Astronomy. "Why?"

She looked up from the page, leaving a finger to mark her place. "Why what?"

"Why don't you care?" Even to Harry, the question sounded too direct and too pointed. But she didn't flinch.

"Harry," she said soothingly. "I learned very early on that other people's opinions rarely make any difference." Her eyes dimmed and her smile fell. "Tom was all I cared about in my first year. His opinion was all that mattered to me and I almost got people – you – killed because of it." Ginny's voice was quiet now, and Harry had to strain to hear her. "Now I understand that the only person that matters is me. I'm never going to give that kind of control to anyone else, Harry. I can't..."

She stopped abruptly and pulled a handkerchief from her backpack, wiping at her eyes with it. "I can't let anyone do that to me again."

Suddenly standing, she grabbed her bag and made for the door. She stopped just before the threshold and turned slightly, catching his eye. "I'm sorry, Harry. I... I promise we'll study some more tomorrow."

Harry made to stand, to reach out to her but she was gone and he felt a weight of loneliness press down upon him. He searched himself, to see if he had somehow driven her away with something he'd said. Finding nothing, he turned back to his still-blank essay and lowered his head onto his folded arms. A cold breeze blew in from the holes in the tower where the telescopes were normally positioned. He shivered, but made no move to get up. For some reason, Ginny's indifference had affected him more than any other encounter he'd ever had and his muddle of emotions continued to whirl around in his head, with no answers in sight.

*

Sleep was an elusive companion that night as Harry went over and over again every detail of his encounter with Ginny. She had seemed so confident about everything until they began to talk about other people's opinions. Realizing that there was no one in the school more qualified to know that the judgments of the Hogwarts masses were fickle, Harry felt a pang of empathy for her. Knowing that she had become so tied-up in Tom Riddle's lies, had her trust betrayed, and her reputation ruined, only added to Harry's growing understanding of the youngest Weasley's life. They had more in common than he had ever thought.

Breakfast the next morning was the single most excruciating event of his year thus far – Dursleys, Malfoy, and Snape included. But what made it so bad wasn't what happened to him, it was what happened to Ginny.

"Ginny *Weasley*?" a Slytherin girl was overheard saying to her friend as Harry, Ron and Hermione entered the Great Hall. "You've got to be joking! Potter can do better than that."

Harry shot her a nasty look before they scampered away. Another knot of girls were twittering next to the Hufflepuff table as Ron seemed to lean in closer to hear. "And I heard Georgina say that Harry's been pining after her for years..."

"But she's been spurning his advances," said another one knowingly.

"It's so romantic," cried the first one, and then seeing Harry staring a furious hole into their backs, the group quickly moved to their seats.

His face steadily getting redder and redder, Harry sat down as innocuously as he could. Right across from Ginny.

“Hello, Harry,” she said vibrantly. “Wonderful day for some Quidditch, don’t you think?”

Ron sat next to Harry and was looking between the two of them as if they were a pair of chess pieces during a challenging game.

Ginny buttered some toast and offered the juice to him, her smile never faltering. “Ginny,” Harry said under his breath, taking the pitcher from her. “Have you heard what they’re saying about us?”

With a mouth full of toast, she waved the butter knife in the air and chewed more vigorously. “I told you last night,” she said finally. “I don’t care what they think about us.”

Harry stared back at her in disbelief, while Ron’s teeth began to grind next to him. Last night was one thing, when no one had been gossiping about his love life – and hers. But in the light of day with only one topic of conversation on everyone’s lips, Harry had expected her to be a little more reactionary. “Really?” he asked lamely.

“Really,” she confirmed with a laugh. “Now, I promised that we’d finish studying for your essay. Is tonight good for you?”

Ignoring the calculating looks Ron was giving them, Harry said, “Same time, same place?”

“I’ll be there. This time, no interruptions. I’m going to lock the door.” Then Ginny took another bite of toast and proceeded to scan the *Daily Prophet*.

“Hang on,” Ron said, seeming to finally find his voice. “Are you dating Ginny? Is that what everyone’s talking about?”

Harry groaned and Ginny sighed. “No,” they chorused together, but Ginny offered more explanation. “We were studying Astronomy last night in the tower and Lavender and Seamus barged in on us.”

Ron didn’t seem to believe her and asked, “So nothing’s going on between you?”

Hermione kicked him in the shin from her place next to Ginny and Ron yelped. “What’d you do that for?”

To Harry’s surprise, it wasn’t Hermione who spoke next, it was Ginny. She was suddenly brandishing her wand, pointing it directly at Ron’s face. Her tone was mild, but there was no mistaking the fire behind her words when she spoke. “Let’s get one thing straight, Ron. If Harry and I decided to snog passionately in the kitchens with all the house-elves looking on, or elope to Majorca and make babies until the end of time, it would be NONE. OF. YOUR. BUSINESS.” Sparks flew out of the tip of her wand with each exaggerated word and Ron flinched uncontrollably.

“But what about...”

“No, Ron. You have nothing to say about this. Harry and I aren’t together.” Her eyes flicked to Harry’s for a second, and something flashed in them, then they went back to Ron’s. “But if we were, you would either be happy for us or keep your mouth shut. Am I clear?”

Ron’s eyes were glued to the business end of her wand and he managed a shaky nod of his head.

“Good,” she declared and grabbed her bag from the floor behind her. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to get to Potions.”

Several pairs of eyes were glued to Ginny as she sauntered towards the hall’s exit and a fit of brief applause caused her to duck her head. Hermione had a smug grin on her face and Ron let out a breath. “What’s *her* problem?” asked Ron.

“I think she’s tired of being hounded about her love life,” Hermione answered.

Ron lost his blank expression and said, “What do you mean, ‘hounded’? I’ve never interfered with her boyfriends – not one time.”

“Oh right, Ron,” Hermione said with a laugh. “How do you explain the freezing hex on Dean Thomas’ underwear? Or the none-too-subtle hints that Charlie would be feeding anyone who got close to Ginny *that way* to one of his dragons?”

Shrinking back under the steely gaze of their friend, Ron visibly gathered the shreds of his dignity and quietly said, “You can’t prove I did any of that.”

Hermione threw up her hands. “I give up. Harry? You deal with him.” Then she, too, stalked out of the hall.

Ron shook his head and loaded up his plate. “Mental, the lot of them.”

Harry found himself agreeing, but for decidedly different reasons.

*

Ginny’s outburst with Ron had certainly taken the wind out of his over-protective brother tendencies. However, it also gave fresh grist for the rumor mill. From what Harry had heard in the halls between classes, they had been seen shagging in several different places, Ginny was pregnant with their second child and Hermione was supposedly livid because Ginny had stolen Harry from her.

The next class with Professor Sinistra, she had been so put out with her students’ lack of attention that she had added another mid-term examination to the syllabus and that it would be held in two weeks. So now Harry had twice as much to study for in the one class he couldn’t concentrate in and had a study partner who was rumored to be his girlfriend – at a time when he had sworn off having a love life.

He didn't see how it could get much worse.

That evening, after dinner, found Harry furiously reading in his Astronomy text as he sat in a chair in the common room. He was determined to make sure that Ginny would be the least inconvenienced as possible, and hoped that by reducing his need of her help, they wouldn't be seen together and the rumors would die down.

"You ready to head up?" Ginny asked, causing Harry to jerk out of his state of semi-consciousness.

"Er – yeah." He gathered his books and notes together and arranged them in his book bag while Ginny looked on.

They walked together in silence; Harry caught in his thoughts of how much Ginny had grown since he had first met her, while Ginny clutched her books close to her chest, and stared at her feet as they approached the tower entrance.

Noticing that her hands were too full to open the door, Harry reached out and grabbed the handle.

"Thanks," she muttered and walked inside.

Latching the door, Harry pointed his wand at the knob and muttered, "*Colloportus*."

The door squelched shut and he added another locking charm on top of that to make sure a determined interloper wouldn't interrupt them. Making his way over to their table, Harry felt decidedly odd for locking himself in the Astronomy tower with Ginny, as if they *were* there for some kind of romantic encounter. It was a completely absurd thought.

"You want to start with the essay?" Ginny asked. "We didn't get very far last night."

Harry nodded and produced his notes and essay. Ginny's eyebrow rose as she looked at the stack of papers. "Been busy I see."

"I didn't want to be a bother for you, so I..."

"Harry," Ginny interrupted. "You're not a bother. I thought I made that clear yesterday. You've got to get your essay done and I've got some astronomy homework of my own to get finished."

With a sigh, Harry opened his book and said, "Thanks, Ginny. Still...I know what it's like to be the focus of unwanted public attention. So I know that it's not fun, no matter how much you protest to the contrary."

Ginny caught Harry's eye and smiled. "You're right. I just..." she paused and pulled at a piece of errant hair. "I just hate feeling out of control."

Touching her hand lightly with the tips of his fingers, Harry said, "I know exactly how you feel. I haven't been able to make my own decisions – until I came to Hogwarts – and even then, Dumbledore has been keeping things from me and making me stay at the Dursleys and stopping me from seeing Sirius..."

His voice caught and he fought down a flood of emotions that he'd thought were long dormant.

"Thanks, Harry – for understanding. I really appreciate it." Ginny was still smiling, but he thought he caught a hint of a quiver in her chin.

Suddenly fearful that she was going to start crying, Harry withdrew his hand and pointed at his book. "So, about globular clusters.... I just need to do some research with the telescopes and I'll be just about done. What do you say?"

Her smile gone, Ginny nodded weakly and walked over to the telescopes. "Which one did you need to look at?"

Harry followed her and said, "How about M5?"

Ginny looked up the coordinates in her textbook and then swiveled the scope on its mount and used the spotting tube to aim it at a dim smudge hanging over the forbidden forest. She then looked into the eyepiece and began to twiddle with the focus knob.

"There," she pronounced. "That should be it. It's my favourite."

He looked through the eyepiece and re-focused the lens. In the center of a black circle was a blob of thousands of white specks, each one twinkling and winking as he watched. Suddenly, he became aware of Ginny's body next to him. Her warmth in the chilly tower was radiating across the inch between them and he wondered why it was so distracting. It became impossible to concentrate on the cloud of stars and when he moved the mount to re-position the telescope as they tracked out of its view, he bumped it instead and completely lost his aim.

Harry straightened and made a show of finding the cluster again, but with her so close, it was hopeless. He turned to look at Ginny and found her looking strangely at him. "I, uh...seemed to have lost the cluster."

Ginny laughed, and without being able to properly see her, he focused on the sound. It seemed to take on a musical quality. "Yes," she said. "I see that."

Inexplicably nervous, Harry ran a shaky hand through his hair and backed into the stone wall. He fumbled for his glasses again and put them on, revealing Ginny's smiling face.

"How about you finish up with the clusters essay and I'll get started on my homework?" she offered.

Unable to say anything, Harry simply nodded and watched Ginny walk to the table. She sat down and sorted her books and papers, then began reading. Harry became enchanted by the way she fought with her hair as she read. Every ten or twenty seconds, a lock of hair would come loose and fall in front of her face. She would invariably tuck it back behind her ear with a graceful turn of her wrist. Then it happened. The flopping sensation in his stomach. The one that used to happen around Cho Chang. The one that had vanished when she went off with Michael Corner – Ginny's old boyfriend. Then she had made a comment to Ron on the train from Hogwarts last year...about Dean Thomas.

"Ginny?" Harry asked suddenly. "Whatever happened with Dean?"

She brought her head up from the book and gave Harry a quizzical glance. "Dean? Thomas?"

Harry swallowed and nodded. "You told Ron you had chosen him last year...on the train home. Whatever happened with him?"

Something flashed on Ginny's face but it passed as quickly as it had come. "Nothing, I'm afraid. I thought he fancied me, but it turned out that he was just using me to get to know Angelica." Angelica, Harry had found out at the beginning of the year, was Ginny's room mate and, among other things, a compulsive liar.

