

# Hogwarts Pie

by

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## ***Prologue: The Yule Ball***

Harry Potter sat alone in his dorm room staring at his dress robes, his stomach roiling with dread.

What the bloody hell was I thinking, he asked himself for the hundredth time that day. I'm pathetic. I'm rubbish. I'm a loser. He glanced up in the mirror at his reflection.

Harry was a nice looking young man, really. He'd grown a few inches and Quidditch had put muscle on his otherwise wiry frame. He had messy, unkempt black hair and vivid green eyes that stared out from behind round, wire-rim glasses. But he screwed up his face in disgust. Ugly prat, he told himself.

Tonight was the Yule Ball. Harry was going, but he didn't want to. He should have been going with Susan Bones, but she had dumped him over the summer before their seventh year, and had broken his heart in the process. Now she was going with Terry Boot, a Ravenclaw. Even worse, Harry had heard the rumours about Susan and Terry, how they couldn't keep their hands off one another, how Susan had, in the words of Parvati Patil, "jumped into bed with Terry after six weeks, AND they do it all the time, apparently.

SIX WEEKS! Harry thought furiously. We dated practically all last year and she had sex with me ONCE. Now Terry Boot is shagging her every other night?!

He ran a hand through his hair and laughed bitterly. Susan wasn't even the worst of it. No, the worst of it was that Cho Chang, his first crush, the girl (he had thought) of his dreams, had started writing to him. Like an idiot he'd written back, and now they had a regular correspondence that had started friendly but had turned first flirtatious and then downright naughty. Cho was a year older than Harry and worked as a Curse Breaker for Gringott's bank; she was stationed in Egypt. She was smart and gutsy and the most beautiful girl Harry had ever met. Every night he fell asleep dreaming of her long black hair and the way it fell down her back, ending just above her very lovely backside. Every night he dreamed of her perfectly straight teeth, her fabulous bow-shaped mouth that had once-only once-kissed his, back in his fifth year, under some mistletoe.

He had never meant to fall for her all over again. Their first foray into a relationship had been mostly disastrous. But for that one kiss-which supplied Harry with the perfect springboard to imagine doing lots of other things with Cho-they had not been able to connect, to get along. Cho had been grieving over her first boyfriend, Cedric Diggory, who died the year previous. Harry had seen Cedric die and was trying to deal with that. In hindsight, Harry realized, he and Cho probably shouldn't have gone near one another.

But this year things were different. Harry was a free man; he was over Susan (well, mostly. He still wanted to smash Terry Boot's face in). Cho, as she told him in every increasingly sexy letter she wrote to him, was entirely available.

Harry finally broke down and wrote to Cho, begging her to visit him. She wrote back a day later saying she would and three days later she arrived at Hogwarts for the Halloween weekend.

It should have been perfect. Harry was ready for Cho now. Okay, he'd only had sex once in his life and Cho had had sex, well, many more times than that, but he was ready. He would not shirk from doing all the things she had teased him about wanting him to do to her. No sir, not Harry. He was ready. Cho might be the most gorgeous female person on the planet but she was just a girl. He wasn't going to worry about what other blokes did with their girlfriends, like he did on their only date at that dreadful tea shop, Madam Puddifoot's. He was ready.

Except that he wasn't. Not even close. Cho showed up looking so spectacular that Harry had trouble talking around her. Again. She flirted with him, which only made things worse. They went to the

Halloween ball together and she danced so close to him that his pants became rather uncomfortable, and he wound up spending half the night walking around with his hands in front of his crotch.

But that wasn't the worst of it. No, the worst of it was when the ball ended and Cho whispered in Harry's ear.

"Let's find someplace private," she cooed. "I know the perfect place."

She meant, of course, the Room of Requirement. The very room where they'd shared that oh-so-innocent kiss two years before. The very room where Harry and Susan, in fact, had ALMOST achieved what Fred and George Weasley jokingly referred to as "Number Four" before Susan put on the brakes and told her she wanted to wait to "make love" until she was older. She and Harry wound up doing it three weeks later while on holiday together in France, and then two weeks after that she dumped him, and then two weeks after that took up with Terry Boot, and then six weeks after that started shagging him stupid every night...

