

Coming of Age 1: Life As A Weasley

Chapter One – Life as a Weasley

Sunlight reflected off the Chudley Cannons posters hung haphazardly on the walls of Ron's bedroom, creating an ethereal orange glow. Despite the unnatural brightness, Ron remained asleep. In fact, he was intent on sleeping until the summer holidays were over, but even the best laid plans never survive contact with the enemy. In Ron's case, the enemy was his mother's list of chores.

"Ron, wake up," came a female voice through Ron's cloud of sleep. The only reaction it generated was to cause an arm to clamp more tightly on the pillow over his head.

"Get up, you great git!" The voice wasn't going away, and somewhere inside Ron's sleep-addled brain, he realized that it wasn't his mum. That meant it must have been the only other female in the house.

"G'roff, Ginny," he mumbled through the pillow. "Nee' mur slee."

"No, Ron. You have to get up now. Mum's been yelling for you for thirty minutes and if she has to come up here, she said she would owl Hermione and tell her you can't get any more letters from her for the rest of the summer."

Hermione? *Hermione!* Ron shot out of his bed, sheets and bedding sprawled onto the floor. "I'm up, I'm up!" he shouted groggily.

Ginny grinned. "Good. Now get downstairs and get something to eat. We've got loads of work to do before Harry gets here." With that, she threw a shirt at him.

It was the same shirt he had worn yesterday. He gave it a test sniff, and deciding that it wasn't too bad, shoved it over his head and onto his torso. "That's just wrong, you know that," she said.

He ignored her and looked at her pleadingly. "Ginny, I need your help. Hermione wrote me last night and I've got no idea what to do about it. She's absolutely nutters!"

Ginny raised her hands in resignation. "Fine, but I'll only help you *after* we've done our chores."

Harry was coming over tonight. They had just received word from Dumbledore the night before and his mum had flown into a tizzy over the state of the house. She had made them promise to clean the house and Ron was not looking forward to it.

"Thanks, Gin."

He ran a hand through his hair and judged it satisfactory for doing chores. Then he grabbed a pair of jeans and thrust them on before lazily shuffling downstairs to eat with his sister.

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Once breakfast was over, Ron's mum had them clear the table and wash the dishes as their first chore of the day. Ron was already bemoaning his fate. Even without the looming threat of replying to Hermione's letter, he had planned on a lazy afternoon of flying his broom around in the back paddock and catching up on his *Marvin the Mad Muggle* comics.

As soon as they had the last dish put back, his mum appeared in front of them and handed them each a piece of parchment. "Now I want these done first, so that even if you slack off, the most important things will be done." She gestured at the top half of the list, which consisted of several jobs Ron hated the most.

"Aw, Mum! Why do we have to degnome the garden *again*? We just did it two weeks ago." Ron knew his mum didn't react well to whining, but every now and then it got him out of doing a chore or two.

"No moaning about chores, young man." Apparently it wasn't going to work today. "You've been lolling about all summer, so I won't hear another word. Besides, Harry's your friend and you've got to set a good example."

"Mum," he said exasperatedly, "Harry doesn't care how the house looks."

That must have been the wrong thing to say, because she shouted, "Well, I do, Ronald. And so should you!"

Dejectedly, Ron set about doing his chores. He studiously avoided his mother for the rest of the morning, which wasn't difficult because she was busy baking biscuits, pies and other confections. It amazed him how happy she was when cooking. Perhaps it was her way to bleed off stress.

He cleaned and dusted the bookshelves in the living room while Ginny folded and put away the laundry. Even when he had been cleaning Grimmauld Place last year, he had never seen as much dust. No wonder, he never saw anyone reading the books. Hermione would be livid if she knew that there were books that had never been cracked open.

Which reminded him of the pickle he was in with her. Since the beginning of the holidays, Ron had been trading owls with her and they quickly escalated into a sparring match. Ron had been at a disadvantage from the beginning because he couldn't see her get riled up, and that was half the fun. The other factor was that the written word was Hermione's element. He was like a fish out of water, while she swam laps around him with words like 'incorrigible' and 'felicitous'. How can you argue with someone when you don't even understand what she's saying?

That wasn't even the real problem. Her latest letter had all but told him she was fed up with their arguments and refused to send him any more owls unless he apologized and stopped arguing with her. At first, Ron was simply angrier with her, and hastily wrote out a strongly worded reply that was sure to get her goat. That was until he realized exactly what she said. "I've had enough, Ron. There will be nothing left of our friendship if these petty arguments aren't resolved."

It terrified him to think that she would actually call off their friendship. So for the next three hours, Ron desperately tried to think of something to fix the problem. He was at a loss as to what to do and by then, it was past midnight so he wouldn't be able to find anyone awake who would help him.

With a dejected sigh, he renewed his efforts to move a stack of old boxes from a corner in the living room to the attic. The sooner he was done with his chores, the sooner he could enlist Ginny's help in salvaging his friendship with Hermione.

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Finally finished with their individual chores, Ron and Ginny trudged out into the garden and began searching for gnomes. Because they had just recently been removed, the gnomes were difficult to spot. Eventually, they found two crouching behind a bush in the far corner of the garden, giggling and pointing at the approaching siblings. With only a look and a nod, Ginny took one side of the bush and Ron the other. Before they knew what happened, the unsuspecting gnomes went flying over the hedge marking the property line with surprising speed.

"That was pathetic, Ron. I beat your throw by at least ten feet," Ginny remarked. Ron didn't reply, but instead continued his hunt for more gnomes.

After a few minutes of silent working without another sighting, Ron was about to give up and move back to the house. Ginny called to him and he reluctantly turned back away from the Burrow. They met by the hedge where there was a small iron bench.

She sat down and motioned for him to join her. "Why don't we get this out in the open now, Ron? You aren't much help to me moping around the garden like that. There were three gnomes by the gate there," she said, pointing to the area. "You didn't even see them."

"Yeah," he answered lamely.

"So...are you going to tell me what the problem with Hermione is?"

Ron raised his head a little and looked up at his sister. "She's gone 'round the bend, Ginny, I swear." Ginny kept a blank expression on her face and motioned for him to continue.

"Well, we've been owling each other a bit over the summer, and it's all been normal until last night. She sends this letter and says things like, 'I can't go on like this' and 'If you can't apologize, I can't be your friend anymore.' What am I going to do?" he whined.

Ginny patted him on the back and let out her breath. "Ron, look at me."

He turned back to look at her and noticed she was trying to suppress a grin. "It's not funny, Ginny!"

"I know," she said, letting the smile form and then forcing her face back to neutrality. "What do you want from Hermione?"

"What do you mean, 'What do I want?' I don't want to lose her as a friend."

"I mean, what do you want her to do? Do you want her to keep arguing with you like nothing happened, or do you want the friendship to change?"

Ron considered this for a moment and then said, "I only argue with her because I can't think of anything else to say sometimes. At least when we argue, I know she's paying attention to me."

"Hm," Ginny sounded noncommittally. "So you argue with her to get her attention, but you don't know what to do to get her attention without arguing."

"I guess," he shrugged. "I just don't want to lose her friendship."

"Do you want me to tell you what to do?"

Ron whipped his head around to look at her. "Please? I'll do anything."

"Oh, Ron. It's too simple, but I'm afraid I can't be the one to tell you. Maybe Harry can help." Ginny leaned back and began absently picking at the loose paint covering the bench.

"Harry? He can't even go on one date without getting yelled at," Ron said knowingly. "Besides, I don't think he would understand."

"Understand that you like Hermione as more than a friend and can't work out how to tell her?" She cocked her eyebrows at him as she said this, as if daring him to refute her.

Ron thought fast. He couldn't afford to let anything loose now, so he thought of something to distract her. "Well, you're one to talk. What about you and Harry?" She immediately blushed and looked away, unable to keep eye contact. Taking this as a good sign, Ron pressed on. "How come you won't tell him how you feel?"

Turning back to look at him, she said, "I told you, Ron, I gave up on him ages ago." Ginny sounded convincing, but her eyes didn't quite meet Ron's.

"Whatever, Ginny. You can fool some people, but you can't fool me." He smirked in triumph.

"Listen, Ron. Harry doesn't think about me other than as your sister. How can I just walk up to him and confess my undying love?" she said with a hint of sarcasm.

"Well, maybe it's time to change how he sees you," Ron said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" she answered with a frightened look.

"Do you like Harry that way?" he asked pointedly.

Ginny's eyes darted around the yard, looking anywhere but Ron's face. "Yes," she said reluctantly.

"Then leave it up to me."

"Oh no you don't--" she said, grabbing his arms. "--I don't need you doing something stupid, all right? You'd probably set off a special Filibuster's Firework with 'Ginny Loves Harry' written in it. No thanks, but I've made enough of a fool out of myself already."

Ron laughed a little at her outburst, then said, "Okay, okay. I'll let you handle it, but you've got to do something about it this year. He probably thinks you've lost interest in him."

A look of panic flashed across her face. "Do you think so?"

Ron rubbed his chin in thought. "He hasn't said anything to me, but that's the impression that I got on the train home."

Ginny looked stricken, then crumpled in front of his eyes. "It doesn't matter, anyway. Why would I want to tell him how I feel if he isn't interested?"

"Ginny?" She looked up at him through her hair. "One thing I know for sure is that you deserve the best and I can't think of anyone better for you than Harry."

She threw herself onto Ron, grabbing him up in a huge hug. "Thank you, Ron," she whispered into his shoulder. "Thank you for helping me to not give up hope."

Ron chuckled and said, "Besides, a guy's got to look out for his best mate."

"Oh really?" she said, pulling back from the hug. "And I suppose you've been planning our happy love life for the past four years, then?"

"I'm not that thick," said Ron with mock solemnity. "You've been doing just fine until now."

Ginny guffawed and then with a glint in her eye, said, "So what are we going to do about you and Miss Granger?"

"I...er...was hoping you would forget about that," came his sheepish reply.

"Well, I know that you want more than a friendship with Hermione."

Putting on a shocked face again, Ron replied, "What are you talking about?"

"Don't be stupid, Ron. You fancy her!"

"What do you mean? I don't...She can't...It's not like that!" He finished inelegantly.

"Sure, Ron. When you're ready to face facts, I'll be sure to help you out. Until then, I've got to go finish an essay for Herbology." With that, she wiped her hands on her apron and walked purposefully back to the Burrow without a second glance back at him.

"Well, she was a load of help..." he muttered to himself as he chased down another gnome.

There was nothing more to it. He would simply have to get Harry to help him figure Hermione out. Ron was skeptical that his best friend would be able to help him out, but he didn't have much choice. Unless he wanted to face the teasing of the twins or a lecture-prone dad, it would have to be Harry.

Throwing the last of the gnomes into the field over the fence, Ron resolved to get Harry to help him out as soon as possible tonight. Hopefully he would have time before dinner.

Coming of Age 2: Life With the Weasleys

Chapter Two – Life with the Weasleys

Harry shook his arms in an effort to keep the blood pumping through his veins. He stretched his back and let out the air in his lungs with a whoosh. Life at the Dursleys was as terrible as ever, but at least he was alive.

He chuckled to himself, thinking of the numerous times that Voldemort had tried to kill him and failed. Had he been a less serious person, Harry might have thought himself invincible. But the circumstances surrounding each encounter with the Dark Lord had made an indelible impression on his mind. Harry knew he was mortal and very capable of being killed.

So he resigned himself to his fate, performing the mind-numbing chores that his uncle thought would somehow wheedle out the magic from his blood. Aunt Petunia was no less strict with him, and took extra pleasure in making him cook the meals that he couldn't eat.

As bad as living with the Dursleys was, if Harry did something stupid now, it would ruin his only chance at getting revenge on the one creature that had taken away so many of the people he loved. Voldemort killed his parents and, through Bellatrix Lestrange, his godfather, Sirius Black. More importantly, the looming threat of Voldemort kept Harry from his friends and the Weasleys, the only family Harry had ever known. So it was with much reservation that Harry stayed at Privet Drive long after he would have normally gone mad. This was why he was sitting in his room, staring absently out the window.

Ron, Hermione and, to his pleasant shock, Ginny had all been diligent in sending letters his way throughout the summer. Last night, he stayed awake purposefully so he could greet several owls that arrived just after midnight. Normally, he would just toss and turn in his bed, never really sleeping, but not fully awake. Dreams would try to penetrate his mind, but it seemed that he could never get deep enough into unconsciousness to allow them to get a foothold in his brain. Last night, however, he didn't even try to drift into pseudo-sleep because he knew his friends would be there for him and wouldn't let his birthday pass without notice.

Harry wasn't disappointed, either. A box of every type of Honeydukes' sweets from Ron, two books on magical defense from Hermione, a set of dragonhide boots from the Weasley twins, Fred and George, an enchanted fireproof cloak from Hagrid, and an empty photo album from Ginny.

Each gift came with a card wishing him well and promising that the end of the holidays was coming soon. Mingled with the happiness of having good friends to share his birthday with, Harry couldn't help but feel frustrated knowing that everyone recognized his pain at being cooped up with the Dursleys, but they were kept from doing anything about it.

Harry knew he should really go downstairs to grab some lunch, but it was too much effort for just a piece of cheese and slice of bread. It would do to wait until he left Little Whinging before he worried about things like eating and sleeping properly. He had survived the Dursleys before; he would be able to survive them again.

The distant hooting of an owl broke into Harry's thoughts. He glanced at Hedwig's cage to find her happily asleep, with her head tucked under one wing. Looking outside, he saw a large tawny owl flying right for his bedroom. It flew in gracefully through an open window and landed on the footboard of his bed. Harry removed the attached scroll and the bird immediately flew away without as much as a blink.

Unrolling the parchment, Harry saw that the message was written in familiar dark green ink.

Harry,

I hope this letter finds you well and that your situation is tolerable. Recent events have convinced me that it would be safe for you to leave your relatives for the remainder of the summer. I have arranged for you to travel to the Weasleys' this evening. Please be prepared to leave at six o'clock promptly. I have already informed your aunt and uncle, so you won't need to bother telling them.

Yours,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Just as he finished reading the letter, a shriek from his aunt, followed by the deep bellowing voice of his uncle, filtered from downstairs. Not a full minute later, his bedroom door burst open and its frame was filled with the imposing sight of his Uncle Vernon.

"How many times have I told you to keep those ruddy birds away from us?" Uncle Vernon's round, fleshy face was already purple, indicating that he had built up a head of steam during his short climb upstairs. In his hands was a crumpled-up piece of parchment, whose delivery had obviously sparked this most recent tirade.

Trying to be calm and reasonable, Harry said, "I can't control them, Uncle Vernon. They just deliver the mail."

"Tell those...those...*people* to use the post like normal folks. I'm tired of all the unnaturalness that you bring around here." Uncle Vernon's face twisted in anger and disgust. He pointed a beefy finger at Harry and finished, "Get your things packed and leave as soon as your...*friends* get here." He turned to walk out, and then over his shoulder said, "We're going out and won't be back until after you've left." With that, he strode out the door and let it slam behind him.

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At six o'clock, Harry was shocked to see Professor Dumbledore himself Apparate into the living room. "Good evening, Harry," the venerable wizard greeted him. His voice was pleasant and he watched Harry carefully, as if he were expecting Harry to bolt from the room.

"Hello, Professor," Harry answered. He was quite nervous to see his headmaster after destroying Dumbledore's office almost two months ago.

"Normally, I wouldn't have been the one to escort you to the Burrow, but my schedule just became free," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. Something about the old wizard offered Harry a measure of assurance. He held up a crystal ball and asked, "Shall we go then?"

"I'm all packed," said Harry as he stood up to place his finger on the Portkey in Dumbledore's hand. In his other hand, he held onto his trunk and owl cage firmly, having sent Hedwig to fly herself there.

"One, two, three..." Harry felt the familiar tug on his navel and they were pulled from Little Whinging in a blur.

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Upon arriving at the Burrow, Harry's legs buckled underneath him and he collided with something on his left. Instead of breaking his fall, however, he fell on top of it. It wasn't until the thing started to push him off that he realized it was a person.

"Geroff, Harry!" came the sound of the youngest Weasley.

He looked at her properly now. Since their faces were only a couple of inches apart, it wasn't too hard to do. "Sorry, Ginny," he muttered, making a renewed effort to regain his footing. Finally righting himself, he glanced at Dumbledore and was rewarded with a wink and, though he could barely discern it from the odd tilt to his long beard, a smile.

He moved to help Ginny up and had his hand brushed away impatiently. "I can do it myself, Harry." She got up but almost fell into him instead. Harry grabbed her waist to steady her and Dumbledore, who was surveying the scene from over Ginny's shoulder, loudly cleared his throat. Harry quickly removed his hands and felt his face burn.

Since it was his ungraceful landing that had knocked her down in the first place, Harry made certain that she was all right. She seemed shorter than the last time he saw her, but he reasoned that it might be because he had grown so much taller since the end of June. Lack of proper nourishment hadn't kept his body from shooting up nearly six inches in that time. "Are you all right?" he asked with genuine concern. "I'm not the best at using Portkeys."

"I'm fine, Harry," Ginny said softly. She hadn't taken her eyes off Harry after they stood up and hadn't made any move to step away.

Satisfied that Ginny was all settled, Harry glanced around the room. It was much the same as he remembered, except that there were some new pictures of the various family members hanging on the multicolored walls. One peculiar thing that he noticed was that none of the pictures seemed to have Percy in them.

"Where did all the pictures of Percy go?" he asked Ginny. She still hadn't moved an inch.

"Wha—oh," she said, shaking her head as if to clear her thoughts. Her eyes clouded over and her lips pressed into a thin line. "Well, he's in the pictures, but it seems that even his photographic self doesn't want anything to do with the family."

"Yeah, well that git's lucky he hasn't come back," a new voice said. "He's in for a bruising if he shows up here expecting us to be all chummy."

Ron descended the stairs and Harry jumped back a little from Ginny, letting his arms drop to his sides.

"I believe that your brother is currently trying to find a sense of direction in his life. I wouldn't be too hard on him just yet." Professor Dumbledore was still in the corner of the room, eyes twinkling merrily in Harry and Ginny's direction.

"Sorry, Professor, I didn't see you there," said Ron who ducked his head at this sudden realization. He walked up to Harry and said with a backhanded whisper, "But I still think he's a git."

He then clapped Harry on the back and said, "Good to see you, mate!"

"I'm glad to finally be here," Harry replied, with a glance at Ginny.

"Mum said dinner would be ready in a bit. Want to walk around outside until it's done?" Ron grabbed Harry's arm and steered him to the back garden. He seemed to be a little tense and nervous about something.

"Thanks for getting me here, Professor. Bye, Ginny," Harry called over his shoulder on the way out the door.

Once outside the house, Harry followed Ron up a small hill, towards a tree. "What's the matter, Ron?" Harry asked.