"Oh," Harry replied. "I'm...sorry."

Ginny smiled again – it was a nice smile, Harry found himself thinking. Her mouth turned at the corners just a little bit, but her eyes lit up and a dimple appeared on her left cheek, just above a particularly large freckle.

"Don't be," Ginny said nonchalantly. "He was just a passing fancy of mine anyway."

Harry was perturbed by this news for some reason. "You fall in and out of fancy often then?"

Ginny's smile melted away and was replaced with a frown, as opposite an expression from the previous as Harry thought possible. If her smile was light in a darkened room, then her frown was a sky full of black and turbulent clouds, threatening violence at any moment.

"No," she said heatedly. "I never said I was in love with Dean. Why the sudden interest in my love life anyway?"

Caught completely off guard by the question, Harry found he couldn't possibly answer with any degree of honesty. "Er..."

"Because I've got six brothers that have taken an abnormal interest in it over the last four years and I'd like to think that I could have a friend that would act like a friend and not a brother."

"I..."

"Just because you're best mates with Ron doesn't give you the right to check up on who I'm interested in."

"Well, it's not that..."

"Then what is it?" Ginny's face was flushed red from their exchange and Harry couldn't manage to stop staring at her, nor could he figure out why his legs had suddenly become wobbly.

"You...when you're angry, that is...are completely..." Harry clapped a hand to his mouth in surprise. Had he actually been about to say that *out loud*?

Ginny's face transformed yet again and Harry was at once pleased and disappointed to see the frown leave it. "What? I'm completely what when I'm angry?"

Thinking quickly, Harry tried to come up with something plausible, but completely *not* about how pretty she seemed at the moment. "Scary," Harry finally decided on. "Like your mum."

The lines on Ginny's face disappeared as it softened. "You think so?"

"Absolutely," Harry confirmed as he vigorously nodded.

"Well," Ginny said, apparently placated. "That's sweet of you – but don't treat me like a sister, Harry. All right? Because I don't need another overbearing brother in my life."

Harry faltered. "What would you like me to be, then?"

"A friend, for starters," she said without hesitation. "Though you are a bit neglectful in that area."

"I am not," Harry protested.

Ginny replied by raising an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. Is that why you spent all of last year biting our heads off?"

Looking down to his feet, Harry kicked at the edge of the carpet. "I'm sorry about that, but I'm not nearly as bad this year. Am I?"

Ginny smiled again, completing the cycle of emotions and Harry felt his own lips tug upwards in response. "No. You're loads better. I guess I'll just

have to make you a probationary friend.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “A what?”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “I’ll give you a chance to prove yourself – to see if you’ve really changed, or if you’re bluffing.”

Unexpectedly determined to be Ginny’s friend, Harry looked her in the eye and said, “I accept.”

“Good,” she said brightly. “You can start by letting me finish my homework.”

Harry blushed and shoved his hands in his pocket. “Sorry. I’d better finish my research anyway.”

Ginny turned back to her book and Harry forced himself to stop looking at her and focus on the telescope. He blew out a breath and racked his brain for the name of another cluster to look at, but the only thing he could see in his mind was Ginny.

*

Much to Harry’s consternation, Ginny’s face hadn’t left his mind as easily as he thought. Barely able to finish his essay for all the time he spent gazing at her while she did her homework, Harry felt that a good night’s sleep would wash her from his mind. Instead, Harry found that the images of her biting her lip in concentration, her flushed face when she was telling him off, and the quirky smile that she had flashed all-too-often in his direction, were now indelibly ingrained upon his mind.

A week later, after more nightly study sessions with Ginny to prepare for his upcoming exam, Harry found himself in Potions, forcing himself to make eye contact with Snape – as if doing so was the single best thing to remove Ginny from his mind.

It worked, too.

“Mr. Potter,” said the greasy Potions master. “Perhaps you’d be kind enough to explain the properties of the potion we’re about to brew?”

Harry blanched and looked to Hermione, who, blissfully, was assigned as his partner since Ron was forced to drop out this year. She began to point to her textbook, but Harry’s eyes were drawn back to Snape as their professor slapped the table they shared.

“*Without* the aid of the insufferable know-it-all, if you please.”

Reaching back in his mind, Harry tried to recall what Snape had been saying in class up to that point.

“Perhaps, even the name of the potion, then?” Snape asked venomously. “Surely you heard at least that much?”

A snigger from the direction of Malfoy’s desk interrupted Harry’s thoughts.

Snape was talking about willow sap and crushed Jarvey fang, then Harry had started to remember a joke Ginny had told him the night before....

Hovering closer, Snape’s eyes narrowed as they focused on Harry’s notes. Harry made a quick move to cover them up, but Snape was faster. He slipped the parchment out from under his arms and walked back to the front of the class.

Harry’s head hit the table.

“Well,” said their professor slowly, while Hermione fidgeted beside him.

“Why didn’t you just read your notes, Harry?” Hermione asked with a whisper.

Harry peeked at her from under his arm. “Because I didn’t write down anything about Potions on them...”

Hermione looked puzzled and said, “But, what did you....”

“Well, it’s no wonder, Potter, that you can’t recall a thing about this class,” Snape said with an air of triumph. “It seems that you’ve written nothing but the name of a girl on your parchment; let’s see...fifty-three times in the last twenty minutes.”

Harry’s face was burning as he tried to slink down lower behind the desk. A burst of laughter from the Slytherins and even a few of the other students filtered into the room.

“Who is it?” Malfoy loudly asked. “Who does Potter fancy?”

Snape paused and seemed to consider the writing on the paper. Then with a sickening grin, said, “Ginny Weasley.”

Another uproar from the class, this time louder, was followed by a furious bout of whispering. Had it been any other student, Snape would have crumpled the parchment and been done with it – but because it was Harry’s...

“And it seems that Miss Weasley is so ingrained in Mr. Potter’s mind,” Snape continued, “that she is soon to become Mrs. Ginevra Potter, according to the last dozen or so of his scribblings.”

Had they been in need of some light, Harry wagered that his face, neck, and back would have provided a dull glowing red about then, but he refused to give in to his urge to bolt from the room.

Snape circled the front of the class like a simpering hen and proceeded to fold the parchment into several squares before pocketing it. "Detention, Mr. Potter. See me after class to make arrangements."

With the punishment assigned, Harry hoped that the worst of it was over, but when he turned to Hermione for help catching up with the lesson, he saw a smirk on her face that would have rivaled Ron's, had he been given a signed Firebolt from Dai Llewellyn himself.

"Not one word, Hermione," Harry said, defeated.

Hermione folded her hands on the desk and straightened in her seat. "I wouldn't dream of it," she consoled, but Harry had a sneaking suspicion by the dancing lights in her eyes that she couldn't wait to rub it in after class.

*

Herbology was a nightmare for Ginny and today was no exception. Professor Sprout usually took pity on the black-thumbed Gryffindor, but today, she seemed pre-occupied and had left Ginny to her own devices. The result was that she had overfed the Venomous Tentacula, knocked down three potted plants she couldn't identify to save her life, and in her haste to get away from the broken ceramic, knocked Colin Creevey into a pile of Dragon Dung.

By the end of the day, she had served a detention with Professor Sprout by cleaning all the pots they had been transplanting from, re-stocking the potions cabinet, and moving all the plants into greenhouse three for the next day's classes. When she had made it back to her dormitory, she was filthy, tired, and sore and wanted nothing more than a hot bath, and then to curl up in her bed.

"Ginny!" a familiar voice called as she came out of the loo in nothing but her dressing gown.

"Hey, Hermione," Ginny acknowledged and collapsed on her four poster.

"You all right?" Hermione asked sincerely. "Rough day in Herbology?"

Ginny chuckled. "You could say that." Thinking about her cold sheets, Ginny wondered if she could sneak an extra heating stone from the house-elves for her feet *and* head.

Hermione sat next to Ginny "Well, I've got some news that will cheer you up," she sing-songed.

"Draco Malfoy fell into a Manticore pit?"

Giggling into her hand, Hermione poked Ginny in the ribs. "No. Even better."

"Ron fell into a Manticore pit."

"Ha, ha," Hermione deadpanned. "Actually, it has to do with Mr. Potter."

Hearing his name, Ginny sat up a little and gave Hermione a questioning look. "What about him?"

"Oh, nothing," Hermione teased. "Just that he's been given detention for writing 'Mrs. Ginevra Potter' on his Potions notes."

Ginny lurched onto her feet, not even mindful of her gown, and promptly sat down again. "If you're joking with me, Hermione, so help me..."

Hermione's smile grew wider and she produced a folded slip of parchment. "I nicked this from Professor Snape when he wasn't looking."

Ginny lunged at the paper and snatched it from Hermione's hand. Unfolding it, she saw her name scribbled over and over again in Harry's familiar writing. At the bottom, was a name she hadn't seen since her third year, when she was still fantasizing about being Harry's wife.

But the bubble of hope that had welled up inside her, as it had when she caught Harry looking at her in the Astronomy tower the other night, left as soon as it came. "So what?" Ginny said, handing the parchment back. "It doesn't mean anything."

Hermione gaped at Ginny even as the latter walked over to her chest of drawers and began to gather her pajamas, knickers, and socks together. "What do you mean, it doesn't mean anything?" the older witch exclaimed. "It means he's been thinking about you – that he knows you're a girl – *and* that he *likes* you, Ginny. This is huge!"

Ginny shed her dressing gown and put on her clothes. "Maybe. Or maybe he thinks this is all some sort of sick joke."

Walking over to her mirror, Ginny began to pull a brush through her still-damp hair. "Ginny!" Hermione said, coming over to her. "If you can't see what's right in front of you, then...then I don't know what to do with you."

With a mournful sigh, Ginny looked at her friend. "Hermione, I've already told you – I've given up on him, and unless he comes right out and tells me that he likes me, or pins me against the castle wall and snogs the breath out of me..." A wistful smile appeared on Ginny's face as she said this, but then she deliberately shook the mental image clear. "Until he confronts me, I can't waste my time worrying about who he fancies any more. I've got a life to live, and I can't wait around for him to sort out his hormones."

Hermione's face softened and Ginny put her brush into her drawer. "Well," Hermione said with a sad smile, "just think about it, all right? From where I stand, he's changing, and I think you'll be surprised at how far he's come in the last year. Just don't push him away. Okay?"

Ginny chewed on her lip for a second before nodding. "Okay."

"Good," Hermione said, putting the parchment back in her pocket. "I'm going to deliver this to Harry and make sure he knows I'm on to him."

"Don't you dare!" Ginny called, but Hermione had already left. "Brilliant," Ginny said and decided that the chilly stone floor warranted an extra pair of socks.

*

With the incident in Potions fresh on his mind, Harry decided that he had better take the matter into his own hands. Determined to not have a girlfriend, despite his growing fascination with Ginny, he set about distancing himself from her in all possible situations.

It required him to face Ginny at least one more time, however, and she proved an elusive quarry. Finally finding her in the library just before they were to study for his upcoming test, Harry set his jaw and walked over to her.

"Hey, Ginny," Harry said slowly, standing behind her instead of taking a seat.

"Hi, Harry," she said brightly. "You're a little early for our study session, but I was getting sick of Transfiguration anyway."

Clearing his throat a little, Harry tried not to look nervous. "Actually...I sort of...um, thought that maybe we didn't need to carry on with the study time anymore."

A flicker of disappointment washed across her face, but was instantly replaced with a blank expression. "Oh...well, I thought you might need some more help on star formation theory..."

Harry grimaced and tried to distract himself by looking at his shoes. "It makes sense now," he lied. "So you don't need to waste any more time on me."

"It's not a waste, Harry," she said firmly. "I was glad to help you and hope that you'll always be able to come to me if you need anything."