But I don't care about that, thought Harry, as Cho led him down the corridor to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. They walked back and forth three times, thinking of the kind of room they needed ("anything with a big bed in it," thought Harry), and the room appeared. Complete with massive, heart-shaped bed (that was entirely Cho's doing).

Things had not gone well. Harry knew he was doomed the moment Cho started peeling off her clothes. She wound up taking the lead, pushing him down on the bed seductively and kissing him slowly and passionately, but then she started to undress him. And Harry...lost it.

The horror of losing control was nothing compared to Cho's reaction. She started to get dressed and leave. Harry begged her to stay, swearing on a stack of Bibles (which magically appeared next to the bed-damn that Room of Requirement!) that he could last longer, do better, that he had more control.

Cho relented, and they started kissing again, and Harry immediately felt himself standing at rather painful attention. Then Cho climbed off him and stood by the bed, looking magnificent-and very naked-in the moonlight. She took Harry's hand and ran it over her skin, starting with her collarbone, down over her breasts-both of them!-down the smooth valley of her stomach, over her hips, and then between-

And Harry lost it. Again. The evening ended. Harry was left alone on a huge, tacky heart-shaped bed with a stack of Bibles next to it, while Cho dressed and left, very embarrassed.

The only bright side was that Cho, at the very least, was not cruel or mean about it. She was as embarrassed as he was, and wound up apologizing.

Harry was sure she'd never want to speak to him again, but she had begun to write him again, not long after that. She didn't mention that night at all, but she didn't come to visit again, either, claiming that the bank "owned her" and was sending her all over the Middle East on dangerous curse-breaking missions. Their correspondence had died over a few weeks, and he hadn't heard from Cho in over a fortnight.

So tonight, Harry was going to the Yule Ball not with Cho Chang-and the promise of a second chance at finally getting the whole shagging thing right-but with his best mate's little sister. Ginny Weasley.

How the bloody hell did I let that happen? Harry wondered again. Yes, he liked Ginny. Very much in fact. She was smart and funny and rather mischievous, like her older twin brothers, Fred and George. She was also amazing at Quidditch. A real corker at it. But she was also a bit strange. She hung out with Luna Lovegood (who was definitely round the twist), had dated Colin Creevey (who she told Harry one day, out of the blue, had dumped her because she wouldn't go along with his bizarre big toe fetishes), was entirely too caught up in her little girly clubs, wore rather weird clothes (when she wasn't

dressed in her school uniform and robes), and to cap it all, she was Ron's little sister.

Harry sighed. It could be worse, he supposed. He could be going with Eloise Midgen, whose acne was acting up badly again. Or Millicent Bulstrode, who even Crabbe and Goyle wouldn't touch.

One thing was certain. Harry was swearing off women. Between Susan yanking out his heart and stomping all over it and then putting it in a meat grinder and spitting into it, and Cho not writing him any more just because he had a wee little problem with premature ejaculation, he was through with the lot of them. At least he and Ginny were friends, of a sort. No worries there.

Harry pulled on his dress robes, ran a hand through his hair, and headed out the door. Time to get this miserable night over with, he thought.

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Harry nodded as Ginny droned on and on. Everything was starting to sound like the same empty drone.

"...and you know I wouldn't care about the whole big toe thing if Colin hadn't insisted on using his toe to shag me rather than his-

"EXCUSE ME?" Harry said, as though he had just been slapped out of a deep sleep.

"Oh," said Ginny. "I was just saying, about Colin and the whole toe thing."

"Colin...used his TOE?"

"No," said Ginny, rolling her eyes. "I mean, I'm a bit kinky and all, but that's just bloody weird."

"Oh," said Harry, shaking his head. They were sitting at a small table in the corner of the room, resting from some vigorous dancing. Ginny was good company, when she wasn't talking a mile a minute.