"It's Hermione. She's driving me nuts and I don't know what to do about it." Ron looked on the verge of a breakdown.

"Ease up, Ron," Harry said, slowing down as they reached the tree. "What's this about Hermione?"

They sat down facing the Burrow. Ron grabbed a large blade of grass and began chewing on it nervously. "She's gone barmy, Harry. I swear she does it on purpose, too. I can't take much more of this." He hung his head dejectedly between his knees.

"She does what on purpose? You're going to have to tell me something I can use, or I can't help you."

Ron lifted his head and sent Harry an apprehensive look. "We're still best mates, right?" Harry nodded. "If something were to happen between me and Hermione, that wouldn't change, right?"

Harry laughed to himself. So that was what this was all about. Harry recalled all the little things that Ron and Hermione had done to show their feelings to one another without actually showing them. Like the row after the Yule Ball, or the kiss Hermione had given him before his first Quidditch match. He wasn't particularly observant, but even Harry had been able to pick up on certain things. "Listen, Ron. You like Hermione, right?"

"Of course I do! She's one of my best friends."

Harry shook his head, "No, Ron. That's not what I'm talking about and you know it. Do you *like* her?"

Ron muttered something incoherent.

"Speak up, I couldn't hear you."

He lifted his head again to look Harry in the eye. "I said *yes*, all right? I like Hermione and I swear if something doesn't happen soon, I'm checking into the mental ward at St. Mungo's right away."

"Okay, so you like Hermione and she likes you. What's the problem?" asked Harry with a perplexed look.

"I never said she likes me...and *that's* the problem," he replied, ripping a handful of grass from the ground. "I've tried everything I could to get her to say it, but she acts like she doesn't know what I'm talking about."

Harry considered his friend's dilemma for a moment and then said, "Ron, Hermione isn't going to be the one to say anything. You've got to be the one to do it."

Ron jerked his head up, "Are you nuts? I'm not telling her about my...my...*feelings*!"

Harry chuckled out loud this time. "Look, Ron. Hermione's the smartest witch of her age, right?" Ron nodded sullenly. "She's bound to have figured out what you're trying to get her to say and she's obviously not going to do it. So that means *you* have to be the one to start things. Otherwise, you're just going to keep dancing around each other until one of you gets sick of it."

It was at this moment that Harry realized with a jolt that *he* was giving advice on relationships. Mr. 'I've only had one date in my whole life' was handing out tips about girls. Talk about irony.

But he also realized that it wasn't experience that made his advice worthwhile. He had lived a life almost devoid of any kind of love and was able to recognize it when offered. It was clear that Hermione and Ron had feelings for one another and they both dealt with those feelings as if they were an invading force. They denied their existence, pretended they were something else, and forcefully lashed out at the very thing that caused the feelings to be there in the first place - each other. It didn't take an expert on romance to figure that out.

Ron cleared his throat and picked nervously at the blades of grass stuck to his hands. "Are you saying that she might stop being friends with me?"

"No, Ron, but she might find someone else to be with that makes her happy that way."

The colors on Ron's face changed from white to red and then back to white in the blink of an eye. He looked up at Harry and gave him a frantic, pleading, look. "Please, Harry, I've got to do something!"

"You've got to tell her how you feel or you're going to lose her," Harry replied unflinchingly.

"But what if she doesn't feel the same way? I can't handle rejection." He looked pitiful, but Harry was convinced this was the best thing.

"Are you a Gryffindor or not?" It was cliché, but Harry knew it would appeal to Ron's sense of House pride. "It's probably the only thing holding her back, mate. Just tell her and get it over with. I promise it'll work itself out."

Harry clapped his friend on the shoulder and got up to make his way back to the Burrow. He figured Ron would need some time to think about their conversation. Besides, it was probably time for dinner and he was ready to start eating properly again.

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Dinner was a raucous affair. Mrs. Weasley seemed to need an excuse to make a lot of food and, so that it wouldn't go to waste, had invited Bill and Charlie to eat with them. She wanted Harry's first day away from the Dursleys to be relaxing and didn't want the twins to cause a scene, so she didn't invite Fred and George. The twins were miffed at not being asked but came anyway.

Harry noted that five separate conversations were taking place at the same time around the table and tried unsuccessfully to hear them all at once.

Instead, he settled on one at a time.

"Did you hear about the witch in Nottingham that enchanted a set of golf clubs?" said Mr. Weasley to no one in particular.

"Norbert's about full grown now," remarked Charlie, who was filling in Ginny on all the happenings in his dragon camp.

Fred and George were trying to convince Bill that investing in their joke shop would be wise. "It's a sure thing, Bill. We've got enough capital to see us through the end of the year, but with a little help, we could open another shop in Hogsmeade and double our profits!"

Mrs. Weasley interrupted their sales pitch and said, "Boys, I'm sure Bill has better things to do with his money." Then under her breath, but loud enough for Harry and Bill to hear, "Like get married and give me some grandchildren."

"Mum, Fleur and I aren't ready to get married yet. And don't go putting ideas in her head, all right?"

"You and Fleur?" Harry asked. "So the English lessons paid off?"

"Yeah," Bill said with a chuckle. "I suppose so." He ruffled Harry's hair and said, "If it was up to me, no one in this house would know. It's bad enough to hear about how I'm wasting my life and how I'd be better off married to a nice witch with ten kids running around me." With a sigh, he got up with his plate to go to the kitchen.

"Oh, Bill?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Be a dear and fetch Ron from the garden?"

"I'm here, Mum," said Ron, upon entering the back door. "I'll just go wash up." He headed for the stairs to climb up to the bathroom.

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After Harry had satisfied his hunger with three helpings of everything on the table, much to Mrs. Weasley's delight, he decided that Ron had no plans on coming down to eat. He grabbed his plate and made to get up when he noticed that Ginny had put her napkin down and had crossed her knife and fork on her own plate. "Can I take your dishes, too, Ginny?"

She seemed a bit surprised by his offer, but said, "All right." She handed her plate over to him and went upstairs. After putting their plates in the sink, Harry went to find out what was going on with Ron.

Arriving on the top landing, he literally bumped into Ginny, who was just about to knock on Ron's door. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Harry! You scared me," she said with a scowl.

Motioning towards the door, he asked, "Are you here to see what's wrong with Ron?"

She flashed Harry a confident smile. "Oh, I know what his problem is. I just came up to see if he needed help making up his mind."

"So you've got things under control?"

She nodded and gave the door a solid rap with her knuckles. Ron's muffled voice was heard through the door. "Come in."

"I leave you to it then," he said. Ginny flashed another beaming smile at him and walked into Ron's room.

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After leaving Ron to his sister's care, Harry walked out into the garden to enjoy the last of the waning sunshine. He ambled up the small hill on the edge of their property and took a seat by one of the large trees on its summit. From here, he was able to see most of the village below and the top of Stoatshead Hill in the distance.

Harry leaned against the hard trunk and let his mind wander. A flock of birds crested the hill and turned south towards the village, calling to each other in a harmony of twitters and tweets.

His thoughts carried on for a moment as he tracked the birds' progress but were broken by the sound of a slamming door and the squeaking hinges of the back screen door. Soon a soft, sobbing sound could be heard in the distance, and it grew closer with every passing second. Then the form of Ginny Weasley appeared, holding her arms close to her chest, her head bowed, walking purposefully towards the tree where he sat. As she climbed the hill, he could clearly hear her intermittently sniffing and sobbing into a handkerchief.

So intent on the ground in front of her, Ginny didn't notice Harry until she was about to step on him. "Harry! Wha—what are you doing here?"

"I was just admiring the view." Harry was referring to the now twinkling lights of Ottery St. Catchpole, but he hadn't taken his eyes off Ginny's face. "Care to have a seat?"

Sighing in relief, she sat down beside him and resumed dabbing at her eyes. The silence lengthened between them and Harry moved slightly to face her properly. "Are you all right? Has something happened?"

Ginny waved her hand as if to shoo a fly and said, "No, nothing too important." She seemed to hesitate for a moment as if to decide whether or not to continue. "It's just Percy. He sent Mum a letter and told her she was wasting her time trying to get him to come back to the family. He said that he'd continue to ignore us until we realized that Fudge was more *qualified* than Dumbledore to fight against You-Know-Who."

Harry noticed that her teeth were clenched as she spoke and her hands were pulling at the handkerchief roughly, as if it were Percy's neck. All trace of sadness had left her as she seethed in rage. "The stupid prat! Who does he think he is, treating Mum like that? If I see him again, it won't be soon enough. I've needed to practice my Bat Bogey Hex on someone anyway."

Through it all, Harry had decided that it was best to let her vent, as she obviously needed to. Inside, however, his mood reflected Ginny's exactly, and he secretly wished he could be the one to hex Percy into a quivering mass.

"But poor Mum. She still loves him and it hurts her when he acts like this." Sadness returned to Ginny and fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. The bright moonlight made them glisten on her pale skin. "Oh, Harry. What are we going to do? Just when we need the family to be at its closest, he has to go and send a letter like this."

Defying the feeling of panic inside him and ignoring all sense of reason, Harry reached out an arm and captured her in a hug. "It'll be all right, Ginny. You'll see. Percy may be an insufferable git, but he's still your brother," he said as he breathed into her hair.

She didn't respond, except to strengthen her embrace and rest her head on his shoulder, sniffing miserably. Her breath was tickling the hairs on the back of his neck and he once again fought off the voice inside his head that told him to stop holding her. Instead, he pulled her closer and she moved her arms to wrap around his collar. Ginny's head continued to rest on his shoulder as the sobs waned away.

For the second time that day, Harry wondered at his newfound ability to comfort others. Earlier, he had been giving advice to Ron about his feelings for a girl, now he was holding one in his arms. If this had been Cho sitting next to him, crying miserably, Harry knew that he would be unable to form a coherent thought. With Ginny, he was able to use their friendship as a springboard for conversation. There was no awkwardness and no expectations, just two friends.

As Ginny relaxed completely in his arms, Harry realized that even though Ginny was no Cho Chang, he was glad for it. He wasn't smitten with the redhead, but the friendship they shared was worth more to him than a hundred Cho Changs.

"Harry?" came her muffled voice.

"Yes, Gin?"

"Thanks for being here for me. I...I really needed someone just then, and I'm...I'm glad it was you." She lifted her head slightly and looked at him right in the eye.

Harry was struck with a new thought: Ginny Weasley was a very pretty girl. The world seemed to swim behind her. All he could focus on was her bright brown eyes, alight with thanks and warmth. Her eyes flitted down to his lips and then back to his own eyes. A flush began to creep up his cheeks as he realized what was about to happen for only the second time in his life.

"Ginny?" he whispered.

"Yes, Harry?" Her voice was different, filled with some unknown emotion. It seemed deeper to Harry and he found that he liked the way she said his name.

"I...I think we should get back inside before they send out a search party."

He thought he saw a look of disappointment flash over her face but it was too quick to tell. She moved slowly away from him and Harry jumped up as quickly as he could before he offered a hand to help Ginny to her feet. As they walked side-by-side back to the Burrow, Harry couldn't help wonder what exactly had happened under that tree.

Coming of Age 3: Back to the Weasleys

Chapter Three – Back to the Weasleys

A loud buzzing noise radiated from outside the ground floor, and a petite, bushy-headed witch turned her head to the window in annoyance. Hermione Granger's father was trimming the yard for the second time that summer, when he specifically knew she was trying to study. Irritated, Hermione got up from her Arithmancy essay and walked over to the window. Pulling the lace curtains apart, she was surprised to see not her father, but the next-door neighbor's son trimming the grass.

He was a tall boy, just under six feet, and was a year older than Hermione; cute, as far as boys went, but annoyingly crass and snobbish. Devon was the name that came to Hermione's mind although she honestly couldn't remember it. After a very rude run-in with him last summer, she had carefully stayed away from him. In fact, she considered, there were only two boys with whom she cared to keep frequent company and they were both very far away.

Hermione sat on her bed and leaned on the sill, staring out into the early morning sky. It was difficult to have boys for best friends, and she couldn't remember it being any other way. When they had first met, Harry had been unsure of himself and anxious to find his place in the wizarding world. Ron had been a bit proud of and very defensive about his family. She loved them both dearly and five years later, she was facing a difficult decision about them both.

While Harry wasn't quite as insecure about himself now, he still needed help understanding his role in the upcoming war with Voldemort. Hermione loved him as a brother and felt it her duty to watch out for him and to be there when he needed help.

Ron, on the other hand, was a totally different enigma and her love for him was of a completely different nature. But their problem was one that has plagued the sexes for all time: communication.

Walking back to her desk, she shoved her essay aside and opened a small book that had been hollowed out on the inside. Extracting a pile of folded parchment, she picked up the topmost one and opened it up. It was the most recent letter she had received from him and Hermione had to force her heart to stop racing when her eyes scanned the now memorized lines.

A different feeling emerged within her as the reality of her situation came into the fore of her thoughts. This wasn't a game, but he was acting stupidly enough about it that it might as well have been. She traced his signature with a finger and blinked back a small tear. For years, she had loved him and every time there came small a change in their relationship, he did something stupid like this. Hermione read the two sentences that kept jumping out at her.

I don't know what you're talking about, Hermione. We get along just fine, but then you start in on how I'm doing something wrong, or how I could be better if I only did it this way...I've already got a mother and don't need you to do the job.

The letter had infuriated her so badly that she wrote a scathing reply that now seemed a bit too harsh. She told him that if they couldn't stop bickering, she would have to end their friendship, and it terrified her to no end to even think about it. Deep down, she wondered if she had the courage to go through with it if push came to shove. *Hopefully*, she thought, *it won't come to that. But honestly, does he need me to spell it out for him?* The last thing she wanted was to drag anyone into a relationship. No, if Ron was that thick, then he would just have to wait.

Wiping away the small tears that had formed in the corner of her eyes, she folded the letter and placed it back in the letter holder, marked '1996', and moved her essay back to the middle of her desk. With fresh determination to get her work done by the end of the day and push all thoughts of Ronald Weasley from her mind, she cracked open her well-worn Arithmancy book and plowed into *Magical Vector Calculations and their Use in Building Spells*.

*

Several hours and four rolls of parchment later, Crookshanks suddenly jumped into Hermione's lap and startled her out of her forced concentration. Hermione rubbed his ears absently and put her quill down. With a stretch, several of her vertebrae popped and it occurred to her that she should mind her posture more closely while studying. Crookshanks rubbed his head into her hand to remind her that he was being neglected.

"All right, all right," she said. "I suppose it's about time for a break."

She made to get up and the ginger cat jumped gracefully to the wood floor, leading the way downstairs.

Hermione's parents were in the kitchen making dinner. Her mother was always the one who set the table, while her father did the cooking. Some of her uncles teased him about it, but he took it good-naturedly, claiming that he enjoyed it after a hard day of fixing teeth. Hermione knew that her mother was just as happy with the arrangement, but it meant Hermione had to clear the table and do the dishes afterwards.

Without being told, she washed her hands and began helping her mother set out the plates.

"All done with homework, dear?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Not quite," she said airily, "But my little friend here decided that I was due for a break." Crookshanks was twirling in and out of Hermione's legs so skillfully that she could walk without worrying about stepping on the darting feline.

"Well, I should say so. You've been at it for hours." Her mum gave Hermione a look, clearly saying she wanted to chat with her after dinner. "If I know my daughter, then she's got something on her mind that wants to be forgotten, and schoolwork is always first on the list of distractions."

Rolling her eyes, more because her mum knew her too well than anything else, Hermione said, "Mum, I really do want to forget about it, so can we not discuss this, please?"

Giving her daughter an appraising glance, she replied, "Is it an 'it' or a 'he' that you want to forget?"

Turning a nice shade of pink that answered the question as plainly as anything she could have said, Hermione refused to speak or look at her mother and busied herself with setting the last of the silverware out on the table.

"Ahh," said her father. "And who's the lucky boy that's been taking up my daughter's precious brain power?"

"Dad!" cried an exasperated Hermione. "I don't want to talk about it!"

Seeing that she wasn't going to give in just yet, her parents decided to forgo an argument and tuck in to dinner. "Well, then we won't pry, but do come to us if you need to."

Hermione took a sip of tea, grateful that they wouldn't push the issue. "All right, Dad."

*

After dinner, Hermione sat on the sofa and relaxed with a book detailing the charms used on broomsticks. *It really is quite fascinating*, she mused to herself; she couldn't wait to tell Harry and Ron all about them. Just as the book was starting on the various Cushioning Charms used on the seat section, she heard a rushing sound and turned to see the head of Albus Dumbledore appear in her fireplace.

"Professor Dumbledore?" she asked incredulously. Replacing her bookmark quickly, she put the book down and walked over to the fireplace. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah, Miss Granger. Most fortunate that you happened to be the one to greet me." His eyes were serious.

Growing concerned, she reflexively shifted her stance and started asking questions. "Is there something the matter? Is it something with Harry?"

"There's nothing amiss, but this does have something to do with Harry. Would you call your parents for me, please?"

"Certainly." Hermione walked up the stairs and called her parents. They followed her back down to the living room and sat on the sofa so they could visit with the Professor.

"Hello, Headmaster. What brings you here?" asked Mrs. Granger.

"Well, Anne, I'd like to ask permission for your lovely daughter to spend a few nights at the Burrow with some fellow students." His eyes turned mischievous and Hermione wondered what was going on.

Looking to her daughter and clearly pleased at the compliment, Mrs. Granger said, "We don't have a problem with it, if she doesn't mind. Is there a special occasion?"

Thoughts rushed into Hermione's brain as she struggled with the idea of going to the Burrow. On one hand, she would be able to be with Ron and possibly sort out what was going on between them. On the other hand, being with Ron always held the potential for fireworks, something that she desperately wanted to avoid.

"Ah, yes. It happens to be Mr. Potter's birthday tomorrow, and I think he would like to have another friend help him celebrate."

That's right! thought Hermione, *Harry's birthday*. Now she knew she had to go, if only to be there for Harry. And if she were lucky, she would be able to get Ginny alone for some girl talk. She needed to bend the ear of another female to try and figure out a way to sort out the mess she'd made of her relationship with Ron.

"I'd love to go, Professor. When do I leave?"

"Anytime tonight or tomorrow, but I suggest before noon, as that is when the cake is rumored to be served. Molly makes a frightfully good chocolate cake, if I recall correctly."

Hermione thought of something and quickly said, "Professor? We don't have any Floo powder."

An arm reached out of the fire and handed her a small ceramic jar. "This should allow you a few trips. The Weasleys will be expecting you tonight or tomorrow morning, so anytime you are ready." With that, his head disappeared with a small *pop*.

Steeling herself for her inevitable meeting with Ron, she got up to start packing, but was stopped by her mother as she pulled her daughter into a hug. "Just remember that we're here for you...if you need to talk or...or anything."