Unable to keep his eyes from her face, Harry saw determination and a little bit of anger swimming in the depths of her eyes. It made the guilt in his stomach burn like acid and he stuttered out another half-apology before rushing out of the library. Avoiding Ginny was the right thing to do, but the pain in his heart made him wonder if it was worth it.

*

The next week passed by slowly for Harry, as he desperately tried to figure out the intricacies of Doppler shifting, nebulae-formation, and the main sequence. His long hours in the common room, surrounded by books and notes, did not go unnoticed by Ginny, and the small pool of acid in his stomach threatened to burn through his esophagus every time she looked mournfully in his direction.

Finally, after the test was over, Harry felt as if a load had been taken off his shoulders and he was able to enjoy some free time away from the subject that had been his plague all year. Even so, Ginny's distance from him hadn't worked. Instead of getting her out of his mind, she had taken up even more of his thoughts. Her absence had only made it more painful to think about her.

Sitting at his desk in the privacy of his dormitory one evening, Harry decided that enough was enough. It was stupid for him to be away from her when there wasn't even anything going on between them in the first place. She had given up on him, so the least he could do is apologize for blowing her off and try to mend the friendship they had once had.

He pulled out a piece of fresh parchment, a quill, and ink bottle, then began to write.

Ginny,

It's been two weeks since our last study session together and I've been feeling guilty about stopping them ever since. It wasn't right for me to use you for help and then turn you away when I was through with you. I'm sorry. Please forgive me for treating you so horribly and consider being my friend again. I miss you, Ginny. I look across the common room every night and see you there, with your friends, and it pains me to know that I'm not one of them.

I haven't ever told anyone this, but I've developed a sort of crush for you this year. It's funny, really, that after you've given up on me, I would start to return those same feelings. When we started studying together, just you and me alone, I realized that you were more than Ginny Weasley, Ron's sister, or that girl that spilled her porridge when I was around. You had your own convictions, goals, and strengths. I came to value our time together and soon, I couldn't get you out of my head. You were always there, laughing, or telling Ron off, or...I don't know. It's silly for me to be telling you this in a letter, but I'm too much of a coward to face you properly – especially since you'll never feel the same way about me that I feel about you.

Please forgive me.

With Love,

Harry

Harry read over the letter once more and decided that he'd let himself ramble on quite a bit too much – it really wasn't the kind of thing to be said in a letter. Deciding he would just have to apologize in person, without the embarrassing admissions, he folded up the letter and shoved it into the first book he could find.

Then, standing and pushing his pride aside, Harry walked downstairs to find Ginny.

*

Another Herbology fiasco had occurred and Ginny found herself terribly behind in this one class. It didn't help that Harry had been distant with her since he broke off their study sessions, especially because she would catch him looking at her in the common room, in the Great Hall, and between classes. She was certain that, given enough time, it would all blow over and Harry would be her friend again. Even if Hermione was right, and Harry liked her, Ginny rationalized that it was a momentary infatuation, and that his feelings would melt away like a spring frost.

So she found herself in the common room, yet again, desperately searching for a way to make up some points in Herbology and to keep Harry out of her head. Professor Sprout had offered anyone in the class with less than a passing average to do one research paper to take the place of an exam. Ginny knew that if she could do one killer essay, she could squeeze out an Acceptable by the end of the term. The problem was she didn't have any time to do proper research.

Ginny twirled her quill between her fingers, letting the feather brush against her cheek as she stared blankly at the fire.

"Ginny?" Harry asked timidly as he walked over to her.

"Hey, Harry," Ginny replied.

There was an awkward pause as Ginny looked expectantly at Harry while he fidgeted with his glasses. He cleared his throat and shoved the round spectacles back on his face. "Yes, well," he began. "I, uh...wanted to apologize to you, Ginny. For the whole Astronomy studying thing."

Ginny stared at Harry and guessed that he had more to say, so she didn't interrupt.

"You see," he started again. "It's not that I didn't *like* studying with you – far from it actually. What it really is.... No...." He muttered something under his breath, then finally caught her eye. "I just thought it would be better for us to stop. Besides," he said, holding up a piece of paper, "I passed."

Giving the paper a quick glance, she nodded and handed it back. "I'm glad you passed, Harry, and I'm not upset about the study sessions."

"Oh. Well...." Harry stood there and didn't quite seem to know what to do with himself.

"Look," Ginny said at length. "I really need to get this Herbology homework done."

Harry nodded. "Right, I'll just let you to it, then." He walked back to the boys' dormitories and Ginny returned to her dilemma with Herbology. Too bad Harry's stricken face was now firmly planted in her mind.

*

An hour later, Harry walked back down to the common room, unable to sleep and in need of a change of scenery. The problem was that the cause of his restlessness was still seated in a chair by the fire and looked absolutely frantic.

"Ginny? What are you still doing up?" he asked tentatively, taking a seat on the sofa opposite her.

The sleepy-eyed girl stared blankly up at him, then returned to scribbling on a piece of parchment. "Hi, Harry. I'm just trying to get this stupid Herbology essay done." Ginny threw down her quill and gave an exasperated sigh. "It's just that I can't find anything on the systemic effects of Alihotsy in humans. I need to use that to argue why Healers need to have an understanding of Herbology."

Harry crooked an eyebrow. "Are you thinking of becoming a Healer?"

She nodded and began flipping through her Herbology text. "That or I'll just check myself into St. Mungo's nutter ward and get a very personal internship," she remarked wryly.

With a small grin, Harry took Ginny's book and closed it. "There's nothing on Alihotsy in the fifth year text, Ginny. But my book has a whole chapter on mind-altering plants...."

Ginny's face lit up so brightly that Harry vowed to do something every day to see her look so happy. "Oh, Harry! That's perfect. Could I borrow it? Please?"

"You know you can," Harry answered. "It's not like I don't owe you or anything.... Besides, I haven't got Herbology until Friday, anyway."

Then, without any warning at all, Ginny threw herself onto Harry and gave him a crushing hug. The book in his hands went clattering onto the stone and he found his arms wrapping around her small body to return the hug. Then as soon as it began, it ended and Harry was surprised to discover himself feeling bereft.

"I'll just go get it, then," he stammered out. An uncomfortable silence stretched between them and Ginny drew back to her place amidst the books and parchment.

After handing her his book, Harry spent the rest of the night staring at the top of his four poster bed. His restlessness was still caused by Ginny, but instead of trying to get her face out of his head, he was asking himself over and over if his decision to not have a girlfriend had really been that bright after all.

*

Thursday morning came with a brisk wind sweeping across the grounds. Harry was feeling strangely rested after his mental battle with his feelings for Ginny the night before, and he looked intently for her in the common room and on the way to breakfast with Ron.

"Looking for someone?" Ron asked in a rare moment of observational skill.

Not caring that his growing fascination with Ginny was obvious, Harry said, "Yeah. You haven't seen Ginny, have you? Or Hermione, for that matter?"

"Nah," Ron replied smoothly. "They're probably gossiping or something."

Harry goggled at his friend as they took their customary seat in the middle of the Gryffindor tables. "Ginny and Hermione? Gossiping? Ron, have you been eating Billywig stings?"

"No!" Ron said with a chuckle and motioned towards the entrance. "But there's Ginny and Hermione now, so we can call off the search."

The girls were whispering to each other in a way that looked very much like they actually were sharing a bit of gossip. Ginny caught Harry's eye and, for a moment, it seemed like she blushed, then it was gone. She folded a piece of parchment that she'd been carrying in one hand and shoved it into her robe pocket. Hermione winked at her and they both took their seats opposite the boys.

"Hermione?" Ron asked as he filled his plate. "Did you just *wink* at my sister?"

"Yes, Ron," she said in the voice she reserved for very dim Slytherins. "Believe it or not, I *can* wink from time to time."

Ron shoved a forkful of eggs into his mouth and swallowed after two large chews. "That's not what I meant. You and Ginny weren't...gossiping were you?"

Hermione rolled her eyes so that they traversed the entirety of their sockets. "Really, Ron. I don't gossip, and neither does Ginny for that matter." The girls caught each other's eye again and they both covered their mouths to stifle a spate of giggles.

"If you want to share the joke, that'd go a long way to making us feel included, you know," said a clearly-perturbed Ron.

"Oh, please, Ron," Hermione placated. "It's not like you and Harry never shared a private joke between you. Besides, it's not really a laughing matter."

This only proved to pique Ron's interest even more. "Then what *is* it about? Have I got a 'Kick Me' sign on my back or something?"

"Honestly," Hermione said with a sigh. "Just forget about it. Did you finish your Potions homework?"

This put Ron on the defensive and they continued to banter back and forth while Ginny pushed her food around her plate, not really eating any of it. Harry tried to catch her eye, to engage her in conversation, but Ginny never gave him an opening.

Soon, the warning bell rang; they gathered up their bags, and headed off to their respective classes. Somewhere in the pit of Harry's stomach, he had a bad feeling that something big was going to happen that day, and that it had everything to do with Ginny.

*

That evening at dinner, Harry received an owl. It was one of the school owls, so Harry knew that it was from someone at school, but had no idea exactly who it was from. The writing was unfamiliar and there was no signature.

Meet me in the Astronomy Tower at midnight. Come alone.

A small feeling of panic set in as Harry glanced up and down the table. No one seemed to notice that he'd received the owl, nor did anyone so much as glance in his direction. Harry briefly wondered if he should tell Professor Dumbledore, but immediately quashed that idea as ludicrous. If someone wanted to do Harry in, it wouldn't be in snog-central.

Harry folded the half-sheet of parchment and vaguely noticed that the design looked familiar.

*

At eleven-thirty, Harry couldn't wait any longer. He had been pacing in front of his bed for the last hour, trying to decide what he was going to do about the meeting with the mystery note-writer.

"Oi, Harry," came Ron's voice from a slit in his bed hangings. "You gonna go to sleep, or what?"

"Sorry," Harry muttered in reply. He stood in place for a moment, then decided he wanted to tell Ron. "It's just that...I got this note at dinner."

Harry walked over to Ron and handed it to him. Ron lit his wand and stifled a yawn as he read the note. "Blimey. You've got a secret admirer."

Disbelievingly, Harry snatched the note back and shoved it in his pocket. "That's rubbish. Who'd want to be with me?"

Ron got out of bed and walked over to Harry's trunk. "Loads of girls, Harry. Haven't you noticed the looks you get in the hallways? A bloke'd pay good money to have that many good-looking girls throwing themselves at his feet."

Harry sat onto his bed and watched as Ron extracted a familiar piece of worn parchment. "Do you really think it's a girl and that she wants to...you know?"

Ron smirked in the dim light of his wand. "There's only one way to find out. Aside from actually going there, that is."

Deliberating whether or not Harry wanted to know who it was, and secretly hoping it was who he wanted it to be, he said, "You look. Don't tell me unless it's a Slytherin. There's no way I'm going to meet Pansy or Millicent in the bloody Astronomy Tower."

Ron unfolded the map and tapped it with his wand. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

He studied the map for what seemed like an age before glancing up at Harry with a curious... closed expression. "It's safe and yes, it's a girl."

Harry was about to ask who it was when Ron cleared the map and placed it back in Harry's trunk. "No, I'm not going to tell you who it is, except..." Ron paused and shivered, and quickly hopped back into his bed, muttering about ruddy freezing castle floors.

"Except what?" Harry prodded.

"Nothing, mate," Ron replied pulling his bed curtains closed. His voice continued, strangely muffled by the curtains. "Go on, take a chance."

"Thanks," Harry said, seeing the glow from Ron's bed go out as his friend extinguished his wand. Harry paused for a long moment and mustered his courage. Then, throwing on his father's Invisibility Cloak, he headed up to meet his future.

*

The door to the Astronomy tower creaked open and, after a beat, closed -- seemingly of its own accord. Ginny let out a breath as she realized that the person was invisible. "Get in here, Harry and take off that silly cloak."