"So, Harry, are we going to shag soon?" said Ginny, tapping her fingers on the table. "Or should I just call it a night? Because I'm getting a wee bit antsy."

Harry, who had been taking a swig of butterbeer, choked and sprayed his drink down his front.

"What?!"

"I asked you if we were going to shag soon," said Ginny, very slowly, rolling her eyes.

"Uh," said Harry, staring at her. "You're...you're Ron's little sister."

"Yeah, so?"

"Ron would beat me to a pulp if he found out you and me, you know," said Harry, turning very red.

"Ron doesn't have to know," said Ginny. "And anyway, his brain turned to dung ever since he got together with Hermione. Those two are like rabbits. It's a good thing Hermione's got private quarters now she's Head Girl."

"Look, Ginny..."

"We don't have to shag if you don't want to," said Ginny. "I mean, if you're nervous or something-"

"I'm not NERVOUS," said Harry defensively.

"Okay," said Ginny. "I'm just saying, though. We're friends. We've both had our share of bad luck with people of the opposite sex. Why not end the night on a bit of a high note?"

Harry stared at her, but of course the moment she had suggested they shag he had started thinking about it. Ginny WAS rather cute, with her freckles and long red hair and hazel eyes and button nose. He was suddenly very curious to know whether she had freckles all over. He was suddenly overcome with the

urge to find out.

"Okay," he said. "But-"

"No strings," said Ginny. "We have a good fuck and tomorrow we go our separate ways. Friends."

Harry nodded, and they left the Yule Ball.

They wound up, to no great surprise for Harry, at the Room of Requirement. This time when they went inside (Harry again wished only for a room with a huge bed in it), they found a room that was painted in various shades of blue, with a big, but not huge, bed in the center and plush carpeting. Not bad, Harry thought. Huge improvement over the heart-shaped bed and the Bibles.

He was just starting to admire the fireplace when Ginny made her move.

Or, more accurately, when Ginny attacked. For someone so petite she nearly bowled him over when she literally jumped on him. Suddenly she was kissing him passionately. Harry had half a mind to tell her to slow down, but then he realized he was desperately randy and that kissing her was rather fun. They stumbled over to the bed and she pushed him down roughly onto it and straddled him.

Harry gulped. She was clearly experienced at this stuff. She leaned over, rubbing against him. He moaned and his pants began to feel tight again. She reached for the buttons of his shirt, but instead of slowly opening them, she gave a huge yank, and his shirt burst open.

"Hey-" he began, but then Ginny was kissing him with her lips and tongue and rubbing against him again.

"Oh, god," he moaned, when she sat up again. She yanked on his belt buckle.

"What's my name?" she growled, in a feral sort of voice. She pulled his belt slowly from the loops of his pants.

"Wha-what?" Harry asked, unable to think.

She snapped the belt viciously on the floor, where it made a huge cracking sound. Harry jumped.

"What's my name, bitch?" Ginny snarled.

"G-Ginny!" Harry yelled. "Ginny!"

She smiled and bit her lip, dropping the belt. Harry had never been so scared, nor so aroused, in his life. He didn't even care that Ginny made him wear two condoms, instead of one, to, as she put it, "help you keep a lid on things for more than five seconds."

The following morning Harry awoke, rather exhausted and bearing a few scratch marks on his chest, to find Ginny gone. For a brief moment he felt a bit dirty; Ginny had rather coldly used him, hadn't she? He had been nothing more than a sex toy to her.

But then he smiled. Harry Potter, sex toy. He rather liked the sound of that.

## **Chapter One: The Imminent Return of Cho Chang**

Harry sat on his bed and read and re-read the letter.

Dear Harry,

I FINALLY have some time off from work and I'm dying to get back to England. How's life going in London? Are you enjoying living with Ron Weasley? I wonder if he still hates me for what happened between us in your fifth year. I hope not.