Gripping her tightly, Hermione replied, "Thanks, Mum. I'll be fine. It'll be fine." With a final squeeze, they broke the embrace and Hermione made her way to get her things. *I suppose that essay will just have to wait.*

*

Later that evening, Hermione appeared in the kitchen of the Burrow, with a smudged nose and a smile on her face. Crookshanks immediately leapt out of her arms and ran up the stairs. He did not like traveling by Floo.

Molly Weasley was waiting for her at the table, knitting what looked like a scarf. "Hello, dear," she said as she got up to give her a hug.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley. Thank you for inviting me." Scanning the room quickly, she noticed how odd it was that there were no other Weasleys in the house.

Mrs. Weasley smiled warmly at Hermione. "It's no trouble, dear. I daresay that you being here will right a few wrongs."

Not wanting to decipher that cryptic statement just yet, Hermione asked, "Where is everyone?"

"Ron's in his room and Ginny and Harry are out under the oak tree in the garden." Mrs. Weasley beamed when she said this last bit.

"Ginny and Harry, huh?" Hermione asked with a smirk of her own.

"It's just wonderful," Mrs. Weasley said tearfully. "She's always held a torch for him and he's such a good boy..." She paused for a moment, seeming to collect herself, and then said, "I'll get your things up to Ginny's room for you. There's tea in the kettle." Mrs. Weasley flicked her wand at Hermione's trunk and levitated it up the stairs.

"I guess I'll just wait here then," Hermione muttered to herself and sat down at the table. But before she could even take a sip of tea, the back door opened and a slightly breathless Ginny appeared, followed by a red-faced Harry.

Grateful for friendly faces, she stood and waved at the redhead. "Hello, Ginny!"

"Hermione!" the younger girl said brightly. "When did you get here?"

They embraced each other and Hermione glimpsed Harry over Ginny's shoulder. His hands were in his pockets and he was staring awkwardly at the floor. "Just a few minutes ago. Were you expecting me?"

Blushing a bit, Ginny said, "Well, we were outside for a while, but I hadn't heard anything about it since we had tea."

Hermione approached Harry and gave him a hug. "It's good to see you, Harry."

Some of the strained atmosphere evaporated and he hugged her back. "I'm glad you're here, Hermione."

Nodding at Ginny, Hermione began, "So you and..." but she wasn't able to finish, as a wide-eyed Ginny grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to the stairs.

"No time for that, Hermione. I need to talk to you, *now*."

They barreled up the stairs and nearly ran over a slightly flustered Molly Weasley, who was returning from putting Hermione's things away. "Sorry," Hermione mouthed as they passed.

Arriving in Ginny's room, Hermione was thrust onto the bed while Ginny locked the door and cast an Imperturbable Charm on it to deter eavesdroppers. "How..." she went to ask, but was again interrupted.

Ginny waved her arm. "The Ministry doesn't monitor the Burrow very well for underage magic, but we still have to be careful. Locking Charms and Silencing Spells are common enough to get by the sensors."

"Oh..." she said, trying to take that bit of information in. Hermione was about to ask why Ginny had hauled her up to her room, but Ginny launched into things full tilt.

"Hermione, do you remember what I told you after the Yule Ball, two years ago?" asked a clearly flustered Ginny.

Nodding her head, Hermione probed a little for confirmation, "You mean about Harry?"

"Yes!" Ginny knelt in front of her friend, skirt splaying around her on the floor. "I lied."

"You--you lied? About...Oh!" Comprehension dawned on her and a million questions flooded into her head. "What about Dean...and Michael?"

Ginny waved her hand dismissively. "My poor excuse at trying to forget about him."

"Then you and Harry are...together?" Hermione asked hopefully. If Harry was able to see the love the Ginny had been harboring for him all these years, then it gave her hope for her and Ron.

But Ginny's reaction did nothing to enforce the view. She dramatically plopped her head on the bed next to where Hermione was seated. "I wish!" Then picking her head up morosely, she looked at the brown-haired girl with wild eyes, "We were so close to kissing, Hermione! I was almost sitting on his lap!"

"Oh!" Hermione repeated lamely. "That must have been quite...frustrating."

"Yes, it was! Now what am I going to do? I practically threw myself on him and he got cold feet." Ginny flopped her head back on the bed in despair. "Our lips were *this* close together." She raised her hand to indicate the distance without lifting her head.

Another thought came to Hermione and she asked, "What brought all this on? I mean, you were quite convincing on the train ride from Hogwarts. Even when Ron virtually told Harry he should ask you out, you didn't flinch."

"I know..." Ginny moaned into the bedclothes. Then turning her head to peek through her red hair, "Did you see him, Hermione? Have you taken a good look at Mr. Harry Potter tonight?"

Hermione thought back to the thirty or so seconds that she was downstairs with Harry before Ginny had whisked her up the stairs. He was taller, and seemed to be a bit embarrassed about something, but other than that, nothing looked terribly different. "I noticed he'd grown a bit since we saw him at King's Cross."

Jumping up to pound on her pillow, Ginny said, "Ugh! Yes! Taller and more confident and charming..." She collapsed on the now lumpy pillow and sighed long and loud. "I had almost convinced myself that it was over. That I didn't really love him, that it was a phase and I would grow out of it. Then he has to get muscles and be so...so... *understanding*."

Trying not to interrupt such a good outpouring of emotion, Hermione decided to stay silent.

"I hate it when boys are understanding!"

Unable to restrain herself any longer, Hermione blurted, "It makes them irresistible, doesn't it?" She wasn't talking about Harry, but another boy that could magically turn the supportive switch on and melt her heart. The problem was that he switched it off too quickly before anything could happen.

"Yes!" Ginny said loudly. She launched into how Percy sent the letter to her mum, and how she had run out into the garden a crying mess. About how Harry just happened to be there, right when she needed him, handsome and sympathetic. "It was just too much, Hermione. I had to kiss him and it took all my willpower to let him make the first move." Ginny sighed again. "Then he told me we should go back inside and tried to make it seem like we would get caught or something." She resumed moaning into her pillow.

A thought twigged in Hermione's mind and she realized that there was something different. "Ginny?"

Sitting up fully now, the younger girl answered, "What?"

"Maybe...maybe Harry *is* thinking about you now."

"Don't pander to my fantasies, Hermione," Ginny said sullenly.

"No, Ginny. I mean what if he *really* is starting to notice you?"

Wiping the hair from her face, Ginny sent a searching look at Hermione. "Do you think?"

"Look, you said that his excuse to come in was that he was afraid of getting caught, right?" Hermione asked, and Ginny nodded. "Well, he obviously was thinking about being caught with you, doing something that he didn't want to be caught doing. So that means he's at least thought about you that way."

Ginny's eyes flitted around the room as she considered Hermione's words.

"And when I saw you two come in just now," Hermione continued, "Harry wasn't exactly comfortable with what happened between you. And when a boy is uncomfortable around a girl, it means only one thing."

"What?" Ginny said breathlessly.

"He fancies you. Or at least, he's starting to. Or he doesn't know how to deal with you. Or he blames himself for something involved with you. Or... well...let's just say the list goes on."

"But what if he decides that I'm not good enough, or too plain, or...or doesn't like me because I'm Ron's little sister..."

Hermione grabbed Ginny's shoulders and looked her in the eye. "Ginny, listen to me. Harry would be a fool to think you weren't worth his time. Personally, I think he's just a little uncomfortable thinking about you that way. I mean, it took Ron four years to figure out that *I'm* a girl." Talking about Ron was painful, but it was worth it to help her friend. If Ron wasn't going to grow a backbone, at least she could help his sister be happy.

"Yeah, but what do I *do*?" Ginny asked, clearly frightened.

"You've got to keep being yourself, Ginny. If it were me, I'd not let on that you think he likes you. That way, he has fewer things to confuse him. Boys are easily confused, you know." Hermione was more talking to herself now than to Ginny. "Last year you said you were able to have whole conversations with him without stuttering. Keep it up, be his friend and make it obvious that you are available. When the time is right, he'll come to you."

"Are--are you sure?" Ginny asked probingly. "I've been waiting for him for an awfully long time, Hermione."

"Yes, Ginny. I'm sure. You've waited a long time, but you've never been waiting while he knows what's at stake. He'll come around, I promise."

Seeming calmed by this, Ginny was silent for a moment then turned to her friend. "What about you, Hermione?"

"Me? What about me?" she asked, slightly surprised at the turn in questioning.

"Yes. What are we going to do about that idiot I call my brother? He's been quite pathetic since he saw you last," Ginny said teasingly.

Hermione's heart quickened. "He has?"

"Why, just this morning, he couldn't stop talking about you. Apparently you sent him a rather shirty letter last night," explained Ginny, with a suggestive waggle of her eyebrows.

Coloring slightly at the mention of The Letter, Hermione said, "Ah...well... I might have overreacted a bit, I should have..."

"No! It was perfect. Whatever you said was just fine. He's tearing himself up about it and is desperate to make up with you." Ginny's eyes were twinkling in a way that suggested she knew more than she let on.

"Is that why he wasn't there to greet me?"

"Exactly. He's been sulking all day and is probably in his room ripping his hair out right now." Ginny clapped her hands and squealed, "You've got him, Hermione. I can just feel it!"

"Yes, well, that's all you know," Hermione said dejectedly. "Things are a bit different from where I sit."

"Oh, bollocks! He's so in love with you, it isn't even funny. At least, *he's* figured out you're a girl *and* doesn't want to lose you. It's only a matter of time, now."

"Yeah," Hermione muttered, "Only a matter of time."

They sat together on Ginny's bed, thinking about love not quite realized, and sighed simultaneously. Exchanging knowing looks, they burst out giggling and Ginny fell off the bed in her mirth, which made them laugh even harder.

After the much needed laugh, Ginny said mockingly, "I don't think I've ever heard you giggle, Hermione. What would your parents think?"

"Oh, my Mum's heard a giggle or two from me, Ginny. It's the straitlaced Ravenclaws that would throw a wobbly."

With a guffaw Ginny said, "Well, enough about boys and school. Let's talk about clothes! And makeup!"

Ginny clutched her side in laughter again at the horrified look on Hermione's face, but deep down, Hermione knew that she liked to talk about clothes and makeup on occasion, just like any other girl. In fact, she had an impressive collection of Muggle makeup in her trunk right then that her magically raised friend would love to see.

"All right, then," said Hermione quickly fishing through her trunk. "Let's see how you look with rouge on."

Coming of Age 4: The Youngest Weasley

Chapter Four – The Youngest Weasley

Blueberry scones. *Mmmmmm*. They were floating above her head, just barely out of reach. Reaching out to them, she found that they dissolved before her fingers were able to snatch one. She was getting more and more frustrated by their constant teasing and made a particularly hard lunge at the closest one, only to find that when she missed, the bed wasn't there to catch her.

With a loud thump, Ginny landed in a heap at the foot of her small bed. She woke up with a start. *Only a dream. Dammit*. But the smell was lingering, continuing to tempt her and it took a few moments before her still sleepy brain could figure out that the scent was quite real. Her stomach let out a loud, very unfeminine growl, echoing off the rafters of her room.

The other occupant of the room, although not disturbed by the sound of a falling fifteen-year-old, instantly shot awake at the sound of her belly. "Wha?" said a groggy Hermione.

Still bleary herself, Ginny tried to get to her feet and make her way to the loo, but tripped on the leg of her guest's bed and landed half on, half off Hermione's mattress.

"Ow!" Ginny shouted indignantly.

"Ahhh!" screamed a shocked Hermione.

Ginny finished sliding off the bed and resumed her position in a heap on the floor. Hermione's head appeared over the side and they locked eyes for a second before dissolving into laughter. Ginny wiped her hair off her face and was momentarily surprised to see a deep shade of red on her palms. Then last night's activities filtered back to her thoughts and she remembered Hermione putting some strange Muggle makeup on her face. Expecting it to disappear over night like magical makeup, she had neglected to wash it off.

"You all right?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah, just stubbed my toe," answered Ginny, massaging the affected appendage lightly.

"What was that rumbling noise? It sounded like some kind of animal."

Ginny looked at her friend sheepishly as she pulled herself up once again. "That would be my stomach." She pointed at the door vaguely and asked, "You smell that?"

"Smells like blueberry scones," Hermione replied sagely.

"My favorite. And certain body parts forget that it isn't proper for a lady to make noises." Ginny shrugged her shoulders and resumed her march to the loo.

After finishing her morning routine, Ginny went downstairs to find out if she could nick a few scones without being caught. Unfortunately, her mum was quite good at detecting impulsive thievery and thwarted her efforts.

"Not until everyone's up and at the table, young lady," she explained in her superior tone.

Dejectedly, but not without a pleading look in her mum's direction, Ginny turned back to the living room. She was usually the first one up in the mornings and would read one of the many books they kept there. The only reason she had even tried pilfering a scone was because her twin brothers weren't there to do it first, and blueberry really was her favorite.

Upon arriving in the living room, she was shocked to find it wasn't empty, doubly so because of who it was that had invaded her space. A shock of messy black hair protruded from the top of the leather recliner in the center of the room. It was all she could see of him, but it didn't matter which part of Harry Potter she saw. Ginny always knew it was him.

Heart pounding irrationally fast in her chest, she quietly padded over to the chair, careful to avoid stubbing her toe on the legs of the wooden end table. As she approached, the sound of his heavy breathing met her ears and she realized that he was sleeping. Walking in front of the recliner, his entire face came into view and she nearly fainted with happiness.

There, arrayed in all his glory was Harry Potter, the boy who had stolen her heart at the tender age of ten, the only one who would ever have her complete and total love and adoration. He had been reading a book, which was now pinned between a limp arm and his lap. The inevitable glasses were tilted slightly on his face, as if he had swatted at an invisible fly in his sleep and accidentally dislodged them. He was adorable; there was simply no other word for it. Wide awake or safely tucked away in the bonds of sleep, he was everything she wanted and needed.

Ginny shakily sat on the rug in front of the empty fireplace, never taking her eyes off the boy in front of her. It was a rare thing indeed to have an opportunity to soak in his features so privately. She wouldn't have been able to blink if her eyes were forced closed with Spellotape. Such was the power he held over her.

Unbidden images of a happy future - wedding band on her finger, green-eyed children running happily around her, and warm arms around her waist - came flooding into her thoughts. She hadn't daydreamed about him since her third year, yet here she was, hopelessly smitten with this wonderful, caring boy.

Harry mumbled something incomprehensible in his sleep and it brought her thoughts back to the present. Ginny was determined to cultivate every available opportunity to encourage Harry to be attracted to her, though she knew it was a real possibility that he never would be. But, in the center of her soul, she believed that Harry wouldn't be suitable for anyone else. It was a part of her that even she didn't fully understand. It kept her sane even when everything seemed set against him reciprocating her feelings.

The sounds of clinking plates filtered into her brain and she knew that it would be time for breakfast soon. As she continued gazing at Harry, an irrational thought stuck in her head. Acting quickly, before she could persuade herself to stop, Ginny rose and walked over to where he slumbered.

Her hand came up and grabbed a hold of his shoulder, almost without her having to make the effort. It was warm and softer than she expected. She shook him carefully; his head briefly lolled around before he caught it and his eyes fluttered open. Harry looked up at her, countenance bright and vulnerable, still unguarded from sleep. He smiled and something in her stomach lurched.

"Hi, Gin. What's the matter?" His face showed concern and she wondered if it was because hers displayed too much of her own emotions.

"Breakfast is almost ready. Care to join us?" On the outside, Ginny was a paragon of control and grace; inside, her intestines were squirming and she was congratulating herself for not stuttering, stammering or saying anything overly stupid.

Looking pleased, Harry said, "I'd love to." He wiped his eyes under the round spectacles, readjusted them, blinked to clear his vision, and made to get up.

Again, as if her arm were controlled by some other force, she held out her hand and offered to help him stand. He took it a little hesitantly, but his smile never diminished. Time slowed as their hands joined; her world spun and a spark of pure emotion shot up her arm. It never occurred to her that something so simple could produce such a wonderful feeling. Holding his hand last night had been wonderful, too, but the torrent of emotion flowing through her at the time had diminished the effect. Now her heart was wide open and she was unprepared for the deep, almost painful effect this contact had on her.

Harry reacted differently too, not moving off to the kitchen immediately as she expected him to. He stood slowly and faced her. She had to look up to keep eye contact, but she knew if she didn't, the moment would be lost. She was desperate to keep this instant in time paused forever.

Despite their efforts, a voice carried from the kitchen, loudly shattering the spell that seemed to surround them. "Time for breakfast, you lot!"

Again acting differently than how she would have expected, Harry kept a steady pressure on her hand and guided her carefully to the kitchen. It was as if she were living in a dream, walking to breakfast in her own home, hand in hand with Harry Potter. The room spun as a fresh wave of emotion threatened to overpower her, but the connection she had with Harry kept her upright and conscious. It was like a lifeline, a lifeline that pulled Ginny along to some happy ending.

Before she knew it, they were seated at the table, surrounded by her family, and their hands had come unclasped. Trying to hide her disappointment and the slight redness that undoubtedly graced her cheeks, she kept her eyes on the table. After a while, she felt someone nudge her in the side and saw Hermione giving her a questioning look.

"Later," she mouthed.

Hermione nodded but didn't lower her eyebrows.

"Pass the butter?" she heard his low voice call to her. Looking up, she saw those green eyes radiating concern at her. Letting herself get caught up in them was so easy. All she had to do was imagine that he was looking at her because he wanted to and because he loved her. But as Ginny continued to gaze at him, Hermione's words from last night came back to her. For the first time, she tried to imagine that he really *was* looking at her that way.

"Gin? The butter?" Shaking her head a bit to clear it, she took the dish and handed it wordlessly to him. But when he reached for the dish, he gripped it right where she was holding it, covering her hand with his. She gasped quietly and froze.

Harry made no indication that he had touched her hand accidentally, nor did he make any move to take his hand away. Instead, he continued to stare into her eyes and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. *Was it possible?* The look in his eyes was still warm and caring and it finally dawned on her that it was possible that he *could* like her, and maybe even love her.

After several moments, someone cleared their throat, and the world around them reappeared. Ginny's face flushed as red as her hair and Harry slid his hand to take the dish, instead of her hand. She glanced to her right and saw Hermione smiling as widely as if it had been *Ron* touching *her* and not Harry touching Ginny. Grinning back, Ginny proceeded to finish her breakfast.

*

Immediately after breakfast, Ginny's mum shooed them out into the garden while she prepared for Harry's party. He still didn't have any idea that they were all there to celebrate his birthday. Ginny knew that Fred and George were somehow involved and hoped that they wouldn't do anything

stupid, like turn Harry into a toad. It only helped a little to know that her mother would be overseeing the preparations.

It was already blazingly hot outside, so Ginny and Hermione decided to head to the pond and take a swim. The terrified look on Harry's face when Hermione suggested it gave Ginny even more reason to think that there might be hope for their relationship, so she had readily agreed. Ron, equally red, mumbled something about Quidditch in the paddock.