A swish of material sounded in the quiet room and Harry appeared before her. She gulped as his messy hair and bright eyes captured her attention. "Ginny? You sent that note?"

"Of course I did," Ginny said exasperatedly. "Didn't you check the map?"

"Well," Harry began, seeming a little embarrassed, "I had Ron check, but he wouldn't tell me who was up here."

"Twit." She took out a well-read letter from her pocket and thrust it at him. "Did you write this?"

Harry glanced at the parchment and his eyes bugged out. He snatched the letter from her hand and quickly read through it, his mouth hanging open further and further with each passing second. "Where did...? How did you...?"

"It was in your Herbology book," Ginny explained with a wave of her hand. "It had my name on it..." Suddenly, she was in his face, poking her finger into his chest. "Is this some kind of sick joke?"

Harry's mouth was opening and closing, soundless words forming as he looked between the letter and Ginny, completely gobsmacked. "No!" he finally managed to say.

"Cause if it is...", she started to answer, then said, "No?" Her anger left her as soon as it came.

Harry watched her for a second then took a step towards the door. "Maybe I should just go..."

Not willing to let him go so easily, Ginny reached out, took him by his shirt collar, and pressed her lips to his. "I forgive you, Harry."

Dazed but still shocked, Harry looked down at her and said, "You...do?"

"Yes. Why didn't you tell me, you git?" Ginny said, taking the letter from his hand. She folded it again and put it in her pocket.

"Hermione said you didn't like me," Harry protested weakly.

"That was then, this is now," Ginny replied. "Besides, you didn't like me then, either, did you?" Harry was about to say something, but Ginny just couldn't stop herself from kissing him again.

"Mwff," was all he could say before he relaxed in her arms.

They broke apart and Ginny smirked at the blissful expression on his face. "Did you really write my name on your Potions notes?"

The dazed look was replaced by a wash of red on his cheeks. "Um...yes?"

"You dork," Ginny said and kissed him again. "That's four weeks of kissing you made us miss out on." She punctuated each word with a poke in his side.

Harry grabbed her hand to stop the poking and pinned them to her sides with his arms. "You know you're dead sexy when you get angry?" he asked and proceeded to kiss her back.

Ginny managed to push him away for a second and, with a flash of mischief, said, "Don't go spoiling my anger with compliments."

Just as she predicted, he lowered his head back to hers and they stood there kissing until what seemed like an hour later they heard the door clang open.

"Oh!" exclaimed Lavender Brown, who was immediately followed by Seamus Finnegan. "We need to stop meeting like this," she said.

They backed out of the tower and as Seamus was closing the door, he whispered, "Go back to what you were doing. It's not like you haven't wanted to do it for years, now."

The door clicked shut and Harry shot three different locking spells at it. "Now," he said, replacing the wand in his pocket. "Where were we?"

Ginny took him back into her arms and brushed her lips against his. "Right about here," she whispered, and they lost themselves in each other once more.

Fluffy Firsts: Tales of Harry and Ginny's First Kiss Chocolate Chip Cookies

Chocolate Chip Cookies

Walking up the lane from Ottery St. Catchpole, Harry hitched a thumb under the strap holding the backpack and took a deep, lingering breath. Looming high on a flat plateau, flanked by an old, creaking forest on one side and a rolling meadow on the other, stood the Burrow. He hadn't seen it since his eighteenth birthday party a year ago, the night before he had left for Auror training and seeing it now, as he strode up the dusty path, brought back a flood of fond memories.

Harry dodged a raft of ducks that were making their way to the river for an afternoon swim and sighed contentedly. The Knight Bus had dropped him off in town so Harry could enjoy the walk – mostly so he could stretch his legs after being in orientation meetings all day – but also so he could just enjoy the sights and smells of the country.

"Oi!" yelled a familiar voice and two identical red heads bobbed into view from the shed on the left. "Who let you back here?"

"Sodding wards aren't worth the breath to cast them if they can't even keep you out."

"It's a pleasure to see you again, too, George," said Harry with a wide grin. "Besides, I helped build these wards, if you remember."

"Yeah, yeah," said Fred in mock disgust. "You had to contribute *something* to the war effort, you know."

It was an established pattern. Fred and George would lambaste Harry for his supposed lack of participation in the war and eventual undoing of Voldemort and Harry secretly enjoyed the teasing because it was the exact opposite of what he had received from just about everyone else in the Wizarding world.

"I'll have you know," Harry rejoined, "that I've been number one on *Witch Weekly's* Most Eligible Bachelor list since the war. *And*," he added with forced emphasis, "since I've been awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, been given an honorary seat on the Wizengamot, etcetera, etcetera..."

"Put a sock in it, mate," George said as he shoved Harry towards the Burrow. "We don't want to hear about how many witches dream about your unmentionables, either."

"Yeah," chimed in Fred, who was walking on Harry's other side. "Or send you their unmentionables – wouldn't want lckle Gin-Gin to get ideas."

At the mention of their younger sister, Harry had to repress a shiver as they walked closer and closer to the front door. Ron knew that Harry carried a torch for the now fully-qualified witch, since his last year at Hogwarts, despite the fact that Ginny seemed oblivious to it all, but the twins were still in the dark about his secret. Ron had discovered this fact over a run-in with a bottle of Firewhisky and a blur of other drinks the night after their N.E.W.T.s were over. Ever since, Ron had been shameless in his attempts to get Harry and Ginny together; actions that only made Harry withdraw into himself even more. The twins didn't know how close to the mark their good-natured teasing was hitting.

Harry swallowed down his nervousness. "Speaking of Miss Weasley, do you – do you reckon she's home now?"

Fred grinned and winked at George, saying in a conspiratorial whisper, "Definitely."

George held the door open while Fred pushed him inside. "Mum!" yelled George as he stood right by Harry's ear. "Look who we found playing with the knickers on the clothes line!"

Harry elbowed George in the side, sending the older boy into a fit of strained laughter while Fred continued, "He said Ginny would look nice in purple knick – oof!"

With both of the twins gasping for breath, Harry once again tried to force his face into a neutrally happy expression when Mrs. Weasley appeared. "What was that, Fred?" she asked, then saw Harry and launched herself at him, smothering him in a warm embrace.

"It's so good to see you, Harry, dear," she said in that mothering sort of voice, which, strangely, Harry found he had missed.

As they stepped away, Harry said, "It was nice of you to let me stay for a while, Mrs. Weasley." Harry had no home. He'd left Dursleys' for good, and while training as an Auror, he had slept in the barracks.

"Oh, tosh," she said with the wave of a hand. "Call me 'Mum' like a proper son, or if you're so inclined, Molly."

The twins had now recovered from Harry's elbow attack and were giving him appraising stares. "Son, is it?" asked Fred smartly.

"Already married our sister then?" added George with a sappy grin.

"Knock it off," said Harry under his breath, no longer able to keep the red from his cheeks. Had he been able to push his feelings deeper, their teasing wouldn't have rankled him so much, but since it had been almost a year since he had seen Ginny, Harry couldn't help himself.

"Now, boys," interjected Mrs. Weasley, clearly aware of the effect the twins had on Harry. "Leave poor Harry alone and go finish whatever devilry you've been concocting in the shed."

"Yes, Mum," they said obediently, edging towards the still-open door. "Wouldn't want poor Harry to wet himself in anticipation of seeing his bride-to-be."

Before Harry could reach his wand to hex their smug smiles off their faces, they were out the door, laughing and singing a rude song about Harry and his dreams.

"What were the twins carrying on about?" came a new voice from the kitchen. "And who's the bride to be, Harry?"

Ginny Weasley was standing at the base of the stairs, towelling off her hair and smiling brightly at Harry.

All power of speech left Harry for a second and he ended up gaping instead.

"No one's getting married, Ginny," answered her mum so Harry didn't have to. "Fred and George were just having their fun with Harry."

Ginny seemed to consider this for a moment, the motion of her hand slowing before she righted her head and flipped her towel over a shoulder. "All right, then," she said as she walked over to him. "Welcome back."

She pulled him into a quick hug. Harry caught a whiff of strawberries and vanilla and found himself still inhaling after she had stepped away. "Thanks, Ginny," he said quietly.

"So, Mum?" asked Ginny, turning back to Mrs. Weasley. "Could you bake some cake or biscuits for my date tonight?"

Something stung Harry when she said this and it was all he could do to not visibly wince. A thousand questions filtered into his mind like, *Why would I think she'd not date other guys?* and more importantly, *Why did it matter that she did?*

"Sorry, dear," said Molly with an apologetic glance. "Your father and I are heading into London for a well-deserved break ourselves." Molly looked fondly at her husband, who had just walked down the stairs.

"Hello, Harry," said Arthur as he gave Harry a solid handshake. Then turning to his wife, he said, "Best be off if we want to make the show."

"We've got tickets to the opera in London," explained Molly. "Dinner and *The Barber of Seville*," she said wistfully. "I don't think I've ever been so pampered."

"Well, you certainly deserve it," Arthur said happily, grabbing his suit coat from a peg on the door. Had Harry not still been working out how he was going to absorb the news that Ginny had a boyfriend, he might have noticed that Arthur's outfit was perfectly matched, unlike at the fashion fiasco of the Quidditch World Cup.

"What about my biscuits?" asked Ginny petulantly. The pout on her lip was almost cute, Harry mused, a sudden surge of bitterness welling inside him.

Then demonstrating that his mind and heart were acrimoniously divided, Harry blurted out, "I can make chocolate-chip cookies."

Molly paused in mid-stride on the way to retrieve a dark-purple shawl that matched her handbag. "Cookies?" she asked. Then seemed to change her mind and said disbelievingly, "I didn't know you could bake. Besides, what are chocolate-chip *cookies*, anyway?"

"I learned a lot at the Dursleys," Harry answered simply. "An American in my barracks at the Auror Academy showed me to bake them. They call biscuits 'cookies' over there." Then turning to Ginny, Harry said, "They're actually fairly good, it's a butter biscuit with bits of chocolate in it."

A pall of nervous energy broke over the four of them before Molly smiled. "Well, there you go," she said and picked a bit of lint off the shawl. "We'll be back late, so don't wait up for us!"

Then, before Ginny could get a word in edge-wise, Arthur and Molly Disappeared with a loud pair of *cracks*.

Far from dissipating the tension, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's abrupt departure only added to the apprehension Harry felt with every breath.

"Well," said Ginny with a tentative glance in his direction. "I guess you're all I've got, then."

"I reckon, so," Harry said, fumbling with his worn Puddlemere tee shirt.

After a beat, Ginny huffed and in a bold move, grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him to the kitchen. "We don't have all afternoon, you know," she said with a sudden smile. "I've got to leave at six o'clock."

"Right. Six o'clock," he repeated.

"What's the first step, then?" asked Ginny once they had made it into the kitchen. "I'm rubbish at baking."

"That can't be true," Harry offered.

"What?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. "Because I'm Molly's daughter? Is that what you were going to say? Well, I've got the domestic sense of a flobberworm."

"Actually," said Harry, gaining some confidence. "I was going to say that it isn't that hard, and that anyone can learn how to cook."

Ginny blinked and had the grace to look abashed. "Oh."

Taking a moment to appreciate Ginny's stance, he quickly decided that while there were prettier witches in the world, it wasn't her figure or face that attracted him to her. As the pink on her cheeks faded and she twirled the end of her towel in her hand, Harry realized that it was because she was something undeniably unique...completely herself and unhindered by anything else. She was just – Ginny.

"I'll get the ingredients together while you brush out your hair," he said, pointing to the drying red tresses draped haphazardly over her shoulders. "Most blokes prefer their dates with kempt hair," he said with a hint of sarcasm to make sure she knew he was poking fun at her.

Harry was relieved when she stuck her tongue out at him and walked slowly over to the stairs. "I'm not starting without you," Harry called to her. "You're going to do the second batch by yourself, Ginny."

"Okay, but you don't know what you're getting into," she replied from the top of the stairs. "I'm really a dreadful mess in the kitchen."

"We'll see. Brush your hair and get down here as soon as you're done."

"Yes, sir," she said mockingly with a fake salute before disappearing behind the wall on the landing.

Shaking his head and sighing, Harry walked to the unfamiliar pantry and rifled through various tins and pails. Finding the flour, sugar, and salt easily enough, Harry placed their containers on the countertop by the sink and resumed his hunt for the right ingredients.

By the time he had found the measuring spoons, Ginny had returned to the kitchen and was watching Harry as she leaned against the oven. Noticing the queer smile on her face, Harry hooked an apron with his forefinger and launched it at her.

"First rule in the kitchen is, you've got to wear protective clothing," Harry said in a perfect imitation of Mad-eye Moody. "Constant Vigilance!" he barked to make his point and caused Ginny to jump a little.

"Did they have to drag his sorry hide out of retirement again just to train the likes of you?" Ginny asked cheekily.

Ignoring her comment with all but a wry smirk, Harry replied, "Just joking. But you really should put that on, or your dress will be covered in flour and dough by the time we have any biscuits made."

Ginny relaxed and Harry snuck a peek at her when she looped the top of the apron over her head and tied it around her waist. She finished adjusting the floral print fabric to cover most of her front while Harry was jotting down the ingredients list on a piece of torn parchment with a dull pencil.

"Here's the recipe," he said, pushing the list towards her, so she could get a look at it. "We'll start by softening the butter and pre-heating the oven."

Harry retrieved four sticks of butter and placed them on a small ceramic plate while Ginny lit the cooker. He was about to put them in the oven when Ginny grabbed his hand. "What are you doing?" she asked with a quizzical expression.

"Softening the butter," Harry replied, trying not to let her cool fingers distract him but shivered involuntarily just the same. "I'd normally let it sit out for an hour before we started, but since you're pressed for time..."

Ginny rolled her eyes at him playfully. "What are they teaching you at that school of yours?" She took the plate from his hand and placed it back on the counter. Then with a flick of her wand, the butter glistened and sagged a bit at the edges.

"Apparently they don't think household charms would come in handy battling against dark wizards," Harry replied, slightly abashed at forgetting he could use magic to help things along.

"That soft enough?" she asked with a twinkle in her eyes, gesturing at the plate.

"Can you sink your thumb into it?" he asked in reply.

Ginny extended her right thumb and inverted it, pressing it into the nearest stick. "Yep," she answered and licked off the dab of butter left on the tip of her thumb.

"Then it's soft enough," he said, swallowing hard a few times. "Set the oven for three-seventy-five and we'll start putting the dry ingredients together."

Wand still in hand, Ginny pointed it at the oven and rotated her wrist clockwise until she was satisfied the temperature was right.

Harry found two decent-sized bowls and proceeded to measure out the flour. "Two and a quarter cups of flour, a teaspoon of salt, and baking soda each..." He measured these as well, cutting the top of the measuring spoon with a butter knife to make sure the amounts were accurate.

Ginny watched him curiously and Harry said, "Now this is very important.... You've got to stir the dry ingredients together with the knife, or you get an

uneven distribution of salt and soda." He made a face and finished, "Very bad for the biscuits...and the people eating them."

"Right," Ginny said with a nod. "Stir the dry ingredients to ensure proper distribution."

Harry gave her a lopsided smirk. "No wonder you got so many N.E.W.T.s," he teased. "Mind like a steel trap."

With a tinkling laugh, Ginny touched his shoulder and leaned into him. "More like I was brainwashed by Hermione at the tender age of twelve to study until my eyes bled."

"Well, at least you've got the marks to get a nice, cushy Ministry job."

Ginny stuck her tongue out at him for the second time that afternoon and Harry couldn't help noticing how pink it was in contrast to her lips, face, and hair. "No stuffy Ministry jobs for me, thanks," she said.

Shaking his head slightly and tearing his eyes from her lips, Harry moved over to the larger bowl. "Now," he said with a small break in his voice, "we combine the sugar, butter, and eggs."

Ginny walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a small basket of eggs. "Just pulled them from the hen-house this morning."

Harry overturned the plate with the butter and holding two of the sticks with a spatula, watched as the other two plopped into the bowl with a sticky squelch. He pushed the flour and salt tins to the back of the counter and shifted the sugar tins to the front. "Three-quarter cups of white sugar and the same with the brown." Looking up to meet Ginny's eyes, he said, "But you have to pack the brown sugar or the biscuits will come out flat."

"No flat biscuits," said Ginny with a sardonic grin. "Luke won't like that at all."

Harry raised his eyebrows, his emotions equally divided between curiosity and an insane surge of jealousy. "Luke, eh?"

Ginny's face remained impassive as she cracked an egg into the bowl. "Yes. My date for tonight."

"Would I know him?" he tried to ask neutrally, pushing the brown sugar down into the measuring cup with the back of a teaspoon harder than was strictly necessary.

"No," she said with a wistful smile. "He asked me out last week and a bunch of us are going to the cinema and then to play games at his flat."

Harry's ears perked up when he heard they were having a first date and he tapped the cup on the side of the bowl so the sugar slid into it as a single, solid mass. "So it's a group date?"

"Yeah, but why the sudden curiosity in my love life, Harry?" she asked as she threw the egg shells into the rubbish bin and proceeded to cap the sugar containers.

Harry started, suddenly unable to think. "Well...I, uh – That is to say..." Something finally flashed into his head and he blurted, "I'm just concerned about you...and want to make sure you're okay." It was a completely stupid thing to say and as soon as it left his mouth, he instantly regretted it.

"I'm capable of taking care of myself, Harry. In case you need reminding, *I'm* the one who took out Malfoy and Goyle so you could have a clear shot at Tom." Her cheerful demeanour vanished and a fire lit in her brown eyes, sending shivers up his arm of a different sort.

Desperate to look appropriately contrite, Harry let his head sink down until his fringe covered his eyes from her view. "I – I know," he said quietly, watching the egg whites soak into the sugar, leaving the yolks to float alone on the surface of the mixture. "I'm sorry. I just...." He trailed off, not able to get his conflicting thoughts to cooperate long enough to form a coherent sentence.

Ginny's finger touched his chin and pushed it up until she could look into his eyes. "You just what, Harry?"

Something flashed on her face and the fire was extinguished, giving him the ability to press on. "I do worry about you, but not like – not like Ron or Bill would."

Her head cocked slightly to one side and she seemed to be fighting some kind of internal battle. "Then what kind of worry is it?"

Harry's heart was beating frantically as he struggled to find an answer that both satisfied her curiosity and didn't reveal his feelings. "I...uh, just don't want you to get hurt."

Ginny's eyes fell to the bowls on the counter. "Oh," she murmured and pushed at the one with the wet mixture in it. "What do we do next?"

Slowly wiping his hands on his apron, Harry sighed. "I couldn't find any vanilla extract. Do you have any, or should I pop over to a shop?"

"Let me check," she said, quickly ducking back into the pantry where Harry had retrieved the dry ingredients.

Harry used the butter knife to cut into the still coherent sticks of butter, pushing the mixture around with it until she returned. *What is it about Ginny that totally disarms me?* he wondered.

"One teaspoon," he said to her when she sent him a questioning look, the small glass bottle pinned between her thumb and forefinger.

Ginny measured the strongly-scented liquid and poured it into the bowl.

With a deft stirring motion, Harry beat the butter, eggs, and sugar together until it was slightly fluffy. Then he tipped half of the dry mixture into the

bowl and continued to turn the wooden spoon until the flour had been absorbed into the wet. He repeated the process until he couldn't turn the spoon and all the flour had been added.

"There," he said with a sense of accomplishment. Ginny had watched him in silence, but Harry had the feeling that she wasn't watching the bowl.

"Now we just need some chocolate chips," Harry said as he put the bowl down, the spatula sticking up in the solid dough.

"Right," said Ginny as she bit her lip in thought. "I think I saw some over here."

Harry followed her into a small cold-larder where the meats and cheeses were stored. "Aha," she said in triumph, hoisting a bag of the small brown pieces of dark chocolate. "I thought we had some here."

Harry smiled at her as she turned around. The closet was only as wide as one person and Harry was in the doorway, but she stood still, not pressing him to move. They stared at each other for a moment before Harry lost his nerve and backed out, a faint tinge of pink across his ears.

With a repressed sigh, Harry watched her pour some of the chips into the bowl and stir them in. He pulled out two large baking sheets and placed them on the counter by the oven, standing deliberately away from Ginny while she finished working the batter.

Taking a sheet each, Harry and Ginny dolloped small portions of dough evenly on their light grey surfaces until there were sixteen on each. Then they went into the oven one at a time for ten minutes until the edges were just barely turning brown. "You don't want them to be too crispy," Harry had explained.

Once the first batches were cooled on a wire rack and the next was in the oven, Ginny began following Harry's instructions to make a second batch of dough. Harry watched her combine the wet and dry ingredients before he stepped over to the refrigerator to pour two mugs of milk. Then, with a small plate of cooled biscuits, set them and the mugs down on the counter in front of her, just as she was finished stirring in the chips.

"Oh, that looks good," she said, a small sheen of sweat dotting her brow. Ginny pushed the remaining dough from the first batch into the bowl of freshly made batter and set it down by the oven.

With a contented sigh, she tipped her mug back and drained half of the milk in one lingering swallow. "Ahh. Now for some biscuits!" She grabbed one off the plate and Harry followed suit, both crunching into them at the same time.

After swallowing and chasing the biscuits down with the rest of their milk, Harry and Ginny sat by the oven until the next batch was finished. "That was some biscuit, Harry," said Ginny, her bright smile returning.

"Told you. I just hope they're a hit for your date," Harry ground out reluctantly.

"Did you really learn to cook like this from those awful Muggles?" she asked sincerely. "Or was it that cute American witch from the Auror Academy?"

Harry rested his elbows on his knees and sighed. "I never said it was a witch," he said with a pointed look. "But yeah, I learned a lot of things about cooking from the Dursleys. I guess it's the one thing I took from my childhood. A solid appreciation for good-quality baking."

His crooked smile must have been visible because she reached out a hand to hit his shoulder. As her hand made contact, however, it seemed to stick and a strange dizzy sensation washed through him. Harry wasn't completely certain, but he thought her hand was trembling as it continued to touch his shoulder, its heat radiating through his thin cotton shirt.

Looking into her eyes, Harry had a strange, hazy desire wash over him and he could see that desire reflected in Ginny's eyes. Her hand was now clasped around a fistful of his shirt and their faces were growing closer together. Just as Harry was certain they were going to kiss, the oven timer went off and they jumped apart.

"I'm – I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I don't know what came over me."

Ginny's fist unclenched and she let it drop beside her, letting out a shaky breath as she did so. "It's all right."

Harry pulled the sheets out of the oven and used a metal spatula to separate the cookies from the sheet and place them on the cooling rack. The strange dizziness lingered; he tried to fight it off. It was oddly similar to the effect alcohol had on him and he wondered if the milk was bad.

Soon, it was almost six o'clock and all the biscuits had been made. Ginny held a bag with two covered plates of biscuits in her hand. "I, uh...guess I should go," she said awkwardly.

Harry made a noncommittal shrugging motion with his shoulders and watched her Apparate out of the kitchen. "Have a nice night," he said sullenly before turning to the mess that had once been Mrs. Weasley's clean kitchen. Harry sighed as he surveyed the messy dishes, flour-laden counters and doughy utensils. Then with sudden inspiration, Harry decided that he might as well make another batch of dough to present Mrs. Weasley with some biscuits. It was her ingredients they had used, after all.

*

As six o'clock turned into nine, Harry found himself sitting at the kitchen table, half a bowl of dough in front of him and a few stray flecks of batter on his chin. The dough that did make it to the oven sat in a covered container on the clean counter and Harry wondered if the Americans had as much difficulty making the actual cookies as he had on this third batch.