Alone on the shore of the lake, they set their towels down and stretched out for a minute before getting in the water.

"So what was that at the table?" asked a very curious Hermione.

Ginny swatted at a fly impatiently and blew out a breath. "Nothing." She tried to act innocent, but knew it wouldn't wash with Hogwarts' smartest witch.

"Uh huh. Harry just happened to be holding your hand when you came in from the living room? And he hated it so much that he grabbed your hand again at breakfast? Is that all?" Hermione had on her maddeningly superior look now.

"Oh, don't be so missish," Ginny said, trying to deflect the attack momentarily.

"Missish? Me?" Sunlight was streaming from over Hermione's shoulder now, so it was hard to see the look on her face. "You still haven't answered the question."

"What was the question again?" Ginny was definitely enjoying this.

"Oh, you!" Hermione flopped down on her towel and tried to act like she didn't care if Ginny told her anything.

After a few silent moments, Ginny gave in and started to spill. "I walked in on him in the living room asleep." She nervously smoothed out the pleats on her bathing suit and continued, "He was very cute, just sleeping in the recliner. I couldn't help myself, and I just stared at him, Hermione." Ginny's face was locked in a wistful smile, as she remembered the cute way his lips were parted.

"And I'm sure that was all it took." Hermione stretched out her lanky body and peered at Ginny through her sunglasses. "You pining away a bit more was all he needed to start liking you?"

"I never said he liked me!" Ginny shouted. Then more quietly, "But I can't help noticing that he's paying me more attention."

Hermione flashed her knowing smile, but didn't say anything. A few minutes passed, while Ginny tried to make sense of the past twenty-four hours. "Do you think he likes me?"

When Hermione didn't say anything for a minute, Ginny thought that she might have fallen asleep. But then Hermione got up to hug her knees and took off her sunglasses. Looking seriously at her, she said, "Yes." The two girls stared at each other for a long time. Then without warning, a loud screech broke the silence and the next thing she knew, she was covered in water.

Spluttering in shock, Ginny could barely breathe, let alone try to figure out what had happened. She peeled back her plastered hair and looked at the lake. Ron and Harry were waist-deep in the water, laughing their heads off.

Before Ginny could work up a satisfactory curse word, Hermione beat her to it. "YOU! YOU IMBECILES!" she shouted. She let out a primal scream and dashed towards the boys in the lake. Deciding to support her best friend, Ginny quickly pulled off her shorts and ran pell-mell after her.

The boys were quite shocked at their reaction, and although the initial surprise had worn off for Ginny, she maintained her angry appearance to intimidate them. Hermione and Ginny splashed into the water, hell-bent on exacting revenge. What exactly that entailed was irrelevant.

Hermione seemed to have thought of something, however, and brandished her wand at the boys. "*Accio Lake!*" she screamed.

A giant section of the lake came rushing at them. Unfortunately, in her haste to pay the boys back for their cheeky display of fun, Hermione had neglected to contemplate the consequences of such a spell. They were much too close to the boys, and there was a *lot* of water.

Being soaked a second time in as many minutes was not on Ginny's list of things to do that day. But as they were already in the lake, she decided to make the most of it and enjoy the cooling effects of water.

Ron was gasping for breath and Harry was clutching his sides in mirth. It was good to see him laughing and it looked like he was laughing more at Ron than anyone else.

"You think - this is - funny, Harry?" Ron said between breaths. Then he launched himself at Harry and tackled him under the lake.

There was a thrashing of water and Harry emerged, a triumphant look on his face. He was holding Ron's swim trunks high in the air. Hermione gasped and immediately went red. Ginny chuckled and Ron was seething, half crouched in the murky lake to maintain what was left of his dignity.

"Give them back, Harry!" he yelled through barely clenched teeth.

Harry took a step towards Hermione and held them out to her. "Tell her, Ron or I'll chuck them on the beach."

Ron's face went from red to white in an instant. "That's not fair, Harry," he whispered.

Undaunted, Harry persisted. "You've put this off long enough, Ron. Tell her or I'll chuck 'em." He dangled the trunks playfully in front of Hermione, who

seemed torn between having Harry stop the torture and finding out what Ron didn't want to tell her.

Ginny had a pretty good idea what this was about, but wasn't about to interfere. This was between the boys.

Ron tried to catch Harry off guard and lunged at him, but Harry's seeker skills paid off and he was able to dodge the attack. Then Ron's countenance changed and he said with confidence, "All right, Harry. You win."

"Excellent!" Harry said. "Go on then." He pointed to Hermione, "Tell her."

Hermione turned to Ron expectantly, but Ron was looking at Harry. "I'll tell her, if you tell *her*," he pointed at Ginny. The color instantly leached from Harry's face and he started to stammer.

"I—but—but, she—that's different!" He couldn't seem to form a coherent sentence and finally dropped the trunks into the water and without a sound walked slowly away.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny looked at each other curiously and shrugged at Harry's behavior. Ron and Hermione locked eyes, and he gulped. The trunks were floating directly in front of Hermione.

She picked them up and waded over to a clearly frightened Ron. "Here's your trunks, Ron. But don't forget what I said in my last letter." With that, she dropped the sodden swimwear on his head and walked out of the lake. Ginny smirked at him and shrugged, then followed her friend.

*

The rest of the morning went by quickly. Ginny hadn't seen Harry since the incident at the lake and she was more than a bit curious about what was going on inside Harry's head. Ron was back to moping around the house, noticeably avoiding Harry. Ginny was reading in her room and caught him peaking in just before lunch.

"Can I help you, Ron?" she asked, a little impatiently, setting her book down.

"Well," he said hesitantly, "Is—is Hermione here?"

"No. I haven't seen her since we got back from the lake." Ginny debated whether or not to tell him that she was reading in the tree house, avoiding him. "You might try Percy's room."

"Alright," he said and left rather quickly.

A few minutes later, her mum appeared in the door. "Get washed up, Ginny. It's time for lunch." Her mum was very good at hiding surprises, and even though Ginny knew that this was to be Harry's birthday celebration, her mum's visage was so controlled, that she had to wonder for a moment if her mum had forgotten about it.

On the way down, she was almost run over by Harry, who was staring at his feet, with his hands in his pockets.

"Ooof," she said as they collided.

"S-sorry, Gin," he stammered.

He was no longer staring at the floor, but at her face. "No problem, Harry," she whispered, still holding his gaze.

A long moment passed with neither of them moving. Harry tried several times to say something, raising his hand, or cocking his head while he opened his mouth soundlessly. Ginny waited patiently for him, but it seemed he either couldn't bring himself to verbalize whatever it was he wanted to state, or his throat just didn't work.

At length, he finally managed to say, "Let's just go down to lunch, Gin."

She wanted to grab Harry and force him to tell her what he was going to say. It had to be something really important to clam him up so effectively. Instead, she reluctantly let him lead her downstairs and into the kitchen.

Coming of Age 5: The Weasley-esque Birthday

Chapter Five – The Weasley-esque Birthday

Arriving downstairs, Harry and Ginny were greeted with a spectacle even a wizard would find unbelievable. The kitchen had been magically expanded to keep everyone that was there for the party in the cool of the house, and *everyone* was there. Bill and Charlie were in one corner, talking with two witches Harry didn't recognize, and besides Mrs. Weasley, were easily the oldest people there.

Several of the Gryffindor boys in Harry's year were interspersed amongst the crowd, including Neville, Seamus and Dean. Neville was closest and quickly greeted Harry with a hearty handshake. "Brilliant party, Harry!" he said before wandering to sit next to Luna Lovegood. She wasn't the only Ravenclaw, either.

Scanning through the crowd, Harry saw that Terry Boot, Mandy Brocklehurst, Anthony Goldstein, and to his great surprise, Cho Chang. Looking directly at Cho, whose head was turned as she spoke to Anthony, Harry noted that the perpetual sadness was no longer present in her eyes. However, he also observed that at every previous encounter with her, his stomach would lurch unexpectedly. This was no longer the case.

Magical streamers were strung across the rafters, turning different colours and letting off small bits of glitter, which fell to the floor. There were tables and chairs along the outside wall, one holding presents, others holding different snack foods and drinks. In the middle, was a long table, almost as large as one of the tables in the Great Hall, filled with dishes and different kinds of luscious food. In the centre of the table was a large two-story cake with sixteen burning candles perched on top. Floating in the middle of the room was a large sign that read:

Happy Sixteenth Birthday Harry!

It was all quite overwhelming for Harry, as he had never had a proper birthday party in his life. To see the results of what must have been loads of work for the Weasleys, caused a new feeling emerge within him. With a burning behind his eyes, he fought the sudden emotions back down and resumed looking at the crowd.

There were also several Hufflepuffs mingling amongst the partygoers. Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchly and Hannah Abbott were by the punch bowl. Harry did a double take as he noticed Hannah and Ernie holding hands as they chatted with two boys he didn't recognize.

Conspicuously absent from the crowd were Fred and George Weasley, who Harry was slightly apprehensive about seeing again. Budding businessmen they may be; he knew that they would always have a prank ready for a party, especially a party like this.

As much as Harry would have liked to continue observing The Burrow's new guests, it was not to be. Ginny, who had been standing next to Harry for the minute he had been people-watching, now continued on to the table holding the presents. This movement caught Mrs. Weasley's eye and she turned to spot Harry.

"Oh! You're here!" She waved her hand to bring him closer. "Come on. Come over here." With a mournful glance at Ginny, he sidled up to the head of the elongated kitchen table, heavy with delicious food.

"Attention, everyone!" Mrs. Weasley shouted through cupped hands. The conversation immediately stopped and she continued. "I wonder if you could all give me your attention for a moment."

The crowd quieted and Harry exchanged a wave or two with some of his friends as they bustled over to hear Mrs. Weasley.

"All right, now. The birthday boy is here, so we can get started." She raised her wand, like a conductor's baton and the crowd burst into a chorus of 'Happy Birthday'.

He was once again overcome with emotion, as he listened to the song, and his vision blurred slightly. So intent on schooling his feelings, he didn't see the cake levitate over to him. When the song was done, he scrunched his eyes and made a wish, just like he'd seen his cousin, Dudley, do many times. He then blew out the candles and opened his eyes to see his friends clapping loudly for him.

Ron and Hermione appeared beside him and Ron clapped him on his back. "Happy Birthday, mate!"

Hermione grabbed him in a hug and said happily, "Happy Birthday, Harry."

"Thanks," he said simply, looking them in the eyes. It was just too wonderful for him to articulate anything more profound.

They seemed to understand and let it go at that. Mrs. Weasley was busy serving the cake with a magic spatula, sending plates of cake to different spots on the table. The crowd slowly made their way to their seats and began to tuck in.

Harry remained standing at the head of the table, still feeling a bit emotional. Ron and Hermione walked over to their chairs and Harry thought he saw their hands brush together as they did so.

After a moment, Ginny walked over to him and in a soft voice, said, "Harry?"

He turned to face her, grinning. "Hey, Gin. Thanks for this," Harry said as he waved his hand at the streamers and banner.

With slightly pink cheeks, she replied, "It's Mum you should thank."

"Don't be modest, Ginny. You know it was your idea!" Fred and George had finally made their appearance and wasted no time in teasing their sister.

George wrapped his arm around Ginny's shoulder and leaned heavily into her, nearly toppling her over. "Yeah, Gin-Gin. Didn't you say you started planning this last year?"

"Right," said Fred, who was on her opposite side, grinning widely. "And weren't you the one who wanted the streamers to send off green sparkles?"

George fluttered his eyelashes dramatically and finished, "To match his eyes!"

Ginny had apparently had enough and elbowed George hard in the ribs. He doubled over, shaking with pain and laughter. She turned on Fred and quicker than anything Harry had ever seen, kicked Fred in the shin.

Hopping madly on one foot, Fred tried to scold his sister, "What was that all about?"

Ginny fixed him with her steely gaze. "You know darn well that Mum was the one who suggested the party for Harry *last week* ." Then turning on George, added, "And *you* know," she gave him a kick in the shin as well, "That the streamers came that way!" Then she grabbed Harry's arm and said, "Come on, Harry. You've a party to be at."

With that, she led him over to the centre of the large table and sat him down next to Ron. Ginny sat down on his other side and promptly began talking with one the Gryffindor girls in her year.

Harry turned to Ron and noticed that he wasn't as jovial as was normal and realized that they hadn't really spoken since the pond incident. Wanting to clear the air, he tapped his shoulder and said, "Hey, mate."

Ron didn't look at Harry but said, "Hey."

"Look...about the whole lake thing. I wanted to apologize about that." He paused, searching for something to say that didn't sound so lame. "It wasn't my place to force you to talk to Hermione."

Still picking at his food, Ron dropped his fork and turned to face Harry. "It wasn't very funny, you know." His voice was low and even. "I was starkers out there, and then you dropped my trunks right next to *her* ."

Guilt washed over Harry as he looked on Ron's serious face. But as soon as he started to form a contrite reply, a smirk formed on his friend's face and Harry started. "You're having me on?"

"I was angry," he said, still smiling. "But after you left, I realized that besides being mortified in front of Hermione..."

"What about me?" interrupted Hermione, whose impeccable timing was as consistent as ever. She sat down next to Ron in a huff and said, "Someone thought it would be funny to enchant the punchbowl to spray punch at the girls."

"It's not enchanted to do that, Hermione. Mum's not used it since Bill graduated from Hogwarts and it's quite shirty about being in the attic for so long. I guess it has a thing against girls." Ron failed to suppress a grin, but looked relieved that he didn't have to explain why they were talking about Hermione.

"Well, I've sorted it out now, but not before it could get half the girls here. Luckily, your mum was able to clean us up." She grabbed a chicken leg from the dish between her and Ron and started eating.

Ron seemed tense again when she sat down and was nervously digging his fork into his steak and kidney pie.

*

Presents were opened, friends were thanked, and the party went on quite well for several hours. No one had turned into canaries, developed enormous tongues, or spontaneous nosebleeds. It was as if the twins weren't there at all.

Harry was enjoying another piece of cake, much to Mrs. Weasley's delight, as he sat in a chair near the garden door. His eyes rested on Ginny. She was talking animatedly with Dean Thomas about Quidditch from the hand gestures she was making. Then he remembered that she had said she was dating Dean on the train ride home last month. Dean was laughing at something she said and gave her a very appreciative look. One that triggered an irrational desire in Harry to punch him in the mouth.

"Something the matter, dear?" came Mrs. Weasley's voice through his thoughts.

Looking up at her, he realized that his emotions must have shown on his face and he shook his head. "No. I'm all right, just a bit full from this wonderful cake."

"Well, I'm glad you like it. Be sure to tell Ginny, then." She motioned her wand at the dirty dishes she was carrying and then marched them off to the sink to be washed.

Harry returned to gazing at the youngest Weasley, wondering when it was that she had found time to make him a cake. More importantly, why? Unable to find a satisfactory reason, he decided to find Ron and Hermione, who had wandered outside. But before he could get up, he was shocked to realize that the girl he had been looking at was now looking back at him. And she was smiling.

Without a single thought about it, his lips curved upwards to mirror the look on her face. Something in his belly twisted in a funny way and he felt his palms go sweaty. It was a wonderful sensation, and the first thought that came to mind was to go over to her and kiss her. *WHAT?* His brain screamed at him. *I mean, she was good looking, and smart, and very brave, and sure, she probably understands him better than anyone else...*

Unable to stand the mental tug-of-war any longer, he stood abruptly and crashed into someone walking through the garden door.

"Ahhh!" he said as his cake plate went flying.

"Oh!" screamed the person, and was hit with the piece of unfinished dessert.

It was Cho.

Harry froze for a split-second in shock, then said, "I'm so sorry, Cho. Let me help you clean that up." He grabbed a napkin from the table next to them and started to wipe the cake.

"That's quite all right, Harry. I can manage...." So focused on the spill, he failed to notice the mortified look on her face and the giggles coming from the people around him.

Finally, she grabbed his hands. "Harry," she said firmly. "It's fine. Let me clean it up, okay?"

When Cho released his hands, Harry became aware of the particular area of her person the cake had landed on. The front of her robes were wet with chocolate frosting and cake crumbs. More specifically, the area around her chest.

Harry's face flamed red and he began to stammer. "I-I...I'm so sorry. W-would you..."

She cut him off hastily. "Don't worry about it." Her voice was calm and even. "I'll just go to the loo and get this fixed up."

Ginny, who had witnessed the entire encounter, stooped to pick up Harry's plate and walked over to him. "Here's your plate," she said quietly, but not avoiding his eyes.

He took the plate from her and said with relief, "Thanks. I'm pretty daft, huh?"

"Nah," she said smoothly. "We all do stupid things around the people we love."

Momentarily confused, Harry tried to decipher the meaning of her words. Did she mean that he was clumsy because he loved Cho or her? Thinking quickly, he decided to make the most of the situation. "I guess you're right, Ginny."

She hesitated for a moment, and then made a move to leave. Harry impulsively grabbed her arm, above the elbow and said, "But I don't like Cho anymore." He desperately tried not notice how soft the fabric of her dress was, or how the warmth of her skin seeped through it so easily.

Ginny gasped in surprise and turned back to face Harry. They looked at each other for a moment, and then Harry released her arm and walked towards the sink without a word.

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The party broke up just after dinnertime, and everyone was so stuffed that they didn't notice, even the perpetually hungry Ron. As the sun began to set and the stifling heat of the day decreased, Harry found himself outside, walking along the edge of the forest in the paddock. There were birds flitting in and out of the trees, calling to each other in a cacophony of noise.

Harry walked to a particularly large tree and climbed up to one of the low-lying branches. Being alone helped him deal with life, but there were times when being alone drained what little happiness he had. Life at The Burrow imbued a measure of peace, but sometimes the freshness of Sirius' loss crept up on him, and he had to seek solitude in order to fight against the overwhelming feelings.

Looking out into the waning summer sunshine, he tried to focus on the happiness he had felt today. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny really went out of their way to make it unique, and for once, he actually felt special. Thinking about his party led him to think about his encounter with Cho and Ginny and how strikingly different the two girls were.

It was easy for Harry to offer girl advice to Ron yesterday, but trying to gain any semblance of clarity to his own situation was fruitless. As much as he wanted to sort out his feelings, they were just too muddled. Cho was the past, he knew that much—but what about the future? Did it include Ginny? Looking at her this morning and then at the party, he could think of nothing better. He even made that stupid remark about not liking Cho any more. While it was true, he was afraid of leading her to believe something that even he wasn't sure about.

Sighing, he leaned back into the trunk of the tree and closed his eyes. His hearing became instantly more acute and he let his mind wander to the sounds of the birds and insects. A loud knocking noise signalled the presence of a woodpecker off to his right. The gentle twittering of swallows danced in the branches above him. Then a new sound alerted him to something unnatural. He perked his ears and tried to filter out the other noises.