A muted *crack* announced the arrival of someone behind him but Harry couldn't find it within himself to turn around.

With a rustle of plastic, Ginny set her bag and purse down on the table next to where Harry sat and took the seat next to him. "Hi, Harry," she said quietly. "Waiting up for someone?"

Harry let the spoon he had been using to eat the dough fall back into the bowl. "Just trying to decide if the Americans have got things backwards."

Ginny gave him a questioning glance so Harry continued. "I like the dough almost as much as the biscuits," he said casually, offering her a clean spoon.

Hesitating slightly, Ginny took a bite of dough. "Mmm," she said thickly. "That's actually quite good."

"So how was your date?" The question came out almost of its own accord but Harry found himself looking at Ginny with some sense of excitement to know the answer.

"It was all right," Ginny said, taking another scoop of dough, but not looking at Harry directly.

Again, unable to help himself, Harry pressed her for more information. "Was it Luke, or just the date itself?"

"No," Ginny said with a small smile as she waved the partially-cleaned spoon in front of her face. "It wasn't the date."

It took a second for her words to sink in and when they did, Harry had to repress the surge of hope that shot through him. "So...you, uh...didn't have a good time with Luke?"

"Let's not talk about him anymore," she said suddenly. "Let's talk about us."

Us? Harry repeated in his mind, then looking at Ginny, saw that she was now staring right into his eyes. "You've got some batter on your cheek," he said, brushing his right cheek with his thumb.

Ginny wiped her left cheek, a puzzled expression on her face as she looked at her still clean fingers.

"Not that cheek," he said, reaching out to wipe the smudge of batter with his thumb. As he touched her cheek, the dizziness returned. He licked the batter off of his thumb. Ginny's eyes went wide. Her hand flicked over to the mixing bowl, picking up a smear of batter, which she wiped onto her temple.

"How about now?" she purred.

Harry shrugged and went to wipe the smudge off of her temple when Ginny grabbed his hand. The dizziness surged again. The room felt considerably hotter. Harry left his hand in her firm grip and leaned forward, licking the batter from her forehead, then giving her temple a kiss.

"Better," he replied, licking his lips.

Ginny's hand returned to the bowl and another spot of dough appeared on her cheek. This time, Harry abandoned all pretence, gave into the buzzing in his head and leaned in to lick the dough off her face, crunching on a chocolate chip in the process.

Before Ginny could make another go at the bowl, Harry took a finger of batter and smeared it over his nose. "I think there might be some on my face, too."

The smile on Ginny's face grew and took on a feral quality. She leaned in close and whispered, "I'll just have to get it off, then."

Soon, the bowl was empty and the next thing Harry knew, they were in the living room, on the sofa, kissing like there was no tomorrow.

*

Molly and Arthur Apparated home an hour later, deciding to appear in the living room to not disturb anyone with the noise of their arrival. When Molly saw Harry and Ginny passed-out on the couch in a loose embrace, covered in chocolately kiss-marks and love bites, she was torn between wanting to hex her daughter for being so impertinent and the desire to ask them when the wedding date was.

When she saw Fred and George standing with an almost empty bag of chocolate chips, looking at each other in abject terror, she had a quickly repressed flash of admiration for her sons' ability to create happiness out of chaos.

"M – Mum. Dad," Fred stuttered. "We didn't expect you back so soon."

Molly adopted a pose that indicated her disapproval. It was best to start off cross, just in case there really was a reason to punish them.

"They weren't supposed to pass out, George," Fred said to his brother in a calmer voice than Molly had expected. Perhaps he knew she was bluffing.

"Yeah, well, Snape always did say that the poison was in the dose - I think we're going to have to either make the chips smaller or cut back on the strength of the vibrataclasho tincture."

"Vibratawhatsit?" asked Arthur sceptically.

"Good to know that it works, though," Fred answered, completely ignoring his father's question. "Some things you just don't want to test with your brother."

"Isn't that the truth, though?" agreed George. Turning to Arthur he pulled his back straight, as if he were reciting in class. "Vibrataclasho tincture does some interesting things - lowering inhibitions, for one thing. We've been dickering with it for a while now, trying to figure out the proper dose and all - it complements chocolate quite well, so we reckoned that the end product would have to be some sort of chocolate sweet," he said.

"We'll clean up, Mum, have a nice night – this is kind of our fault after all."

Yep, the twins were definitely in damage control, now. But for some reason, Molly didn't mind. "As long as you're sure they won't be in any danger from those chips," she reprimanded as strongly as she could manage.

"No problem," Fred assured, turning on his high-powered smile. "It was a derivative of an old love potion that Snape lectured on in our third year."

"Yeah," interjected George. "Even Neville could brew it right."

"You should know, Mum. It only works on people who already have an attraction for one another." Fred was rubbing his hands together conspiratorially as George was patting him on the back.

"Well," said Molly with another glance at the sleeping teens. "Let them be for now, then we'll check on them in the morning. I reckon they're going to have a headache the size of Hogwarts."

The twins turned towards the kitchen when Molly cleared her throat. "Oh, and boys? Not a word of this until they've sorted things out. Do you understand?"

Crestfallen expressions washed over them, but they nodded sullenly and made their way to start work on the dishes piled in the sink.

Arthur, who had let Molly work things out with the boys on her own, put his arms around his wife. "It's about time, isn't it?"

Finally letting a smile break across her face, Molly nodded. "Yes, Arthur. It is."

"I was about to ask Fred myself if there was something they could do to help them along a little," he continued.

"When did you figure it out?" Molly asked.

"Last year," Arthur replied. "At his birthday party. When Harry was giving Neville a wicked look as he was dancing with Ginny...." He shook his head at the memory. "How about you?"

Again, Molly smiled. "Since the day they met at King's Cross," she said. "I knew it would happen from that very day."

Fluffy Firsts: Tales of Harry and Ginny's First Kiss The Ambush

The Ambush

With a towel wrapped around his waist and his dirty clothes balled tightly in his fist, Harry Potter crept slowly from the sixth-year boys' showers towards his bed. The warmth from his ultra-hot shower was the only thing keeping him alive as the viciously cold air assaulted his bare chest and feet. He couldn't wait to slip into bed and let the extra heat soak into his sheets – otherwise, he'd be faced with the prospect of shivering for the first hour of the night while his bed lowered his body temperature. With all the magical solutions to problems, Harry still marvelled at how little things like this seemed to get lost in the cracks.

He padded past Neville's bed and was surprised to see his own bed hangings closed, a small light radiating from the crack between them. He was certain that he'd left them open after retrieving his towel. With a shrug, he pulled them apart and was shocked to find a pair of bright brown eyes staring back at him.

"Ginny!" Harry whispered harshly. "What the..." But he stopped speaking at the look on her face. Since the Department of Mysteries, Harry had taken to noticing Ginny more often than in years past. Part of that noticing was that she seemed to be either extremely confident of herself, or prone to constant second-guessing. It looked like tonight she was suffering from a bit of the latter.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed and made sure his towel wasn't revealing anything in the light of her wand. "What's the matter?"

She hesitated for a moment, looking mournfully towards another four-poster in the room and motioned for him to get fully into bed. He complied and she shut the hangings, casting a silencing spell as she did. "It's Dean," she said miserably. "We broke up this morning."

A light bulb turned on in Harry's head. He'd seen Dean flirting with Parvati in Charms earlier and wondered about that. Now he knew. Turning to face Ginny, he shivered in the cold air as the effects of his shower began to wane. "What happened?"

Ginny sniffled a little, staring at her hands, and then gave Harry a watery smile. "He said I wasn't committed to our relationship, and that it would never work with me...pining after another boy."

Harry stared back at Ginny, not understanding what she had said at all. "I'm sorry?"

"Dean dumped me because I have a thing for someone else, and didn't feel like snogging him every second of every day." She shifted on the bed, crossing her legs so that their white flesh peeked out of her nightdress.

Harry felt his eyes drawn to them, following their smooth lines up to....

"It's actually kind of a relief, to tell you the truth."

Harry's eyes shot back to hers. "A relief?"

"Yeah," she confirmed and shook her head so that her hair fell into her eyes. She used her hands to push it back and it caused her nightdress to tighten across her chest. Harry pulled more tightly on his towel, mentally checking to make sure it was still in place. "It's almost like someone is trying to tell me something."

She leaned forward and placed a hand on his bare shoulder. Harry swallowed. "Really?"

"Harry?" she asked, her face close to his now. "Can I be totally honest with you?"

Suddenly unable to speak, he nodded.

"You're the boy I'm infatuated with." She paused, letting that phrase linger between them, as if by doing so Harry would be able to comprehend it more than he did. Instead, it completely paralysed him. "I know I haven't been the most subtle about my feelings in the past, and I *really* tried to get over you in the past two years, but..."

"But what?" Harry whispered, almost afraid of the answer, but compelled to prompt her, nonetheless.

She smiled and leaned even closer, forcing Harry back to the headboard of his bed. "But I know that will never happen, Harry. You mean too much to me; I can't just let you go without...*trying*."

She suddenly withdrew, leaving her scent lingering around Harry's face. His skin burned where she had touched him and he began to understand how she felt. "W-What do you want to try?" he stammered.

Her smile returned and there was a definite twinkle in her eye. She pushed herself along the bed until she was sitting right next to him, facing the headboard. Then, she took her free hand and cupped his cheek. Harry swallowed again as she leaned forward once more, feeling his mouth go dry. "This," she murmured and placed her lips on his.

Warmth. Warm and soft was the only way to describe kissing Ginny Weasley. Her tears were long gone, but he couldn't help but taste their saltiness mingled with Ginny's indescribable flavour. When Ginny finally pulled back, Harry almost leapt at her to keep the contact. After a moment's hesitation, and the look of pleasure reflecting in her eyes, he did just that.

He stopped clutching his towel, and put his hands behind her head instead, burying his fingers deeply into her long, flowing hair. Ginny responded to that very well, and opened her mouth against his, moaning low into their kiss. Harry had a fleeting thought that he'd missed out on so much kissing simply because he hadn't seen what had been right in front of him all this time. He'd been too caught up with Cho....

After what seemed like an hour, Ginny broke away again, placing her hand on Harry's chest to keep him against the headboard. It was trembling, as if her hand was at war with her mind in breaking the kiss. Her wand had extinguished itself somehow, and they sat there in the dark, staring at the tiny points of light that reflected from their eyes. Finally, Ginny slipped out of the hangings, and with a lingering glance at him, walked away.

Harry lay awake for quite some time after that. He found his boxers and pyjamas, managing to put them on, despite the overpowering desire to take a very cold shower instead. With her scent in the air, her taste in his mouth, and the memory of her kiss emblazoned on his mind, Harry sank into bed. It was still warm from where she sat, and knowing that so much of Ginny was still around him gave him comfort. He snuggled into his covers, smiling at the thought of seeing her again in the morning, and dreamt about her eyes all night.

Fluffy Firsts: Tales of Harry and Ginny's First Kiss Through Sorrow's Arms

Through Sorrow's Arms

Wormtail's hand moved in a blur and slashed viciously at Remus while Ginny and Harry looked on, their feet affixed to the floor with a powerful Sticking Charm. Their wands lay against the far wall of the room where they'd landed after Peter had caught the two teens unaware with a Disarming Charm. Remus managed to rip Peter's wand from his hand after Wormtail had stuck Harry and Ginny to the floor, and the fight degenerated into a contest of strength. Remus dodged his former friend's assault as best he could, but without his wand, he was nearly defenceless against the magical silver hand. Finally, that hand connected and a bright red stain appeared on the werewolf's stomach. The wound quickly turned brown and began to smoke.

Sinking heavily to his knees, mouth stretched open in shock, Lupin stared in wonder at the gash as the silver ate into his flesh. Then he fell.

Eyes wide in triumph, Wormtail turned on Harry and Ginny, raising his hand to strike again.

"NO!" Harry screamed. Then stretching his fingers at the raised arm, he shouted, "*Diffindo!*" Peter's silver hand dropped to the floor with a loud clunk and spray of blood; he shrieked and ran out of the hall, clutching at the stump that had held his magical hand.

Harry, amazed that he had used wandless magic at all, extended his hand towards his wand and Summoned it to him. He cancelled the Sticking Charm, rushed over to Remus and pulled him close. "Remus," he sobbed, knowing from his third year that he was helpless to stop the poison from spreading.

"Harry," Remus strained to say, putting one hand on the boy's face. "James and Lily would be so proud of you..."

Tears clouded Harry's vision. "Don't leave me, Uncle Moony. Don't leave...."

"Always remember that," Remus continued as if he hadn't heard him. "You're their son." Then with a final breath, said, "Remember – you are a Potter." His head slumped and then his body relaxed in Harry's grasp.

Racking sobs enveloped Harry and he buried his face in the older man's robes. "You bastard! You can't leave me, too!" he screamed through his tears. Then in a strained whisper, "You said you wouldn't leave me."

Strong but small hands broke Harry free from his old professor and stood him on his feet. Those hands pulled him into a shaky hug and he buried his face once again, this time in tomato-red hair. They clung to each other, weeping and sniffing until they were led out of the room.

*

Back at Order headquarters, the mood was sombre. Mrs. Weasley milled around the kitchen, bringing hot cocoa and warm Butterbeer to anyone who would take it. Fred and George had disappeared, and Ron was holding himself in the corner of the living room, staring unseeingly at a sobbing and muttering Hermione.

Ginny had seen her share of death in the war, but of all the deaths, this one had been the hardest. Remus had been there for her when no one else would so much as look at her. The year after the Chamber of Secrets, Ginny returned to Hogwarts with dread in her heart at what her classmates would say. When her suspicions were realized and she had been ostracized by everyone, Remus Lupin had taken her under his wing and brought a measure of happiness back into her life. Now, he was gone – forever.

Her sorrow couldn't match Harry's, however. She *had* been watching him; even when she'd convinced everyone, including herself that she wasn't going to watch him any more. She simply couldn't help herself.

He'd bounced back fairly well from his fifth year, and was on the road to some semblance of teenaged normality when this ambush occurred at the end of his sixth year. Just when he'd found himself, the last link he had to his parents was ripped from him, and Ginny was certain that this would be the thing that made him crack. She was determined to make sure that it didn't.

Moving past her mother, Ginny looked out the kitchen window at a lone figure sitting on a rock. Harry was out on a cliff that overlooked the beach where the new Order Headquarters had been established. It was another spectacular sunrise on Maidencombe Beach. Purple hues highlighted the low clouds on the horizon casting an ethereal glow over the whitecaps. Ginny hardly recognized the fact that she'd been up all night, and that it was a new day. The coming sun didn't bring her any of the comfort that she normally associated with dawn.

Shoving her hands into her jeans pockets, Ginny walked slowly over to where he sat, letting the wind tear at her hair without really caring where it blew.

"Hey, Harry," she said tentatively, sitting on the sand next to him. He shrugged in reply, wiping surreptitiously at his eyes.

The wind whipped both of their hair straight now as they faced the sea. The force of it seemed to give them a purpose other than dwelling on their loss, and Ginny now understood why he was here.

She looked at him again, turning just enough to see his profile. He shivered and pulled his arms close to his body. Ginny knew he didn't want to talk, and so she kept silent. There would be time enough for talking when Harry was ready. For now, it was good enough that he wasn't alone.

They sat like that for a long time, until Ginny's eyes drooped and she curled into a ball on the sand, using his leg for a pillow. The sounds of the distant waves and blowing wind lulled her into a fitful rest.

*

Harry stared at the darkening sky, letting the breeze pull at his overly-long hair and push it off his head in muddled torrents. He sighed and felt a single tear drop from his eye and trace a solitary path down his cheek until the wind licked the wetness from his face.

Why do the people I love have to die? he rhetorically asked the gulls circling overhead. *Why me?*

Ginny woke up then, her eyes scrunched in confusion and then she smiled as they landed on him. She had always been there for him, to comfort his pain; but he didn't want comfort now. He wanted the pain to consume his heart so he didn't have to feel anymore. Bearing the weight of Remus' loss was too much for him after enduring so much loss already. But somewhere deep inside him, Harry knew that Ginny would never let him succumb to his selfish sorrow and that her devotion would keep him from giving up.

He had been thinking about her ever since she fell asleep next to him. It was as if he had awakened to a new awareness of who she was, focusing his attention not on the past but on the here and now. As if all the times they had spoken before, all the time at school and the Burrow had become a distant memory and the reality of *this* Ginny Weasley, the one who had been sleeping on his lap, hit Harry for the first time. She was there with him *by choice*, and she wasn't going to let him be alone. Part of Harry was grateful for her presence, and it was while he was pondering that feeling that she blinked her eyes open and he became aware of the fact that he'd been staring at her.

She sat up, rearranging herself until her arm slipped underneath his and her head was lying softly on his shoulder. A piece of red hair would occasionally flip up and tickle his nose, but he didn't dare move to push it down. The cool breeze left his exposed arm covered in goose-bumps, but the one held by Ginny was warm and comfortable.

It was a long while before she spoke. "He's not gone, you know? Not as long as we remember him."

Harry took a second to respond, not entirely sure that she had actually said anything or if he had only heard it in his mind. "It's like with Sirius," he managed. "Right now, I'm past feeling." Then with a sigh, he hung his head and Ginny's straightened next to him. "It's too soon."

"In second year," Ginny said slowly, not letting go of his arm, "Remus was the only one who could relate to what I'd gone through after the Chamber. His condition cut him off from the Wizarding world and that's exactly what had happened to me." She paused as if searching for the right words. "I was a cast-off; tainted by Voldemort and no one wanted to be around me."

"I'm sorry," said Harry miserably into his hands as a fresh wave of guilt coursed through him. "If I hadn't been such an idiot..."

"Shh," soothed Ginny. "You weren't an idiot.... Just a bit preoccupied is all."

He looked at her over his arms, that were now folded and propped on his knees, and saw the beginnings of a teasing grin on her face. Pleasantly irritated, he pushed at her with his elbow and tried to hide his smile. "I was stupid...*and* blind," he temporized. "You shouldn't have had to endure Tom in your head by yourself." He turned back to the waves and sighed. "No one should have to..."

Silence hung in the air as the sun dipped below the horizon behind them, turning the sky an electric blue. Now that his mind was back on his old professor, Harry couldn't find anything else to think about.

"He taught me how to perform the *Patronus* charm in third year," he said finally. "He told me more about my parents than anyone before or since and..." Harry's voice cracked and he fought a sudden surge of emotion that seemed to constrict his vocal cords. "He was the last of my parents' friends."

Against his will, a tear slipped from his closed eyes and he felt his body shake uncontrollably. Ginny's arms pulled him to her shoulder and he didn't hesitate to return the embrace as the dam finally burst and his emotions poured onto her through his tears.

*

When Harry recovered from his emotional bloodletting, a star-filled sky greeted him and Ginny had fallen asleep once more, this time in his arms. He reached around to his trouser pocket and grasped his wand. Remembering Professor McGonagall's lessons from the prior term, he conjured a pillow and blanket, placed them on the sand with some difficulty and eased Ginny off his shoulder. She murmured for a second and Harry took the liberty of pushing the hair out of her face.

"I wonder if you might need some rest as well, Harry," came a quiet voice from behind him that greatly startled him. Professor Dumbledore's normally twinkling eyes were nowhere to be seen. Instead, the powerful headmaster's solemn gaze caused Harry to blink in wonder. He hastily removed his hand from Ginny's face and turned to look at the black ocean.

"I'm fine," Harry lied, wanting Dumbledore to leave him be, to let him just stay here forever with Ginny.

The elderly wizard waved his wand and a leather bean-bag plopped onto the ground on Harry's other side. "You're quite lucky to have such a devoted friend," he said, motioning towards the sleeping girl as he sat.

Harry grunted, still a little embarrassed that he'd been caught touching Ginny's face.

With a sigh, Dumbledore continued. "You should go inside to get some rest. As yesterday was the end of term, you will be returning to your relatives tomorrow. I've made arrangements to have..."

"I don't think so," Harry said, cutting Dumbledore off. "I'm not going back there; not tomorrow, not ever again."

"Harry, I know you've had a difficult time losing Remus, but I must insist that you go back to live with your aunt. The protections..."

"I said *no*, Professor, and I mean it. I've had enough of them to last a lifetime and I'm not going to waste my time with them again." Harry's voice grew thick with emotion again but he fought it down. "It's too much to ask," he finished quietly.

Dumbledore seemed to hesitate and for a moment Harry thought he'd given in. But then his headmaster rose from the ground, dismissed the bean-bag and raised his wand. "I'm sorry, Harry, but this is for your own good..."

There was a crack and a flash of light as Dumbledore was thrown backwards onto the sand. Harry looked dumbfounded at his outstretched hand, and noticed the tip of his wand, which had been in his hand since he'd conjured the blanket and pillow for Ginny, was smoking.

Dumbledore got to his feet and brushed sand from his robes. "Harry?"

Remorse swept through him even as his will to stay on the beach increased. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I'm not going."

"And what will you do? Stay here forever?"

Harry shook his head in frustration. "I don't know. Maybe so. Maybe I'll waste away here and your precious hero won't save the world like he's supposed to. Maybe Voldemort will win and everyone I love will die anyway."

Dumbledore frowned. "Surely you don't hope for that, Harry."

"Maybe I don't," Harry retorted. "But I'm not going back to the Dursleys!"

Something stirred by Harry's feet and he realized that his shouting must have woken Ginny. "Harry, what's going on?" she asked with bleary eyes.

"Harry," Dumbledore pleaded, causing both of them to look in his direction. "It was never about you being a hero; it was about doing the right thing."

Dumbledore looked over Harry's shoulder and a snapping twig made Harry turn in that direction. Tonks was behind him, her wand held loosely at her side. "What's all the racket?"

In that second, another spell fired, this time from Dumbledore's wand. A beam of sparkling light flew towards him and stopped a foot from Harry's chest, before it ricocheted off into the night.

"Remarkable," Dumbledore said, clearly impressed, and he walked closer to Harry. "What nature of spell *did* you cast, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, annoyed that Dumbledore had been willing to take Harry by force to the Dursleys. "I dunno."

Dumbledore prodded the area where his spell had rebounded, revealing a shimmering blue sphere that completely surrounded Harry and Ginny.

"Well," Dumbledore said after making a few more probes with his wand, "it looks like you will stay here for a while regardless of what I intended. You've managed to cast some kind of powerful protective magic, Harry. No one will be forcing you to leave until you remove it."

Harry's mouth opened as he tried to reply, but nothing came out. Finally, he managed to ask, "How can I remove it when I don't even know how I cast it in the first place?"

With a grim smile, Dumbledore put his wand away. "That, Harry, is something you're going to have to work out on your own. For tonight, at least, I am honouring your request."

Dumbledore turned and walked towards the cottage, leaving Harry wondering how he could have cast a spell that could flummox the most powerful wizard in the world.

*

Ginny watched Harry carefully after Dumbledore left. Tonks was still there, looking oddly at both of them, so Ginny didn't pull Harry down to the sand for a thorough explanation like she wanted to. Instead, she stared at Harry as he slowly sat down and replaced his wand in his back pocket. Tonks and Ginny watched Harry's eyes droop and his body relax as thirty-six hours of wakefulness seemed to finally catch up with him. Soon, his head was in Ginny's lap, and he was fast asleep.