There it was again, something definitely man-made, almost like footfalls.

Soon enough, the breaking of twigs and shuffling of leaves became loud enough that he could tell that whatever, or whoever it was, was getting closer. Slowly, Harry pulled his wand from the waistband of his trousers without opening his eyes. It was definitely a person, and they were now directly below him. Running through a few different courses of action, he decided that his best chance would be to simply drop from the branch and tackle them.

Just as he was starting to roll over and begin the dropping maneuver, a voice called out to him. "Harry, are you out there?"

It was Ginny.

Already halfway through his roll, he tried to stop, but gravity had taken hold of his body. He twisted his torso back to the branch and tried to grab on with his free hand, which only served to jerk his body more vehemently. Instead of cleverly pouncing on his victim, or even falling gracefully to the ground, he landed in a heap, right in front of Ginny.

"Ahhhh!" she screamed in shock.

"Uhhhh," he moaned into the soft dirt.

Ginny dropped to his side and turned him over. "You gave me such a fright! Are you hurt?"

Her breath was coming in short gasps, and it blew softly on his face. There wasn't much light left, but it was enough that he could see her expression. Concern and love were plainly evident, and it struck something forcefully in his soul. Again, it occurred to him that Ginny Weasley was a very pretty girl. Her scent and warmth radiating from her body surrounded him and he revelled in its comfort. *Howdid I not notice her before?* he mused, still staring into her worried eyes.

"Harry," she whispered, breaking him out of his reverie. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," was his quiet reply. *I am now*, he didn't add.

Her hand moved to his forehead, as if to push his fringe back, but it stopped suddenly and withdrew. Ginny's open expression closed and she leaned away. "We better head back. Mum doesn't like us to be out after dark." She stood up and held out her hand to him.

"All right," he said, still not breaking eye contact with her.

He grabbed her proffered hand and stood up next to her. Ginny made to let his hand go, but he held it tighter. "Let's walk back together," he added, as if it weren't obvious that they were going to do that anyway. But he needed to say something to keep her hand in his.

Ginny hesitated for a moment, as if having an internal debate, then replied, "I'd like that."

They walked hand in hand out of the trees and into the paddock. Harry's palms were sweating and he felt extremely awkward holding her hand like this. Last night, it just seemed natural, and he hadn't thought a thing about it. Now there was a strange tension between them. Thinking of how to break it, he stopped short of the line marking the Weasley's garden.

"That's odd," Harry said, suddenly sensing something.

Ginny cocked her head and looked at him sideways, "What's odd?"

"Listen."

A minute passed before she said, "I don't hear anything."

"Exactly. What happened to the birds?" Harry pulled his wand out again and looked around to the trees where they had been.

"You don't think something's the matter, do you?" Ginny said with a bit of apprehension.

"I don't..." but he was cut off by a loud shout from The Burrow. Then at once, the sound of several spells echoed through the air, along with more shouting.

Harry squeezed Ginny's hand tighter and they took off towards the hill that overlooked the Weasley's home. Red, blue and green light flashed in the distance as more spells were fired. Mr. Weasley's distinctive voice could be heard shouting '*Stupefy!*'

As they topped the hill, the scene before them defied description. Several hooded figures were firing spells at The Burrow, which was now on fire in several places. At least one of the attackers was out of the fight, sprawled on the grass by Mr. Weasley's shed. The eldest Weasley was in the doorway of the kitchen, firing fearlessly as he defended his home. The twins were also shooting spells from their windows and every once in a while, tossed something down which exploded and knocked several Death Eaters on their backsides.

"Have you got your wand?" Harry asked Ginny quickly.

She pulled it out of her dress pocket and brandished it in front of her. The look of cold determination on her face made Harry flinch. "All right," he said, pointing to the shed on their right. "Do you see your dad's shed?"

Ginny nodded, and he continued. "Let's make for there, and we can catch them in a crossfire. It'll give us some cover as well."

Her face still grimly set, she said, "I'm ready, Harry."

They squeezed each other's hand for reassurance and ran together for the shed. Harry chose a route that put trees, bushes and other cover between them and the attackers. But it didn't matter, the Death Eaters were too intent on the main building to turn around and check their flank. *Big mistake*, thought Harry.

Arriving on the side of the shed facing the drive, they crept slowly around to the side entrance and waited for Fred and George to set off another explosion. Like clockwork, another bomb appeared from the window and the air was rent with another loud *BOOM!*

Taking advantage of the chaos, they slipped inside the shed. Crouching low, Ginny hugged up to his side for support. "Here's the plan," said Harry. "You aim for the ones closest to us, and I'll take the far ones. That way, they'll all be distracted and maybe give your family time to get out of there."

"Sounds good," she said simply. Then she moved over to the other side of the doorway and aimed her wand at the closest Death Eater. "*Stupefy!*" she yelled. The Death Eater crumpled.

Harry started to send hexes at the far group of attackers and eventually, spells were sent back to their direction. The shed was good cover, as it stopped most spells, but bits of wood flew around them as each bolt hit the structure and the roof was starting to smoke. Eventually, Death Eaters started to fall in the crossfire. Fred and George must have run out of bombs because no more explosions were heard, but it didn't matter, the battle was all but over.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley emerged from The Burrow's door as soon as the last attacker was stunned. They were followed by Ron and Hermione, who had been shooting spells from the kitchen window. Harry turned to Ginny and helped her off the floor. Her hair was mussed and there were beads of sweat on her nose. Harry didn't think she could ever look more beautiful, than at that moment.

When he didn't move immediately, she jerked his hand a little and said, "Earth to Harry?"

"Wha-Oh, sorry," he said sheepishly, still openly staring at her.

"Come on." She pulled his hand and they walked carefully out of the shed.

They picked their way through the unconscious and prone bodies of the Death Eaters, trying to avoid touching them. Some had their hoods askew enough that Harry could see their faces but he didn't recognize any of them. As they approached the house, movement caught Harry's eye and he turned quickly to see what it was, wand still drawn.

A Death Eater was moving towards Ginny, about three feet away. Acting fast, Harry sent a stunner at the man, but his aim was off. The hooded man lunged at Ginny, who had just discovered the threat, and grabbed her by the legs, toppling her to the ground. Hermione screamed, and Harry could see out of the corner of his eye that they were running to assist.

Not wanting to risk hitting Ginny with a spell, Harry dove on the man to try to remove him physically. "Get...off...her," he yelled between laboured breaths. The man was strong however, and Harry was unable to push him far. Ginny was just barely able to rotate her legs before kicking the man squarely in the crotch. With a howl of pain, the man went down and Ginny scrambled to get out from under him.

Harry grabbed her hand to help, but she was still struggling when the Death Eater pulled an old shoe from his cloak and lunged one last time at the redhead. As soon as he had a handful of her dress, the Portkey activated, and because Harry was holding onto her hand with all his strength, he was pulled forward with a jerk as well, into the unknown.

Coming of Age 6: The Thing About Weasleys

Chapter Six – The Thing About Weasleys

Ron was not in a good mood. Trudging back from the lake after nearly showing Hermione the family jewels, anger bubbling and boiling inside him, he contemplated several appropriate hexes to apply to a certain best friend. As he entered the cool of the house, the steam was finally beginning to filter out of his system. Even though he could see the humor in the situation, and even if Harry had had his best interests in mind, it wouldn't do for Ron to let him off too easily. So Ron resolved to act angry until Harry's party, just to make sure Harry knew that he couldn't get away with being that much of an insufferable git.

First, Ron needed to find Hermione and try to defuse the situation with her before she made good on her threat to end their friendship. *One thing about Hermione was that she always kept her promises* --Ron shuddered involuntarily at the thought. Not really knowing how to handle the situation, he thought about asking Ginny for advice, but her disinterest was clear, and he had no choice but to face Hermione on his own.

Ginny had obviously been lying about her being in Percy's room. As good a liar as Ginny was, he had learned to see through her half-truths. That meant Hermione wasn't in the house - which meant she must be outside, and since it was so hot outside, she would seek shelter, meaning the shed, or the tree house.

With a plan in mind, Ron felt more confident, even if he didn't see how he was going to talk to Hermione. It was always difficult to talk to Miss Know-It-All Granger, and now that their friendship was on the line, he was more intimidated than he'd ever been. He struggled to keep his composure as he thought about the impending conversation.

He flopped down the stairs and into the kitchen to grab a bite of something. Hopefully, his mum would be too busy with the decorations to notice.

When he entered the kitchen, he was momentarily taken aback by the size of the room, and almost thought he was in the wrong house. Gathering his wits, he padded carefully over to the pantry; his mum was nowhere to be seen. He opened the pantry door and grabbed a small loaf of bread and two apples, only taking those because there were no sweets. Still trying to remain silent, he made for the garden door and slipped into the late morning heat.

Once outside, with a great sense of relief at not being caught by his mum, Ron walked more confidently towards the shed. With some level of trepidation, he opened the door and peered inside. The bright sun made it hard to see within the dark building, so he had to wait for a moment before his eyes adjusted. Finding no one, he closed the door and walked towards the tree house.

The tree house was located in an old oak tree that rested on a hill overlooking the village. Bill had built it when he was seven with dad and Charlie's help and the twins had modified it with an enlarging spell three years ago. It was their first attempt at a time delayed spell and when it was first cast, the effects were unpredictable. Time however, had increased its stability as the power waned and as the bits of magic they infused in the spell melded together.

The outside of the tree house appeared normal to the casual observer. It was square, made of rough, hewn lumber that was worn and gray from years of exposure to the elements. A single closed window dominated the southern wall and a rope ladder led to the trap door on its bottom. The entire structure was built on and around several large branches of the tree, providing it with support and kept it a good ten feet off the ground.

Ron grabbed the bottom of the ladder and adjusted the bag on his shoulder as he climbed to the top. Before he could push the door open, he heard a muffled sob and froze on the slightly swaying rope. Time seemed to stand still as he strained to hear any sign of who it might be. Finally deciding that he was being stupid, as it could only be Hermione in the tree house, he pushed against the door until it swung over to the floor with a loud bang.

"Agh!" screamed Hermione, who was backed into the corner of the magically enlarged room, clutching at her chest. Her other hand was brandishing a shaky wand aimed at Ron's head, which was the only thing poking through the door.

"There you are," said Ron somewhat triumphantly. He pulled himself onto the dusty floor and closed the door with an only slightly quieter slam. Noticing the wand for the first time, he held out his hands and said, "I'm not going to attack you Hermione, I only wanted to talk."

Hermione didn't relax, but put her wand down in any case. "You scared me to death, Ron!" she said, stamping her foot to punctuate her words. "How was I supposed to know it was you?"

Ron grimaced and looked at his feet in a vain attempt for help. "I'm sorry," he whispered sheepishly. "I didn't mean to scare you."

He heard Hermione sigh and glanced up to see her wiping at her face. "It's fine, Ron," she said as she sank into a crouch in the corner. "What did you want to talk about?"

A fresh wave of butterflies erupted in his stomach as he wrestled with what he wanted to tell her. "Well...I sort of..." Ron cursed himself inwardly as all

semblance of coherent speech prompted him. *Why does this blasted girl do this to me?*

"Yes, Ron?" she prompted.

Sunlight spilled into the cutout holes that passed for windows in the tree house, illuminating the slowly swirling dust in the air and fell on the side of Hermione's face. Her eyelashes glistened with a wetness that Ron failed to understand. He was close enough to discern the small bumps on the skin of her face, highlighted by the light and miniscule shadows they cast. It made her seem surreal, as if she was the creation of a master sculptor.

Seeing Ron falter, Hermione smiled. His breathing hitched and he almost forgot to start again. *No wonder I can't ever say anything around her.*

Then without pausing to consider the words that had been bouncing around his mind for years, they slipped past his guard and spilled from his mouth. "You're so beautiful, Hermione."

Several things happened at once. Ron's breathing started again while Hermione's stopped with sharply inhaled lungful of air. Ron widened his eyes in surprise and he looked anxiously around the room, trying to find the person that had uttered those words. Finally, the bag that was hanging on Ron's shoulder slipped and fell to the ground with a clatter.

Then their eyes met and Ron knew there would be no going back to the way it was before. He felt himself floating in between the comfortable friendship that they'd enjoyed for the last five years and a space of unknown territory that was laid out in front of him. It was either going to be marked with Hermione's presence or it would not and Ron became numb with the anticipation of knowing which it would be.

Hermione let out her breath and blinked, eyes still locked with Ron's and she said, "What did you say?"

Ron was in agony. Not only had his traitorous mouth let loose with one his carefully guarded secrets, but now Hermione wanted him to relive the agony by repeating it. Summoning all the courage he could find, he closed his eyes and clenched his fists with determination. "I said, that I think you are beautiful, Hermione."

Trembling, he cracked one eye open to see her reaction. She stood up and walked tentatively towards him. "You...you really think so?"

Fighting the urge to jump out the nearest window, he stood his ground and nodded his head. "Yes," he said opening his eyes more fully. "I really do."

She stopped just in front of him and touched his still clenched fists with a light finger. "But my hair is atrocious...and I never paint my nails...and I don't have any pretty clothes to wear."

"I like your hair," Ron interrupted. "And the dress you wore to the Yule ball was very pretty." He paused and looked down at their hands. Ron's fist unclenched and gently lifted her hand. "And you did paint your nails."

Hermione looked down quickly and flushed red. "Well, that's just...Ginny and I were...." She pulled away from him and brought her hand to her forehead.

"I like it," said Ron proudly. "But maybe something red would be a better color?"

She peaked at him from under her hand and smiled wryly. "And what do you know about which colors look good on me?"

"Well, red is a great color, so...um...well, it's a Gryffindor color anyway," said Ron stumbling over his words yet again.

Hermione grinned and approached him yet again. "I think it's sweet that you noticed, Ron."

A bead of sweat dropped from his forehead and ran down his cheek. "Yeah...I...guess I notice things about you, Hermione."

She brushed the back of her hand on his face and kissed him where the perspiration had been. "Harry's party will be starting soon so we better get back."

Ron's face heated, and combined with the already hot air in the tree house, threatened to spontaneously combust. With a lingering look at Hermione's face, he said, "Yeah, we'd better get back."

*

The walk back to the Burrow had taken far too little time in Ron's opinion as a wonderful tension filled the air between him and Hermione. They talked the entire time, their hands brushed occasionally because they were far too close together. He couldn't think of anything better to happen to him. Not only had they been able to repair the mysterious rift their friendship, but he couldn't help smile every time Hermione looked at him. He was grinning like an idiot and he didn't care what anyone else said about it. Except maybe Harry. *Harry*.

He still needed to smooth things over with Harry, but with whatever was happening with Hermione going on, Ron couldn't think of a way to reconcile and tell Harry that his relationship with Hermione was becoming something more. So he decided not tell him just yet.

They arrived in the Burrow's expanded kitchen just as they started to sing 'Happy Birthday'. Ron gave up his grudge for a moment and with a slap on the back, wished him a Happy Birthday. Ron's stomach was growling, so he didn't waste any time in moving over to the food trays.

Hermione had a tear in her eye, so he asked, "Is there something wrong?"

She looked at him quizzically and said, "Didn't you see the look on Harry's face?"

Ron glanced at his best friend, who was watching Ginny lay into the twins. "No. Was there something I missed?"

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms as Ron continued to pile food on his plate. His mother had outdone herself and he wanted to have some of everything. "Ron Weasley! Harry has never had a real party before and was on the verge of crying, while all you can think about is stuffing your face!"

Placing another chicken leg on his burgeoning plate, Ron licked his fingers and said, "Oh, tosh. Harry's not the sort of bloke who gets all emotional about things." Then under his breath he muttered, "'Verge of crying'...honestly."

Ron expected another scathing attack, since that was what had happened every time they rowed. It was quite amusing really, to see her get wound up so tightly. This time, however, she let out her breathe and said with an air of contentedness. "Well, perhaps you're right, but that doesn't mean he'll always be insensitive."

Just as Ron was about to reply, Hermione grabbed his arm and led him back to the table. "Careful!" yelled Ron, trying to balance his precariously loaded plate. "I don't want to drop any of this." Then eyeing her empty hands, remarked, "Where's your plate, anyway?"

They sat at the center of the rapidly filling table and Hermione casually said, "I'll just eat off your plate." Then apparently seeing the look of concern on his face added, "You've certainly got enough for two people...or five."

"Hey!" he said in protest.

"Oh, be quiet and eat your chicken," she scolded half-heartedly.

"Fine, but I'll just end up going back for seconds."

"Whatever," she said distractedly. "Look, here comes Harry and Ginny," she said, nodding in their direction. "I'm going to go get us some drinks. You should probably apologize to him, you know. It is his birthday after all."

Ron huffed and made to retort but she had already gone. He knew that she was right, but couldn't quite bring himself to that level of humility. Harry did deserve to be left in the cold for a while. After all, he had been.

"Hey, mate," said Harry after he sat down next to Ron.

"Hey," said Ron, still staring at his half-eaten chicken leg.

"Look...about the whole lake thing. I wanted to apologize about that." Ron tried to figure out how long he would torture his friend, when Harry continued. "It wasn't my place to force you to talk to Hermione."

"It wasn't very funny, you know." Ron tried to keep his face straight and focus on making Harry suffer just a bit longer. "I was starkers out there, and then you dropped my trunks right next to *her*."

Ron's resolve broke when he saw the look of terror on Harry's face and he let the smirk he had been fighting come to the surface. "You're having me on?" asked Harry.

"I was mad," he said, still smiling. "But after you left, I realized that besides being mortified in front of Hermione..."

"What about me?" interrupted Hermione, who apparently hadn't returned with any drinks. She gave Ron a questioning look and when Ron nodded, said, "Someone thought it would be funny to enchant the punchbowl to spray punch at the girls."

Ron rolled his eyes, remembering the last time they had used that wretched piece of glass. "It's not enchanted to do that, Hermione. Mum's not used it since Bill graduated from Hogwarts and it's quite shirty about being in the attic for so long. I guess it has a thing against girls."

"Well, I've sorted it out now, but not before it could spray half the girls here. Luckily, your mum was able to clean us up." She made to grab one of the chicken legs on Ron's plate, but changed her mind when Ron's eyebrows shot up, and she took one off the nearby serving dish instead.

Presents were opened, cake was served, and Ron stuffed himself until he could barely breathe. Hermione kept shooting him disdainful looks as he ate, but would invariably smile when he looked up at her.

*

Eventually, the need for food faded and an idea formed in Ron's mind. He pulled himself from the couch he was occupying and grabbed Hermione's hand with a grin on his face. "Wanna go for a walk?" he whispered into her ear.

"Sure," she answered with a smirk of her own.

Ron pulled her out the front door of the Burrow and led her down the dirt path. It wound towards the village for a couple of miles, but he wasn't interested in going there. Instead, he made a left where a small trail forged a path in the undergrowth of the trees on the side of the road. After a couple of minutes tramping through the bushes, Hermione pulled on his hand.

"Where are you taking me?"

He tried his best to look innocent. "Just somewhere I always went before I left for Hogwarts." Seeing the disbelieving look on her face, he added, "It's not much further, and I promise you'll like it."

She seemed to consider this, but finally relented. "All right, but we shouldn't wander far."

"Why not?" he asked impatiently. "It's not like Death Eaters would attack us in the middle of a thicket on Harry's birthday."

Something shook inside his still too full belly and he wondered just how sure he was of himself. Hermione seemed to be thinking the same thing because she said, "That's exactly the kind of thing Voldemort would do. Wait until we've been lulled into a stupor by celebrating Harry's birthday and then attack."

Ron waved his own queasy feelings aside, as well as Hermione's argument. "They don't even know he's here. Only Dumbledore and our family knows."

"And Lupin, and my parents and..."

"All right, all right, you've made your point." He turned to face her fully and said, "I won't let anything happen to you, Hermione."

A faint pink appeared on her cheeks and she looked down at her feet. "I know you won't Ron, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be careful."

Feeling a little twinge of pride at having earned Hermione's trust, he took her hand once more and pulled her towards his 'spot'.

The babbling sound of water drifted to their ears as they neared the stream and as they approached it, Ron could hear Hermione's breathing increase. A small patch of grass clung to the riverbank and held two small smooth boulders that looked as if they had been carved into the same kind of pouf that Trelawney used in her classroom.

They sat on the rocks and watched as a myriad of insects flew lazily over the water, occasionally being eaten by a jumping fish. "It's beautiful, Ron," said Hermione after a moment.

Ron's mind was buzzing with the heady rush of being in this wonderful place with a pretty girl at his side. Hermione turned to look at him and something in her eye made him move his head closer. She smiled at his motion and tilted her head slightly, only encouraging him on. Just as their lips were about to touch, a piercing scream echoed down from the Burrow.

"Ron, we need to get back right now!" shouted Hermione, who had jumped up and was already running towards the road.

Quickly, Ron ran to catch up with her, before she could get lost in the waning light—he grabbed her hand and pulled her closer to him. Then he took the lead and followed the path back through the trees as fast as they could go.

When they emerged on the dirt road, a full-fledged battle was taking place in front of the Burrow. Bill and Charlie were dueling with four Death Eaters, while their father was shooting hexes at another group hiding behind the large willow tree in their garden.

Ron and Hermione both took out their wands and walked over to the tree, using various shrubs and bushes for cover. No one in the ranks of the enemy had thought to cover their flank and Ron thought with glee that it would cost them. As one, Hermione and Ron raised their wands and sent off stunners at the group of attackers that Arthur had unsuccessfully tried to fell.

Two of the three were hit with the spells and the remaining Death Eater spun around in time to get hit with another hex from Hermione. Ron was amazed that she had fired off another spell so quickly, but didn't have time to compliment her. Soon, the other four were aware of their presence and had turned to shoot stunning spells of their own at the newcomers.

With a dive roll, Ron dodged the red streak of light and ran crouched over to the willow, now free of conscious Death Eaters. Hermione followed, casting a shield charm that deflected the stunner aimed at her. Ron goggled at her, but she just smirked in reply, sending off another spell at the now scattering attackers.

Bill and Charlie took advantage of the distraction and quickly dispatched the remaining dark-cloaked Death Eaters. Before they had hit the ground, all three of the eldest Weasleys ran back through the front doors, towards the sound of more spellfire from the back garden.

Hermione grabbed Ron by the arm and they took off after them.

The next five minutes was a blur for Ron and he barely had time to shout "NO!" at Ginny before a Death Eater grabbed her dress and pulled her and Harry out of the Burrow's garden and into the unknown.

Fred and George appeared from the floor above them, dragging a large duffle bag behind them. "Right," said Fred with a grim look of determination. "Who's going with us to get Harry and Ginny back?"

Arthur Weasley limped into the garden, followed by his wife. "No one is going anywhere until I've contacted the Ministry," the eldest Weasley informed his family.

"But dad, they could already be in with Voldemort!" said Ron forcefully. "We've got to go now!"

"Calm down, Ronald," said his mother. "Let your father handle this, and don't think of traipsing off again like you did last month!"

"Will you give that a rest, Mum?" Ron said dejectedly. "I told you, I'd die for Harry and there's nothing you can do to stop me from going to find him. Besides, did you forget that Ginny is missing too?" He paused to catch his breath and try to reign in his rising temper. "I wasn't there for her when she was writing in that damn diary, so I'm going to bloody be there for her now!"

"Watch your mouth, young man!" said Ron's mother heatedly. "You're just too young to be..."

"Molly," said her husband calmly. "Let it go for now."

She turned to face Arthur, shock evident on her face. "But..."

"No, love," he said, still completely calm. "Ron's almost a man now, and we can't be in the way of his life forever."

"He isn't..." she started. "But..."

"Listen to me, Molly." Arthur stared into his wife's eyes, hands holding hers gently. "This is their fight as much as it is ours. Do you remember what Albus said to us yesterday about their role in the war?"

She nodded mutely.

"It's time for them to step into their own lives now, and we can't stand in the way any longer."

Molly stood there, tears glistening in her eyes as she looked from Ron to Fred and George and finally Bill and Charlie. "I just don't want to lose any of you!" she burst out, tears finally falling down her cheeks. "I don't want to lose another son...."

Arthur scooped his wife into his arms and held her close while she let her emotions run into his tattered tweed coat. At length, she wiped her eyes and took a steady breath. "All right, you lot! Let's get moving!"

Fred and George responded instantly, rubbing his hands together, "We'll head to the shop and pickup some equipment." The twins shared a mischievous glance and pulled out their wands to Apparate.

"I'll alert the Ministry and meet you two in Diagon Alley," instructed Arthur. After the twins disappeared with a *crack*, he looked to his eldest and said, "You two split up and find Dumbledore or Minerva. One to headquarters and the other to Hogwarts. Meet us at the twins' shop when you've found them."

"Right, dad," said Charlie. "Don't start the fun without us," he said with a wink and disappeared, followed closely by Bill.

Arthur turned to Ron and Hermione and said, "You two Floo to Diagon Alley and help Fred and George. I'm going to find out where they were taken and we can coordinate our rescue plan from there."

He turned to his wife and kissed her on the cheek. "You stay here, Molly and make preparations to receive wounded," then seeing the look on her face, added, "Just in case." They looked at each other for a moment before he said, "I'll let you know as soon as we know something's happened, love."

"Be safe, Arthur and come back to me," she pleaded, and Ron could tell she was trying not to cling to him as he made to leave.

"I will, Molly," and he was gone with a *crack*.

Ron grabbed Hermione's hand and went to the fireplace. He took a handful of powder from the jar on the mantle and was about to throw it into the fire when his mother came into the kitchen. "Take this with you, Ron," she said, holding his backpack in her hands.

Hermione grabbed it and he smiled at his mum before shouting "Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes!" and throwing the gritty powder into the cold fireplace.

Coming of Age 7: The Wrath of A Weasley

Chapter Seven – The Wrath of a Weasley

A great whooshing sound sped past Ginny's ear as the three bodies banged against each other, pulled inexorably through space. She tried desperately to yank her dress free from the Death Eater's grip, but it was no use. At length, they tumbled from the air and landed in a heap on the ground. Ginny could hear the air rushing from the dark cloaked man's mouth as Harry landed on top of him. She focused on their captor and a burning hatred boiled up inside. This man had assaulted her family and taken her and Harry from them, probably to the Dark Lord himself.

With a primal scream, Ginny launched herself at the wheezing man, recently freed from Harry's body. Her foot shot out and struck his torso, just above the hip. The man tried to roll away, still struggling for breath, but she was too quick for him. Another blow from her foot knocked the wand from his hand and he howled with pain. Finally, she grabbed the front of his robes and pulled his hooded face up to her own.

"You tell Tom that when I see him again, I'm going to kill him personally," she said with a voice of cold steel. His eyes widened through the slits in his mask as she dropped him roughly to the ground and finished with a solid punch to his face. The Death Eater didn't move again.

"Wow," said a clearly shocked Harry, gently rubbing his left shoulder.

"What?" asked Ginny, resuming her cheerful demeanor.

Harry winced as he moved his hand to gesture at the prone form on the ground in front of them. "You kicked the arse of a fully-trained Death Eater," he said, awe clearly evident in his voice.

Ginny waved her hand in the air to dismiss the compliment. "He just really pissed me off, that's all. Besides, I don't think 'fully-trained' would apply to this buffoon," she said with disdain, kicking him again for good measure. She looked around at their new surroundings and noticed that they were alone. This surprised Ginny, as she expected to be brought directly to Voldemort.

Harry was following her eyes and he seemed to pull himself from similar thoughts. "Well, remind me to never get on your bad side, then."

She flashed him a wide grin and said demurely, "Just do whatever I ask, without question and I'll not hurt you too badly."

"Yes, ma'am!" Harry yelled, with a mock salute, but winced again as his shoulder tensed.

"Oh, Harry. Are you hurt?" Ginny moved to his side to inspect the affected joint.

"It's nothing," he said through gritted teeth.

Ginny arched her brow at him, but made no comment as she moved his hand away to look at the shoulder properly. It was shaped oddly, with the arm moved out from the socket, creating a depression where the bone would normally be.

"I think I dislocated it when we landed," said Harry with a glance to the fallen Death Eater.

"Well," said Ginny with genuine concern, "It's certainly not 'nothing', but I think I can fix it."

Harry tried unsuccessfully to pull back from her grasp, wincing again with the foolish action. "When did you study to be a mediwitch?" he asked jokingly

She looked into his eyes and said, "Madame Pomfrey showed me a couple of things is all."

"'Pompous Pomfrey' showed you a couple of things?" he asked incredulously. "She's never taken on an apprentice before!"

"I know...I never asked her to show me anything, but when you fell from your broom and were in hospital..." she stopped suddenly, heat rising in her cheeks with the memory.

"Go on," prodded Harry gently.

"I...I went to visit you and she was in the middle of fixing you up...." Ginny paused in thought, a distant look in her eyes. "Then she just started snapping orders at me. I was so shocked that I just did what she asked and before I knew it, you were healed."

Harry stood before her, a perplexed look on his face. "You...you healed me once before?"

Ginny's eyes shot to the ground and her hair fell around her face. "Not exactly...."

You mean that was the first time, but it wasn't the last," Harry stated plainly, somewhat to himself.

Ginny's head shook softly, hair still dangling across her brow. Harry's finger gently pulled her chin up until their eyes met and he brushed the hair from her face. "Thank you."

She slowly sucked in a breath and tried to control her heartbeat. The intimate contact was almost too much and made it difficult for her to concentrate. "Don't worry about it," she said with a quiver in her voice. "I'm sure lots of people would have done as much." She moved to tend to his shoulder again, but he stopped her.

"No, Gin. I'm not thanking you for healing me...I'm thanking you for caring enough about me to be there when I needed you." He reached out to touch her hand but pulled back at the last second. Clearing his throat nervously, he said, "So what about this shoulder? Think you can still fix it?"

Ginny blinked, confused by the sudden change in Harry's demeanor. With a slightly trembling hand, she grabbed her wand from the ground where it had landed from their fall and went about fixing Harry's shoulder.

Harry flexed his shoulder after Ginny's healing spell was complete, still wincing a bit with the motion.

"Are you sure it's fixed?" asked Ginny, concern mingled with a small portion of fear.

Harry glanced around again in the dim light and nodded. "It'll have to do." He tore his eyes from the small stand of trees to the north and looked at Ginny. "We need to get moving before someone comes looking for him," he said, gesturing at the still unconscious man on the ground.

Suddenly frightened, Ginny grabbed Harry's hand. "Do you think dad will be able to find us?"

Harry's eyes softened and he squeezed her hand slightly. "I'm sure your whole family is trying, but I don't know if they would be able to track where we went."

"What can we do to help them?" she asked, looking towards the forest.

"Well, first of all, let's try to use the Portkey to get back." Harry shrugged at Ginny's questioning look, explaining, "It worked for me before."

They walked over to the fallen Death Eater and searched for the Portkey. As they turned him over, an old shoe fell out of his robes. "That must be it," said Ginny.

"We need to touch it together," explained Harry. "On three." They knelt down and each reached out with a finger, still clutching their hands together. "One, two, three."

Their fingers touched the shoe but nothing happened. "Damn," muttered Harry under his breath. Ginny's hope deflated and she was about to start searching through the man's robes again.

Standing suddenly, Harry pulled on Ginny's hand until she was upright, then he put a finger in front of his lips to indicate they should be quiet. Ginny squinted in the direction Harry was looking, but the waning twilight was just too dark to make anything out. A snapping twig and deep gravelly voice announced the approach of another person.

The voice carried on the still night air across the small meadow where they were standing. "...Muggle lovers could have fought so well?"

"I don't know," came another voice, impatient and nasal. "I wouldn't put anything past those Weasleys."

Images flashed in Ginny's mind of her first trip to Flourish and Blots. A tall man, well dressed, with platinum-blond hair. It was the way he entwined hatred with the name Weasley that was forever ingrained upon her mind. Lucius Malfoy was the epitome of hatred and loathing.

All the pain and torture of her first year swelled up inside her like an infection, drowning out her natural control and confidence. This was the man that had caused it, the Dark Lord's chief lieutenant, the one who gave Tom Riddle's diary to a naïve eleven-year-old girl.

"Gin," came Harry's harsh whisper.

"Huh?" she asked, shaking her head to clear the horrible memories.

"We've got to get out of here!" Harry was pulling at her hand, and she found her legs following without her telling them to.

*

They ran for a half-hour, diving into another small thicket and following it until they came out on the far end, where a small set of cliffs dominated the southern edge of a large valley. Harry was breathing hard and his eyes pierced the darkness ahead. The sun was long set and only the light of a quarter-moon lit the landscape in front of them. A shiver ran involuntarily up Ginny's spine as she struggled to find her breath.

"There," said Harry... "We can stay there for the night."

Ginny looked at him, drinking in his form, from the perpetually messy hair that was now windswept from their dash through the woods, to the tattered trainers on his ever growing feet. It was at this moment that Ginny Weasley fell completely in love with Harry Potter for the second time.

The sight of him next to her, rescuing her from Malfoy again made her dizzy and she collapsed against him. The fear of being discovered was distant as the presence of Harry Potter's protection and strength filled her senses. She could stay in his arms forever.

When she opened her eyes next, she was laying on a soft bed of pine straw under a low tree, its thick branches veiling a splash of twinkling stars in the night sky. Harry appeared next to her and lay down awkwardly, shivering in the cool air.

"You can come closer, Harry," said Ginny with a slight croak in her voice. "I won't bite."

He turned to face her and a small grin appeared on his lips. "I thought you were still asleep."

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked through a yawn, turning over to face him. "I don't remember lying down...."

A warm chuckle sounded in his chest. "That's because I carried you for a hundred yards before I put you in here."

"Oh," she said sheepishly. "I guess it's been a long day."

"Yeah," he said softly. "I've been thinking that we're probably still in England, or at least the U.K." He scooted closer to Ginny and lay his head down on the pine straw next to her.

"How is that?"

"Well, the weather is about the same and we're in the same time zone," he reasoned. "Then I was looking at the stars and they're in pretty much the same position as before..."

Ginny let out a giggle, and Harry sent her a stony look. "What's so funny?"

"*You ...*" she said stifling the laughter as quickly as she could. "...have been hanging around Hermione too much."

"Hey," he cried indignantly, though softly. "Being intelligent has its benefits, and if it'll get us out of the spot we're in, you'd be smart to thank me for it." He was clearly trying to be serious, but failed miserably.

Ginny giggled harder. "Right, mister smarty-pants. I'll be sure to bow before your greatness, just as soon as your noodle has saved us." Ginny didn't know why she was ribbing him like this, but it seemed to take the edge off the fear that had controlled her earlier. Being this close to Harry made her feel safe, and safe was exactly what she needed.

Harry huffed and folded his arms over his chest, still keeping the somber pretense. "Fine then, have it your way. See if I save your butt from another Basilisk."

"Hah," Ginny exclaimed. "You owe that one to Fawkes, not your wit."

With an exaggerated sigh, Harry turned to face her and said, "Can't a knight in shining armor get any credit?"

Ginny grinned full and long, enjoying being on the giving end for once in her life. "I'll tell you what," she said, poking him in the chest. "If I ever get myself captured or possessed by an evil wizard again, I'll let you be the one to save me."

"Let me!" he shouted. Ginny shushed him and he repeated more quietly, "Let me! See if every Death Eater in the world could stop me."

The ferocity of his tone surprised her. It was deep and passionate, born of some feelings that Ginny had never seen in Harry. His eyes relaxed and a warmth passed between them. "I won't let anyone hurt you again, Ginny."

A tear escaped her eyelids and spilled onto their makeshift bed. "That's very sweet, Harry. Thank you."

He tentatively wrapped her in a hug, one arm underneath her head and she grinned into his chest, content to be safe and warm in the arms of Harry Potter.

*

The distant hooting of an owl echoed through the still valley, waking Ginny, still enfolded in Harry's arms. A brief surge of panic gripped her, but quickly ebbed as she listened to her companion's rhythmic breathing. His face was nestled in the hollow of her neck and his warm breath heated her chest.

A chill ran up her uncovered leg and she realized how cool the night had become. The side next to Harry was warm and comfortable and she longed to be swallowed up in his embrace. The mental image of Harry on top of her, trying to shield her from the cold air caused her heart to beat faster and a flush crept up her face. *Well, that's one way to warm up*, she thought sardonically.

Fighting back that mental image, she turned her attention to the boy next to her. While their friendship had blossomed quickly over the past two days, she couldn't help but long for something more. She could feel him moving closer to her, but there were times she sensed him holding part of himself back. She also knew that Harry was the kind of person that reacted poorly to being pushed, so Ginny resolved to continue giving him the space and time he needed. If only she hadn't been waiting so long already.

A sigh escaped her lips and the sounds of shuffling feet came from her right. "*Lumos*," said a barely audible voice.

It was hard to tell how far the person was from their position under the tree, but she felt Harry tense up beside her and hold her closer. His eyes reflected in the dim light as they both strained to hear anything from the wizard that was obviously searching for them. Ginny struggled with wanting to run out and yell for help and huddling deeper in the shadows of the low pine they were hiding in.

A flash of light swept across their position, and then disappeared. Twice more it seemed to pin them against the ground, hesitating for the briefest of moments, and then it moved on. After what seemed like an hour, the light was extinguished and a faint cracking noise announced the wizard's departure.

Still on edge, Ginny fought the urge to let out her breath and instead, buried her head in Harry's shoulder, blocking out the world and letting him take the burden of worry from her.