Smiling to herself as Harry's breathing slowed, Ginny was startled by a low whistle from her right. "That was some spell," whispered Tonks as she approached and conjured her own bean bag.

What's the big idea about the Dursleys, anyway?" Ginny asked. "I never understood why Harry has to be with those blasted Muggles. Why can't he just stay with us at the Burrow?"

Tonks shrugged. "That's something you're going to have to ask him," she said, nodding at Harry. "From what I understand, there's some kind of ancient magic that protects him there. Only Dumbledore really knows anything about it, but I reckon he's told Harry, too."

Ginny frowned. "I don't care what kind of protection he's got there. If it destroys his will to live, there's not much sense in keeping him alive, is there?"

The older woman chuckled softly. "You *do* have a thing for him, don't you? I've never even seen your mum act so defensive towards him. Merlin knows Hermione's mothered him enough, but you're the only one that goes beyond fussing and *understands* him, aren't you?"

Not grasping what Tonks was getting at, Ginny flushed with pleasure nonetheless and managed a weak nod. "There's a lot of people who love him."

"Not like you," Tonks countered. Ginny's face grew warmer. "Listen," Tonks continued, "you need to help him figure out how to deactivate this spell."

"How do I do that?" Ginny asked. "If Dumbledore can't undo it, how can I do anything for it?"

Tonks gave a maddeningly happy smile. "You'll figure it out. Maybe try to get Harry to talk about things. Get him to open up to you, and maybe the spell will go away all on its own."

Ginny shrugged and began to stroke Harry's fringe. "'Maybe' isn't very reassuring."

Tonks stood and, like Dumbledore, vanished the conjured beanbag. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

*

Ginny's mum visited a little while later, bringing a plate of roasted chicken legs and a flagon of pumpkin juice. It was Ginny's first personal encounter with the spell Harry had cast as she was forced to retrieve the food herself. There was a brief sensation of cold as her hands penetrated the shield, like when the shower is first turned on, and then it passed. Apparently, she was able to move in and out of the spell freely.

Two of the chicken legs fell victim to her hunger and as she went to pick-up a third, a movement in the air caught her attention. There was a swish of wind and she had to crane her neck to only catch a fleeting glimpse of a white blur before it vanished. All thoughts of food now thoroughly vanquished from her mind, she shifted Harry's head to a pillow and rotated her body in the direction the movement had glided in.

The next thing she knew, a pair of amber eyes were peering at her from across the spell's boundary. They bounced closer and the pure white body of Harry's owl appeared.

"Hedwig," Ginny scolded lightly. "You gave me such a fright."

The bird stared at Ginny for a moment and then hopped across a line in the sand that marked the shield's boundary. There was a small shimmer in the shield, but Hedwig was not propelled away like Professor Dumbledore had. Instead, she hopped over to where Ginny's two chicken bones were sitting in the sand and gave Ginny what she was certain was an agitated stare.

With her thumb and forefinger, Ginny snared one of the bones and dangled it in front of the owl. In a mark of restraint, Hedwig only glared harder, if it were possible, at Ginny. She flicked her wrist and the bone landed at Hedwig's feet. "There you go, girl."

The owl quickly grabbed the bone with her talons and began to strip away the remnants of meat and skin with her beak.

Ginny watched her for a while and when she was almost done, threw the other bone in her direction. Ginny grabbed another chicken leg and joined her feathered companion in their midnight meal. The third leg was now at Hedwig's feet, with a little more meat on it than the last two, when Ginny decided that there was more to Harry's pet than there seemed. "You understand him, don't you?" she asked with a glance at the subject in question to make sure he was still asleep.

Hedwig gave a contented hoot and began to preen her wings.

Sitting back on her elbows, Ginny sighed. "How am I supposed to help him deactivate this shield? I mean, it's not like I've had a whole lot of success with getting him to notice *me*, now have I?"

Hedwig chose that moment to tuck her head under her wing.

"Oh, fine," Ginny whispered. "See if I let you have any more of my chicken bones, then."

Tired and quite full, Ginny sipped at a cup of pumpkin juice before she, too, fell fast asleep.

*

A thin light filtered through Harry's eyelids and he willed his new awareness of it to go away. He'd not slept nearly enough to make up for his missed allotment in the last few days. Then, as he thought about *why* he'd not been sleeping, the weight of Remus' loss pressed heavily into him once more.

Something heavy was on his legs and when he shifted to look at it, he was reminded of his companion in grief. Ginny's legs were entwined with his, as she lay sprawled face-down on a tan pillow.

The sky was grey and stormy, as it had been for the past three days, and Harry's stomach groaned as he regarded it with detached interest. A

nearby basket provided him with some cold chicken and pumpkin juice.

Soon, his motions stirred Ginny and he caught her eye as he wiped his hands on his filthy shirt.

"Morning," Ginny offered through a yawn.

Harry grunted; his self-loathing reaching new heights. "You don't have to stay out here, you know?"

"And why shouldn't I?"

"Well," Harry replied, scratching his head and getting a face full of his own scent. "I stink, for one thing."

To his surprise, she smiled. "Me, too. Besides, you need to be with someone at a time like this."

"Well, what if I don't *want* anyone around?"

She paused in the action of smoothing out her hair and gave him a stern look. "Don't get shirty with me, Harry. I'm here to *help*, not to fight with you. If you're going to be that way about it, then I may as well leave you to it."

He watched her stand, brush sand off her jeans and turn to leave before he realised what was happening. "Wait!" he cried. "Don't... don't go."

When she looked at him again, it was with one raised brow and crossed arms.

"I...uh, would really like you to stay."

She didn't make a move to sit and Harry began to fidget. He *did* want her to stay, but he wasn't going to *beg* her to do it.

"I have a better idea," she said. "What if we move this party into the cabin? I have it on good authority that the den is unoccupied and it'd be a great place for us to stay while you sort things out."

Harry considered her idea and when his bladder reminded him that it had been many hours since he'd last emptied it, he readily agreed. "Sounds good. First, I need to go to the loo."

*

The den was much more comfortable than the sandy cliff, with its squashy sofa and bright fire, but he felt unaccountably nervous when Mrs. Weasley kept offering to cook for him.

"Snap?" Ginny asked, breaking through his thoughts. She was holding out a stack of cards and began to shuffle them on the small table in front of the sofa.

Not really caring one way or the other, Harry nodded and let her deal. After about ten minutes, the cards were starting to shake in their hands and Harry was certain his were going to explode. A popping flash ignited on his right and Ginny's face was covered in soot.

The sight of her bright red hair and coal-black skin made her look like a match on fire. It was such an amusing sight, he laughed out loud.

Soon, Ginny joined in his laughter as she wiped the soot from her face and they dealt out another hand.

"So," she began and drew another card from the deck. "You going to the formal next year?"

Just before the end of year exams, and Ginny's O.W.L.s, Dumbledore had announced that Hogwarts would be having a formal dance the following year to, as he put it, "give reason for the witches to come back and the wizards to think about something other than food."

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. I guess it depends on if I can find someone to go with."

"There's always Susan..."

"Bones?" Harry finished incredulously. "Not a chance. She's..." he trailed off. He considered telling Ginny about Susan's annoying habit of staring at Harry's scar every time they were together and the star-struck look on her face that made it impossible to have any kind of conversation with her, but he thought better of it.

Ginny didn't let him off so easy, however. "What?"

"Nothing," Harry answered and when he saw her jaw set in determination to get his answer, he elaborated. "It's just that I've got this whole Voldemort thing hanging over my head. Let's say, just for the sake of argument, that I like a certain girl, who's been a good friend to me, and I'd like to maybe spend more time with her..."

"Who?" Ginny blurted.

"Never mind." Harry let out a breath and stared at the crackling fire, noticing how the Shield Charm distorted the flames. "Would it be fair to her to ask her out? Wouldn't it be better if I protected her by just leaving her alone, to keep her away from Voldemort's notice?"

There was a moment of emptiness that lingered along with his question. When the silence was broken, it was to Ginny's casual laughter. He jerked his eyes to her face.

"Oh, Harry..." she began. "Have you given up, then? Because that's exactly what Voldemort wants, you know. He wants you to be miserable, just like he is." She shifted on the sofa and locked her brown eyes onto him so that he couldn't turn away if he wanted to. "I know how wretched he is; how much he hates what he's become and how much he wants everyone to be just as depressed and dejected."

Harry wanted to believe her. For just a second, he wanted to just jump off the cliff and take a chance with someone. And then Remus and Sirius appeared in his mind and he lost his nerve.

"If you let Voldemort dictate how you live your life, Harry," she continued earnestly, "then he wins and everyone you love, whether you tell them or not, loses. Besides, we're all on his hit-list, anyway. Sooner or later, he's going to come after everyone that opposes him, and I *assume* you're not falling for Pansy Parkinson."

Unable to help it, Harry let out a little laugh. "Well, even if I liked someone, she'd have to put up with me being a thick-headed git."

Ginny laughed, too. "If she's worth your time, then she'll know, Harry."

Harry chuckled again, this time feeling the humour and the irony. "Oh, she knows all right," he said pulling a hand roughly through his hair. "She knows me better than most anyone...." He stopped suddenly before he let something substantial slip.

"So you do like someone!" Ginny declared triumphantly. "Who is it? Does she know you better than me?"

"No," he said. "Not *more* than you." As soon as he'd emphasized that word however, he knew he'd made a mistake.

"What?" she said softly. "Speak plainly – riddles are making my head hurt right now."

Harry abruptly stood, startling Ginny. He placed his cards on the table, walked over to the grate, and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I can't tell you, Ginny. I told you – if word got out, she'd go to the top of Voldemort's hit list."

"That means she's either part of a family that's fighting against him or...a member of the Order." Her eyes went wide and she stood. "You fancy *Tonks*?"

His face twisted in disgust. "*No!*" he said forcefully before chuckling. "Too old and too... eccentric for me. She had Remus pegged, I think."

She seemed relieved but she wasn't finished yet. "So she's your age, then?"

Not knowing why, he shook his head, seemingly compelled to answer. "Nah, younger."

"So," she said, ticking off a mental checklist. "It's got to be someone in my class unless you're really robbing the cradle, someone in a family fighting against Voldemort." Then confusion masked her face. "But, Harry... You said she knew you well and none of the girls in my class know you at all..." Her voice trailed off and her eyes flew open. She backed away from Harry, her hand clutching at her chest.

Harry continued to stare at her, trying to tell her without words how he felt, to convey them without having to force them out his mouth. The emotions were still too raw and the threat of losing someone that got close to him was too real for him to confess the truth, so he willed her to understand.

A pale, freckled hand flew to an open mouth. Ginny's breathing increased and she started to shake. "Harry?" she squeaked. "You're having me on, aren't you?" Her legs found the front of the sofa and she stumbled back into her seat.

He walked over to her and knelt at her feet, never breaking eye contact. Slowly, his head shook, answering her question as best he could. Her face lit up like a five-year-old's on Christmas morning.

"It's me?"

He nodded, dipping his head twice.

Then before he could blink, her arms were around his neck and they tumbled over onto the rug. Suddenly confused, he pushed her away and sat up. "What about you?" he asked as she sat next to him. "I thought you were with Dean?"

Pulling her hands free of his grasp, she whacked him hard on both shoulders. "You pillock! I broke up with him months ago!" Then, hugging him tightly again, she whispered into his neck, "It was always you, Harry."

Ginny smiled and kissed him. A herd of Erumpents could have been driven through the room and neither of them would have noticed. "Does that mean you'll go to the Dursleys'?" she asked.

"No," he said quickly, "but I might be talked into going home to the Burrow."

There was a popping noise and a sound like an electric motor winding down. When Harry looked at the fire again, he realised that the shield charm had ended itself.

Ginny smiled again as she placed her lips on his. "I think I can live with that. But first," she said, sniffing the air around him and wrinkling her nose in an adorable fashion, "*you* need to have a shower."