*

Ginny blinked her eyes and found herself alone under the tree. Sunlight filtered through the canopy of pine limbs above, swaying slightly in an early morning breeze. The chill of the night had gone, but so had Harry and she once again fought away the fear that so easily seemed to capture her.

Swallowing down a lump of anxiety, she sat up awkwardly under the lowest branch and brushed pine straw from her skirt and blouse. A movement caught her attention and she froze, staring at the form until it approached her hiding place. Harry walked cautiously over to the tree and expertly ducked under the branch.

"Oh, hello," he said with a wide smile. "I was hoping that you wouldn't wake up until I got back." In his hands were two cracked, but functional mugs. "I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"I wasn't scared," she said unconvincingly. "It's just that..."

"Don't worry about it," he said, handing her a mug.

She was pleased to discover it full of warm oatmeal with a small wooden spoon sticking out the top. "Harry? Where on earth did you get this?"

"Oh...about that..." he said, rubbing his head in thought. "I, uh...found this cabin about a mile from here..."

"A cabin? Wasn't there anyone inside?"

"Not exactly..." he said with a shrug. "You see, there *was* someone there, but they left; so I borrowed these mugs, and some oatmeal, and the spoons, and..."

"Harry?" interrupted Ginny, smiling at his rambling. "It's wonderful," she said as she took a heaping spoonful of the delicious food and began gulping it down.

"I was just afraid of taking too many things and having them notice," he said, licking his spoon clean. "It would be just our luck to get caught by the Muggle police for burglary and have the Death Eaters be the first ones to catch wind of it."

"Well, they shouldn't miss a couple of old mugs and spoons, right?" said Ginny with confidence.

Harry grinned sheepishly and took another bite of oatmeal.

After they finished, Harry took her mug and spoon and offered to help her out from underneath tree. "Did you get the backpack from the cabin too?" she asked, pointing to the bag he was putting their dishes into.

"Er...yeah," he said with a shrug. "And the water bottles and apples..."

Ginny put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. "I think they're going to notice that something's missing, don't you?"

Harry zipped up the pack nervously after pulling out the water bottles. He handed one to her and said, "You know you look just like your mother when you do that?"

"Do I?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye, unscrewing the cap on her bottle.

"Absolutely," he said, taking a swig of water. Then wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, said, "We needed the supplies and I only took what I had to."

Ginny pulled at her bottle, savoring the cool water and put the cap back on. "Well, if we get caught because of your little bout of kleptomania, you can't claim superior intellect as part of your rescue technique."

"Hah!" cackled Harry. "I'll have you know that everything I do is carefully calculated to get us safely back to the Burrow."

A twinge of sadness passed over Ginny with the mention of her home. It seemed like an age since she'd been there, and she realized for the first time how wonderful a safe home was. Breaking free of the melancholy, she quipped, "I'll believe that when I see it, Harry Potter."

He screwed his face up in mock hurt, stabbing at his heart dramatically. "Thou woundest me, fair maiden."

"Right," she said with a laugh. "So what's the plan for getting us saved then?"

"I saw a phone book in the cabin from the Taunton region, so I assume we're somewhere in that area." He looked around the sky, as if to gauge the sun's angle and said, "So if we head west, we should run into the M5, or the A358, depending on which side of Taunton we're on."

"Taunton?" said Ginny, a surge of hope running through her. "We should go south, not west," she said, pulling on Harry's hand. "It'll take us towards

Churchstanton and if we're lucky, Ottery St. Catchpole."

Harry pulled a little on her hand to get her to turn around. "And what's so great about Churchstanton?"

"My aunt lives there," she said, flicking her tousled hair out of her face. "At the very least, we could use her place to Floo back to The Burrow." Ginny pulled her arm again and Harry fell into step behind her.

"All right...but I just hope that Voldemort's crew hasn't already thought of that..."

Ginny pushed that thought out of her head as they trudged south. As much as she liked having Harry in the lead, this was territory that was at least somewhat familiar to her. Aunt Jeanie was her favorite aunt and as the sun climbed higher into the sky, Ginny smiled as her thoughts drifted to memories of playing in the River Culm with charmed flowers floating around her head.

Coming of Age 8: Walking With Weasleys

Chapter Eight – Walking With Weasleys

Hermione slid uneasily through the grate of Fred and George's joke shop, throwing out her arms to balance herself. Ron was already brushing off his jumper and jeans as the twins appeared from a back room, arms loaded with strangely shaped items.

"Here, Ron," said George. "Take these and put them into your bag."

Ron looked dubiously at his brother. "Those won't all fit, you'll have to find another bag."

Fred rolled his eyes and asked, "Are you a wizard or not?" and produced his wand, muttering an expansion charm over the bag. He dumped his load into it, followed by George. "Now you two wait here while we get..." they paused and looked at each other seriously, finishing together, "...the bomb."

Looking for a place to sit, Hermione walked over to the counter and pulled herself onto it. The dimly lit shop was filled with hundreds of jokes and pranks, in sections marked with titles like *Treats*, *Transfiguration*, and *Explosives*. "You've got to hand it to them," she said. "They've really come a long way since they left school."

"Yeah, they're something alright," Ron said sardonically. "I'm just glad they're on our side."

She smiled and patted the space next to her. He hopped up and put an arm around her. Leaning into his shoulder, she sighed and let her guard down for the first time since the attack began. "Thanks for taking care of me, Ron."

"N-No problem," he said haltingly. His hand was making awkward circles on her back and the grin on her face grew larger. He turned to face her and said, "I don't think you should come with us, Hermione."

"What?" she asked, barely stifling her anger. "Of course I'm coming with you!"

Ron looked at her sheepishly, but said, "I just don't want you to get hurt. You should floo back to the Burrow and wait with Mum."

"I will do no such thing, Ron!" Hermione pulled herself away from him and folded her arms across her chest. "You can't lock me in a closet and keep me from helping Harry and Ginny!"

She expected him to lash back at her, but instead his eyes softened and he brought his arm around her back, pulling her close again. "I guess you're right," he said with a sigh as he continued to rub the small of her back. "I'm sorry."

Hermione leaned into him with another small grin and said, "Just don't try to protect me so much. I'm not fragile."

"Maybe so," he said, but Hermione could tell that he wasn't entirely convinced. "Do you think they'll be all right, Hermione?"

Her smile faltered and she said with a sigh, "Harry'll take care of Ginny. As thick as he is..."

Ron's hand stopped moving and he turned to look at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," she said trying not to talk down to him. "She's terribly smitten with him and he's starting to feel the same way."

The blank look on his face gave way to restrained laughter. "You mean Harry fancies *Ginny*?"

"Who fancies Ginny?" asked Fred as he walked into the shop from the back.

"Harry!" said Ron, still laughing.

"It's not funny, Ron." Hermione was getting more aggravated by the second. "He and your sister have been captured by Death Eaters and all you can think to do is laugh at his attraction to her?"

He sobered a little and said, "Well, I guess it isn't *that* funny."

"Yes it is," said Fred with a wicked gleam in his eye. "Just think of all the teasing we'll get in at their expense."

"You better not, Fred," said Hermione sternly. "He's thick enough to push Ginny away if you point it out to him." Then with a glance at Ron, she added, "Sometimes you just have to let nature take its course."

Nature had better not 'take its course',” said Ron firmly. “Or Harry’ll have quite a lot to answer for.”

Hermione whacked Ron in the arm. “They’re not stupid, Ron.”

“I should think not,” said George who had now joined his brother. “Or mum will give them an in-person howler.”

Ron shuddered next to her and Hermione said, “I know that none of you think that poorly of your sister and Harry.”

They all exchanged looks and shook their heads. Before Hermione added, “Good, then let’s forget about it and hope that they’ve at least snogged each other once before they meet some terrible fate.”

“That’s our Hermione,” said Fred, draping a hand over her shoulder, which Ron promptly pushed away.

“Always thinking positively,” chimed in George from her other side, earning a shove from Ron as well.

Two loud cracks reverberated off the store’s rafters, announcing the arrival of Bill, and Charlie. They didn’t hear the sound of Dumbledore’s entrance at all.

The Headmaster walked quickly to where Hermione and Ron were still seated on the counter. “Has your father arrived?”

“Not yet, Professor,” said Ron with a squeeze to Hermione’s middle.

“Very well,” he said turning to Fred and George. “I trust you’ve retrieved the prototypes?”

They nodded their heads and each removed a small package from their pocket.

“Excellent. Hopefully we won’t have to use them, but it’s best to be prepared.”

Another crack sounded and Arthur Weasley appeared, and then limped awkwardly to where they were all gathered. “Ah,” said Dumbledore. “What news from the Ministry?”

“They were taken with an unauthorized Portkey at 7:58pm to a spot just north of Taunton,” he reported.

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore as he checked his watch. “That gives them about an hour’s head start. We’d better get moving then.”

“Here are the exact coordinates, Albus,” said Ron’s father, handing him a slip of parchment.

The elderly wizard took the paper and with a flick of his wand, muttered “*Portus*.” It glowed in his hand briefly before returning to normal and he held it out for everyone to touch.

They all gathered around his extended hand and put a finger on the paper. Dumbledore counted off, “Three...two...one.” A tugging sensation pulled at Hermione’s navel and they were whisked away.

*

After arriving in the clearing, they immediately found Harry and Ginny’s trail. One of the benefits of being a curse-breaker, Hermione discovered, was that it made it easy to track people’s magical signature. They followed the trail until something broke Bill’s tracking spell. He cast it again, but the misty blue light from his wand floated away as soon as the incantation left his lips.

“Bugger!” he exclaimed. No one bothered to correct him. “There’s some kind of charm canceling their signature.”

“No doubt,” intoned Dumbledore who was taking up the rear. “Their captors are as well trained in the art of concealing their trail as you are in following it.”

“Just great,” muttered Ron.

“We know they’re here and traveled in this direction for the past thirty minutes,” offered Arthur. “So we just need to spread out a bit and comb the area. They can’t be too far off if they’re traveling by foot.”

In unspoken agreement, Ron and Hermione followed Bill, while Charlie and Arthur followed Dumbledore. The twins had been hanging back the entire time and continued to follow, sticking to the middle of the two groups.

After about fifteen minutes, Ron stopped and shook his head. “This isn’t right,” he said.

“What isn’t right?” asked Bill beside them.

Ron face was twisted in thought and he started to shake his head at odd intervals. Bill was about to give up and turn around, when Ron said, “They’re drawing us into an attack.”

“How do you know that?” asked his brother impatiently.

“Well,” said Ron tapping his chin with a finger. “They’ve let us follow their trail for half-an-hour, then cut it off.” He walked up the trail for a while and knelt down, squinting at the dirt in the dim moonlight. “And their tracks have been erased,” he motioned for them to come closer. “See how the dirt’s been moved recently. Like they’re trying to cover something up.”

"Excellent deduction, Mr. Weasley," said Dumbledore as he approached from the side. "However, we have little choice but to continue if we are to find your friend and sister."

Hermione came up behind him as Ron straightened up, grabbing his hand both for her own comfort as much as his. He nodded and they continued walking for a few more minutes, keeping their eyes equally focused on the trail and the surrounding bushes and rocks. The sound of a snapping branch came from their left.

Ron lit his wand and earned a sharp reprimand from Bill. "Turn that thing off!" he whispered harshly. Ron quickly extinguished the light. "You could have given away our position!"

It was clear that Bill was going to continue to lay into him, but he was cutoff by a blinding red flash that ripped the air between them, singeing their eyebrows. They instantly dropped to the ground and crawled behind a small group of rocks. More spells could be heard sizzling in the cool night air, bouncing off stone and wood, some inevitably connecting with their targets.

Dumbledore's distinctive voice could be heard nearby, "You were never particularly adept at Defense Against the Dark Arts, Mr. Mulciber." A few spells were heard and a scream before the man fell. "It's no wonder then, that you make a poor Death Eater."

Bill set up a complicated shield charm over their location and said, "Stay here and don't use your wands unless you have to." Then he ran over to where his father and brother were dueling four Death Eaters. Their duel was fascinating to watch and Hermione found herself analyzing their technique.

Dumbledore, however, was amazing. He was fighting half of the attacking force at once: Apparating around the battlefield, stunning or otherwise incapacitating his foes with precision and grace.

The twins stood back and seemed to be waiting for some kind of signal from Dumbledore. Every now and again, they would deflect a stray curse, but kept themselves out of the main battle.

Soon, there were twelve bodies lying in a row in front of them, all bound, gagged and stunned.

Not being conscious at the time of he and Voldemort's duel at the Ministry last June, Hermione was in awe of the power her Headmaster held and found her respect for the old man deepen, if that were possible. "No wonder Voldemort fears him," she said under her breath.

"Look at this one," said Charlie, who had been inspecting their prisoners. "He's got an old wound," he jabbed into the man's pockets with his wand. "And what looks like a Portkey."

"That's him," said Hermione. "From the Burrow. It's the one who took Harry and Ginny."

"Are you sure, Hermione?" asked Arthur. "I didn't see him very well myself."

"Ron and I were right there when he took that old shoe out," she said confidently. "I'm sure."

"Well," said Dumbledore, who had surveyed the scene over their shoulders. "It appears that Harry and Ginny have escaped and are on their own." He turned to Bill and Charlie and said, "Go back to headquarters and see if anyone else has arrived. We'll need some more people to continue the search."

They immediately Disapparated and Dumbledore turned to Ron's dad. "It is becoming more and more crucial that we find them, Arthur, but I fear that we will have to delay an hour or two while we work out a better rescue plan."

"Is there nothing that can be done?" asked Arthur.

He pulled his watch from his pocket and after looking at it for a second, said, "I'm afraid not. Their magical signature has been masked, either by the Death Eaters, or," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Perhaps Mr. Potter has unintentionally masked Ginny and himself to prevent their pursuers from finding them."

"Can he do that?" asked Hermione before she could stop herself. "I mean, that's not even covered at Hogwarts."

"Correct, Miss Granger. However, Harry is very keen on picking things up and has been in the company of Aurors and Order members since last year. Besides," he said twisting the tip of his beard thoughtfully. "I wouldn't put it past him to have done it entirely without knowing that he was capable of it."

Another second passed and he turned back to Arthur. "Take your family and Hermione home and get some rest. We'll send other Order members to continue the search."

"I trust Harry implicitly, Albus," he said with a sigh, limping over to the Headmaster. "You know that. It's just terribly difficult to leave her out here with Death Eaters on the loose."

"I'm fairly confident that they are in no danger tonight, Arthur." The look in the Professor's face told them all just how deeply he believed it.

With a nod, Arthur relented. Dumbledore changed the Portkey they had used to travel to the clearing and with another whoosh, Ron and Hermione were taken back to the Burrow.

Waiting around and doing nothing proved to be the single most aggravating part of their entire involvement in the attack. Hermione was at her wits end, with only tidbits of information arriving with various Order members to keep her going. Tonks and Lupin arrived immediately after they had returned from the search and went with Arthur back to the Ministry to check for under-age magic use in the area. The twins went with Bill and Charlie back to the shop to pickup another prototype and then back to the trail where they had battled with the Death Eaters. Mrs. Weasley alternated between baking and cleaning, not seeming to know which was more important.

Just as Hermione was reading in a book on Magical Transportation about how to make her own Portkey, Arthur appeared in the living room where Ron and Hermione were seated, a piece of parchment waving in his hands. "Hestia's found them!" he announced.

Mrs. Weasley came bustling through the door. "Are they safe? Where are they? Who has them?"

"Calm down, Molly," he soothed. "We don't have them yet, but Hestia's sure that she detected a Confundus Charm around a stand of pine trees." He held up the parchment triumphantly. "And ol' Hopkirk's finally come through for us for a change. A wandless Confundus Charm was cast in that area just an hour ago."

"How do they know it was Harry or Ginny?" asked Mrs. Weasley, clearly still unsettled.

Two sets of popping noises could be heard in the kitchen. "We don't know for sure, but the signature was blocked, so she couldn't send off a proper letter; it was sitting in a stack on her desk, of all things."

"I don't follow, Arthur," she said as Bill, Charlie and the twins came into the room.

"We heard you'd located them," said Fred. "When do we leave?"

"Just a minute boys," he said, gesticulating with his hands. "We've got to wait for Dumbledore first and your mother needs to know what's happening." They each looked around at the empty seats, but seemed too antsy to sit. "Now, Molly," he continued. "Harry's seemed to figure out how to block his magical signature and so we don't know who cast the spell, or who's in the pine trees. What we do know, is that there are more Death Eaters in the area looking for them as well."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Hermione and Mrs. Weasley. Bill and Charlie looked like they wanted to feed someone to a dragon. "So we've got to be extra careful before we get caught in another trap."

"Oh, we've got just the thing for that, dad," said George proudly, extracting a long, thin, two pronged cylinder from his cloak, resembling two fat wands jammed together at the end.

"Dark Detecting Diviner," explained Fred at the quizzical glances he was getting. "Just like the real thing, except this baby will fire an illuminating charm at the witch or wizard if they've done a dark spell in the past two days."

"We tried to increase the time, but the signature becomes too weak after that," added George. "And you have to be closer than a hundred yards for it to fire properly."

"That will come in quite handy, George," said a voice directly behind Hermione. She jumped a foot into the air and clutched her chest to still her rapidly beating heart.

"Professor Dumbledore," said Ron, breathing heavily. "When did you get here?"

"I only just arrived, Mr. Weasley." Then gesturing to the twins, said, "I believe a field test would be in order."

"Right," the twins chimed.

Again they touched the now worn slip of parchment in Dumbledore's hand and were carried away to the trail.

*

The Dark Detecting Diviner didn't lock onto any dark magical signatures when they first arrived, but George kept it out and ready while they walked toward their rendezvous with Hestia. Bill and Charlie were hanging close to Ron and Hermione, while Dumbledore and Arthur lead the way with the twins. They walked for ten minutes before they came over a slight hill that opened up to a valley. The eastern horizon was lightening with the impending dawn and Hermione had to concentrate to keep from tripping on the loose rocks on the path.

"Oi," said George ahead of them. "I'm picking up something here."

The adults gathered around him and he said, "It's getting stronger."

Following George, they trudged up a light slope until it peaked. What they saw caused several of them to gasp. "Look how many of them there are," said Fred, eyes goggling at the sight before them.

Hermione made it up the slope last and peered from behind a tall tree. She too, gasped. Down the other side of the hill they'd just climbed were hundreds of black cloaked figures in various states of sleep, and what seemed to be several...

"Trolls?" asked Bill incredulously.

"I'm afraid so," said Dumbledore and then grabbing Fred and George on the shoulder, gave them a significant look. They gulped audibly and nodded, a look of fear etched on their faces.

"We've got to distract them and send someone to get Harry and Ginny back to Hogwarts," said Arthur who immediately turned to Dumbledore and began whispering fiercely with him. After a moment and several nods and shaken heads, they turned back to the group.

"Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley will meet up with Hestia and try to get Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley back to safety." The headmaster produced a Muggle fountain pen and handed it to Ron. "This Portkey will take you to the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. Activate it when you've found them by saying the name of your Transfiguration professor."

Ron nodded solemnly and took the pen, placing it in the pocket of his jeans.

"Fred, George," said their father. "Take these two as far as you can and try to circle around their camp. We need you to take out as many of them as you can." He clapped them each on the shoulder. "We'll attack as soon as you set *it* off."

"Right," responded Fred.

"Let's go, you two," said George, who was still brandishing his Dark Diviner.

They followed the twins back down the small hill and marked its base as it wound around to the north. Ron was holding Hermione closely as they walked, his bag hanging loosely from his other shoulder. As they entered a small glade, the Diviner jerked George's hands and nearly pulled him to the ground.

"Argh!" he yelled, trying to gain control of it. "It's gone mad!"

Fred jumped to his brother's rescue and grabbed the handles with his own hands. It seemed to calm down a bit, then shot off a series of white bolts into a nearby clump of bushes. Soon there were answering spells sizzling past their heads. Hermione pulled Ron behind a tree as Fred and George dropped the Diviner and brandished their wands.

From what Hermione could see, there were twelve Dark Wizards in front of them, as she could see twelve bright lights bobbing and weaving through the bushes. Using the lights as a guide, she sent off several stunners. Ron was yelling "*Stupefy!*" and "*Expelliarmus!*" in succession from the other side of the trunk. Fred and George were more exposed but seemed remarkably adept at dodging the hexes that were aimed their way.

Several of the lights were no longer moving, but then a series of curses flew over her head that were too many to have come from the dozen that they had originally spotted. Given that they had come from a slightly different angle, she gathered that they were about to be attacked by a second wave of Death Eaters.

"We've got to cut their numbers down," yelled Hermione to the twins.

"You don't say!" answered Fred as he sent two red bolts after a pair of Death Eaters that had tried to flank them. "You have something in mind?"

Blocking a blue beam with a shield spell, Hermione said, "Not really. I was hoping you had something up your sleeves."

"What about the bomb?" asked Ron through gritted teeth as a spell ricocheted off the tree in front of him, sending bits of bark into his face.

"No," answered George. "We have to save it for the main attack."

A large crash announced the arrival of a snarling Mountain Troll, waving a large club threateningly over his head. Hermione squeaked and sent three stunning spells at the creature. They hit him squarely in the chest, but instead of falling down, he only became more agitated and angrily slammed the club into the ground in front of him.

"Right," she said shakily. "It takes three *simultaneous* stunning spells to de-capacitate a fully-grown Troll."

Before they could coordinate their attack however, the Troll charged their position and Ron barely pulled Hermione away from the tree before it was toppled from one solid swing from the Troll's club. Now exposed to the attacking Death Eaters, it took all they had to dodge and deflect the hail of curses that were sent their way.

Just as Hermione turned to see what the Troll was doing, Fred yelled out over the sounds of firing spells, "Close your eyes!"

But the Troll was once again bearing down on them and the last thing she remembered was the urge to vomit as a putrescent smell invaded her nostrils, before a blinding light knocked her unconscious.

*

Hermione's eyes fluttered open to see Ron's legs running through leaves and grass. He was grunting heavily and she felt her body being held tightly to his shoulders. It took a moment to decide that she definitely felt lighter than normal.

Her voice didn't want to work at first, but eventually she was able to croak out a shaky, "Ron?"

His legs halted suddenly and her head began to spin. "Hermione!" he said through panting breaths. "I'm so glad you're all right."

Ron hefted her body from off his shoulder and set her gently on soft grass. He seemed to inspect every inch of her before wiping the hair from her face. A feeling of warmth flooded through her as she basked in his care. "What happened?" she strained to ask.

"I don't know," he said with a furrowed brow. "The Troll was heading for you and Fred yelled to shut our eyes, so I did. The next thing I know, you're

knocked out and the Troll is hovering over you, trying to decide the best way to eat you, I guess." He let out a soft chuckle that died on his lips. "I thought he'd hit you with his club or something, so I grabbed you and ran."

Temporarily fighting down the love for Ron that was growing inside of her, she asked, "Did the Troll follow? What happened to Fred and George?"

"I don't know," he said with a sigh. "I don't think the Troll followed, but I can't be sure. Fred and George were dueling with two Death Eaters that didn't get hit with the bomb." Gently cupping her face, he said, "I couldn't bear the thought of losing you, Hermione. It would..." He paused and swallowed heavily. "I don't think I could stand it."

"Oh, Ron," she said and lifted her arms to pull him into a hug, but they didn't seem to be working right. "Ron?" she said anxiously. "What's wrong with my arms?"

"Huh?" he said, perplexed and then, "Oh! I forgot about the feather weight charm I put on you." He produced his wand and made to wave it over her but hesitated. "What's the counter charm again?" he asked sheepishly.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but smiled nonetheless. "Honestly.... It's *Finite Incantatum*."

"Right," he said, blushing brightly in the morning sunlight. "*Finite Incantatum*."

Her body instantly sagged against the ground and although everything seemed to move properly again, it wasn't without some effort. As soon as she had tested her limbs, she launched herself at Ron and hugged him with all the strength she could muster, placing a wet kiss on his cheek. "You're my hero, Ron."

His blush, if it were possible, grew even deeper and crept down his neck to the top of his chest. "I just did what anyone would do, Hermione."

She pulled away and propped herself up with her hands, still looking into his deep blue eyes. "You did exactly what I expected from someone who loves me."

A look flashed across his face and he took several deep breaths. "You mean I.... That is to say.... I couldn't.... But I do!" He was cute when he was perplexed, Hermione decided. She was therefore, quite shocked when he pinned her with a piercing gaze and said, "Oh, sod it all." And she found herself being passionately kissed, effectively pushing all other thoughts out of her head as she sank into the feeling of Ron's embrace.

Once again, she felt as if she was floating, but for an entirely different reason. Gradually however, she was forced to think about their situation and reluctantly broke the kiss. Ron had a goopy look on his face and she felt inexplicably powerful knowing she had done that to him.

"Ron," she offered tentatively.

His eyes slowly returned to focus but his smile lingered.

"We need to find Harry and Ginny. They're out here still and if Fred and George didn't make it back, no one will know what's happened."

He rubbed her arms lightly with his hands and looked over her shoulder, his face growing serious again. "Yeah," he said. "I think I saw someone moving around back towards the hill but with you knocked out, I didn't want to risk investigating."

"Well," she said as they stood up and brushed off their robes. She felt a wave of dizziness come over her and had to grab Ron's shoulder for support. "Let's head back that way and see if we can spot their trail."

He hefted his backpack on his shoulder again and together they trudged off through the trees.

Coming of Age 9: A Very Weasley Reunion

Chapter Nine – A Very Weasley Reunion

Following Ginny turned out to be the easiest part of their journey to Churchstanton. As Harry fell into step behind her, Harry found it hard to keep himself focused on the root and rock filled path and not on the pretty girl walking in front of him. It became especially hard when he tripped into her for the sixth time and she began to tease him about watching where he was going.

"I *am* watching where I'm going," he said, trying to act nonchalant.

"Uh, huh," she said, not turning around. "They say a guy notices a girl's front first, not her backside."

This time when Harry tripped, he made no effort to use Ginny to stop his fall and hit the ground with an awkward thud. Dust from the path flew into his open mouth and he found himself choking and coughing on its metallic taste.

Ginny squatted beside him and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a handkerchief. "Was it something I said?" she asked cheekily.

He continued to stare at her, absently wiping his shirt with his hands. "You just.... How could you say.... I wasn't..." Harry's mind was whirring and he found it difficult to find any word over one syllable in his vocabulary.

"Listen, Harry," said Ginny plainly. "I know you've been checking me out and it's all right with me, but let's get something straight." She pulled on his hand until they were both standing. "If you fancy me, then just tell me, all right?"

Not knowing what else to do, he nodded dumbly and watched her as she finished removing the dirt on his shirt and trousers. "Now," she said when he was satisfied, "let's get..."

A vibrating sound reverberated through the ground into their feet and legs, breaking Ginny's train of thought. They grabbed each other's shoulders to keep themselves balanced until the rumbling stopped.

"What in the world was that?" asked Ginny, squinting towards a hill in the distance.

"I don't know," said Harry, regaining his composure. "Whatever it is, I think we should put some distance between us and it." He took her hand firmly in his and they ran quickly towards a line of trees in the distance.

An explosion sounded behind them, spurring them on even faster. As they ran, Harry caught sight of a two people hurrying towards them from a rise to the south. They were too far to determine their identity, and just as he was about to stop to take another look, they met the tree line and Ginny pulled him inside.

They crashed through the underbrush for several minutes, and then Harry slowed them down so the noise they were making didn't alert anyone that might be nearby. A few minutes later, they came across a small trail that led north and south through the very thick trees.

"Which way?" asked Harry, deciding to defer to Ginny's familiarity with the way to her aunt's house.

Ginny rubbed her chin with a pair of fingers and her thumb as she tried to look down the trail as far as possible each way. "That way," she pronounced, grabbing his hand again and pulling them south. "We'll follow this for a while and try to shake anyone that might be following us. Then... we'll try to get out of these damned woods."

Harry chuckled and said, "Sounds good to me."

*

They walked together for what seemed like hours, but the glimpses he caught of the sun through the trees told Harry that it hadn't been nearly that long. Ginny stopped every ten or fifteen minutes to rest and listen, and Harry used it to watch her.

"Ginny?" Harry asked quietly. "I wanted to answer your question."

"Which one was that?" she asked, taking a tiny swig of water from her bottle.

Harry capped his own bottle and pushed into the bag at his feet. "The one about how I feel about you."

Ginny's face became serious and she pinned her bottle between her legs so she could re-apply the band to her ponytail. "It wasn't a question," she said. "I just want you to figure out where you stand with me and when you do, I need you to tell me. No messing around."

Harry swallowed. "Have you figured out how you feel about me?" he asked.

Her hands froze in mid air, just as Ginny was pulling her hair through the last loop of the band. Then after a stifling second, she flipped it out and caught Harry's eye. "No," she answered. "I guess I haven't."

"Then the deal goes both ways."

Nodding her head thoughtfully, Ginny stood and grabbed the bag. "My turn to carry the backpack, and yes, when I've figured out how I feel about you, I'll tell you."

With a grin on his face, Harry waited for Ginny to re-tie her trainers and tapped his wand to the backpack. He handed it to her and then took the lead as they continued walking south.

They turned west and came out of the trees, following a small stream that Ginny said led to the River Culm. Lunch came and went and they ate a piece of fruit each, while still walking, and planned on being at Ginny's aunt's house just after nightfall. By mid-afternoon, their pace was slowing as their tired legs screamed in protest. The stream was larger here and another patch of woods loomed a mile ahead.

"What's your favorite food?" Harry asked suddenly.

Ginny turned and gave him a quizzical glance.

Harry shrugged in reply and said, "I just thought that if I was going to figure you out, I ought to know something about you. I mean, I know that you like to fly brooms, you've got an atrocious temper, you don't tolerate idiots and you sleep with a stuffed unicorn named Sparkles."

Ginny stopped in her tracks and let out a loud guffaw. "What do you know about Sparkles?" she teased before walking off again.

Harry jogged to catch up to her, hitching his thumbs in the straps of the pack. "You were mumbling in your sleep last night."

Ginny thwacked him in the shoulder.

"Ow," Harry complained. "What was that for?"

"I don't talk in my sleep," Ginny said simply. "You must have been dreaming."

With a wry smile, Harry said, "So I must have been dreaming about how Fred took Sparkles and hid her in the tree house?"

Another thwack. "The correct answer is, 'Yes, dear'," Ginny said, a playful smile on her lips.

Harry laughed. "You never told me what your favorite food is."

Ginny gave a dramatic sigh. "I suppose you're too pig-headed to train up properly. Pity those Muggles you live with didn't put the fear of women into you at an early age."

"Uh, huh," Harry replied. "And your favorite food is...."

Her hand flew out again, but this time, Harry caught it and wove his fingers with hers.

They walked that way for a minute before Ginny said, "Roast chicken."

Harry nodded thoughtfully and said, "I love your mum's meat pies."

"Ooh," Ginny said with a snicker. "You'll be her favorite adopted son for sure when you tell her that."

"Yeah, well," Harry said with a forlorn look at the trees as they drew close. "If I see her again, there's a whole bunch of stuff I'm going to tell her."

Ginny glanced at Harry and nudged him with her shoulder. "Yeah? Like what?"

Harry pulled up short and drew in a shaky breath. Ginny turned around and as their eyes locked, it felt like his stomach was floating. "I'm going to tell her," he said huskily. "That she has the most beautiful daughter in the world." Harry's hand rose to her cheek and drew her into him. Ginny's eyes welled with unshed tears and he continued. "I'm going to tell her that these past few days with you have meant more to me than every other day in my life. I'm going to tell her...." Harry's voice broke and a tear slid down Ginny's cheek onto his thumb. "I'm going to tell her that I lo –"

A sizzling red spell ripped the air over their heads and they ducked instinctively. It struck a tree a few yards away, leaving an angry, smoking hole. Harry looked back to where the spell originated and was surprised to see three figures running towards them in black cloaks.

Harry grabbed Ginny's hand again and pulled her towards the trees. More spells whizzed around them as they ran, hitting dirt, rock, and wood ahead of them.

Putting a larger oak tree between them and their pursuers, Harry took Ginny in his arms and squeezed his eyes shut. With a *pop*, they appeared on a large branch about halfway up. Their sudden transport surprised them both and Harry had to cup his hand over Ginny's mouth to stifle her scream.

Angry voices met their ears as they clung to each other and the rough trunk of the tree.

"They went this way," said one of the men.

Another just behind him said, "I heard someone Apparating. They probably escaped."

"They can't Apparate, you idiot," piped in the third one. "They're just kids."

Harry took out his wand and tapped it on Ginny's, then Harry's head, feeling the familiar cold liquid trickle down his body. The only way he knew that Ginny was still there was by her breath on his neck and her warm body pressed against him.

The Death Eaters conferred for a moment, and then one of the men Apparated away. Their whispers were too faint to hear, so Harry had no idea what they had said.

One of the men had his wand pointed into the trees, an oddly pink light emanating from it. He swept it around in the branches of the trees, obviously looking for something – for them. Everywhere the beam touched something solid, it would shimmer, as if diffusing the light around it.

Harry fought a surge of panic down when he realized what was happening and pointed his own wand down at the men. If that pink light came too close to them, he would at least be ready for it.

Ginny's breathing increased and Harry tried not to be distracted by the way she was wiggling on his leg. The beam swept passed their position, coming within an inch of Harry's foot. If there was any kind of pattern to the man's actions, Harry was sure the beam would hit them next. The pink light swept back, right at them and then it stopped, right on Harry and Ginny.

"*Stupefy!*" Harry yelled. His stunner shot down to the forest floor and impacted right where the Death Eater had been – he was no longer there.

"*Dirumpo!*" yelled the other man and an orange light hit the tree behind Harry.

The resulting blast shot Harry and Ginny off the branch and they fell onto a rotting log. Harry had twisted in the air enough that Ginny landed on him, saving her, but knocking the wind out of his lungs.

Harry wheezed, trying to catch his breath so he could start slinging hexes. Ginny beat him to it, however, and knocked over the man who had discovered them with a well-placed tickling jinx. Harry got shakily to his feet and parried another spell from a third Death Eater. The next thing he knew, he was face down on the forest floor and had a terrible ringing in his ears.

He leapt to his feet and whirled to see the first wizard wrestling with Ginny near the log that broke their fall. She kicked the man solidly in the groin and he went down. Just as she locked eyes with Harry and they began to run for each other, a red spell slammed into her back and she pitched headlong onto a knotted root.

"*No!*" Harry yelled and stunned the man that had cursed Ginny. The man that Ginny had kicked was recovering and had taken out an old boot from his robes – a Portkey. He reached for Ginny and Harry pointed his wand at the still form lying at the base of the tree. "*Accio-*" he began but a foot connected with his hand, sending his wand flying over his head.

Harry pulled his throbbing hand protectively to his chest and faced down his attacker. The Death Eater circled Harry, his wand missing as well, and just when Harry was about to claw his way through the man to get to Ginny, they heard a *pop*. They both looked to where Ginny had been and found nothing – Ginny had been captured.

With a primal scream, Harry launched himself at the last standing Death Eater, but the wizard simply retrieved a bent candlestick from a pocket and tapped it with his finger. In a blink, he, too, was gone.

Slouching onto the forest floor, breathing heavily, but not knowing what else he could do, Harry stared at the spot where Ginny had been. He thought about how close he had been to getting her free of the Death Eaters, about how he had almost told her that he was starting to feel differently about her, and about how much he missed her already. She was in harm's way and it was completely his fault.

"Harry!"

He jerked his head up and Hermione barreled into him. "Harry!" she repeated and started to cry. "We thought we'd lost you. Everyone's been worried sick. Dumbledore and the Order fought a load of Death Eaters, Fred and George were brilliant! And, Harry? Where's Ginny?"

"Hermione?" Harry asked tentatively. He looked up and saw Ron looming over them. "Ron?"

"Hey, mate," Ron said and extended a hand. Harry took it and was pulled to his feet. "We saw you fighting that Death Eater. Did they take Ginny?" Ron's eyes were serious, but oddly calm.

"Yeah," Harry replied, glancing once again at the knotted root. "We need to find her. I need to..." But Harry couldn't bring himself to tell them. It was hard enough to gather his courage to tell Ginny.

Ron clapped him on the shoulder. "I know you do. We all do."

"So what's our plan?" Hermione asked, looking between both boys. "How do we even know where she is?"

"Well, it's pretty obvious that she's with Vo – You-Know-Who," Ron replied.

Hermione huffed. "But *where* is Voldemort? If we don't have a place to look, then there's no hope of finding her."

"I know where she is," Harry interjected, mostly to stop them from arguing.

Ron's eyebrows were arched high on his forehead while Hermione simply gaped at him. "You do?" they chorused. "How?"

Harry shrugged. "I cast a Tracking Spell on her backpack. I linked it to me, so that I could tell exactly where she was. Once they're in the same place for five full minutes, I'll be able to see it in my mind."

"How did you do that?" asked a perplexed Hermione. When Harry shrugged off her question, she pressed on. "Even so, how will we get there? We can't Apparate yet, and we don't know how to make a Portkey."

"And there's no adults around to do it for us," Ron offered.

"We won't need to," said Harry. For a vision had just popped into his head. "She's close – about a mile away, in an old cottage. Voldemort's not there, though. It's...it's Malfoy."

"Draco?" Ron asked, incredulously.

"No. His father."