I was rather hoping we could get together over the summer, if you're free. I'm sure you've been very busy with Auror training, but if you can squeeze me in I'd really love to see you. And, if I may be so bold, I also wouldn't mind picking up where we left off. I'm sure you've had plenty of girls since then; that last picture of you that you sent me--wow. You look scrumptious!

Please write back and let me know your plans. I'll be coming back to the U.K. in a month.

Love,

Cho

Harry groaned and fell back on his bed. Why? Why? Why? he wondered. Why did Cho have to return NOW? He'd been content to let her go, he thought he HAD let her go. The occasional note to say "hello" had been their only correspondence in well over a year. But this?

One sentence in the letter kept scrolling past his brain. "I'm sure you've had plenty of girls since then." "Yeah, right," said Harry bitterly.

The truth was, Harry was pathetic with women. He'd had sex exactly twice in his life. Once with Susan, and she dumped him two weeks later, which only served to make Harry believe he was horrible at it. The second time--Harry groaned again--with Ginny Weasley. Ron's younger sister. THAT had been a bit of a joke.

He'd had a good time, certainly. Ginny was a sex partner, to say the least. But he hadn't lasted very long, even wearing two condoms, and she'd disappeared before he woke up the next day. They stayed friends, of a sort, after that, and never mentioned what had happened. Ginny had always been friendly to him, even kind at times, but he couldn't help but think that--however much he'd enjoyed himself--he still hadn't been very good. For one thing he was clueless about girl's bodies. He didn't know the first thing about how to make a girl moan and quiver and beg. He LIKED girls' bodies, yes he did, and he very much liked touching a girl in those places that were usually covered up, but the problem was that once he did he tended to lose control of himself. It was horrible.

Ron and Hermione seemed to be very good at sex. True, they'd only had sex with each other, but after two and half years of dating they were still shagging like minks. Harry had long ago started wearing earplugs to bed--it was the only way he could get any sleep when Hermione stayed over--but the first few times he had listened to them. The first thing he noticed was that they seemed to go at it for HOURS. Harry wondered if Ron had charmed his equipment or something, because Ron seemed to be not only almost insatiable but had endless stamina.

The second thing he noticed was that Ron seemed to know very well what he was doing to Hermione, judging by the way she moaned and whimpered and screamed. Harry only stopped listening to them

when he realized he wasn't getting any sleep and when he realized that there was something very disturbing about his two best friends in the world shagging like minks. He could only imagine what Ginny must think (Ginny and Hermione were roommates in a flat a few blocks away).

Since leaving Hogwarts, Harry had dated a little, but things never seemed to go anywhere. Girls would always tell him they'd write, and they never did. Harry had a lot of trouble talking to girls, too, which only made him resent his break-up with Susan even more. He'd never had trouble talking to her, but she HAD to go and dump him before even giving him a chance to get better in bed. Last he'd heard Susan had dumped Terry Boot, too, and had taken up with none other than Harry's arch-enemy, Draco Malfoy. "Ugh," said Harry out loud, not wanting to think about Susan shagging that rat-faced prat.

He sat up and ran a hand through his untidy hair and a feeling of despair washed over him. It SHOULDN'T be like this, he told himself. He was Harry Potter! Famous Harry Potter, the bloke who'd beaten Lord Voldemort. He'd been captain of Quidditch in school. He was an Auror--one of the hardest, most challenging careers in the wizarding world--and one of the coolest. He was pretty good looking, too, he thought, even if he did wear glasses and have a lightning shaped scar on his forehead (he was glad it hadn't disappeared when he'd killed Voldemort).

Harry dressed pretty stylishly, too, thanks to the gobs and gobs of Galleons his dead parents had stashed away for him in Gringott's Bank. A good thing, too, because the training phase of the Auror career--three years--paid very little. Ron had only been able to make rent payments because his older brothers--the twins Fred and George--supplemented Ron's paltry income with generous allowances from the profits of their wildly successful joke shop.

So, Harry thought. I'm cute. I'm rich. I'm famous. I'm a natty dresser. And I can't get a girl to sleep with me. How nice.

And now Cho was coming back. And she wanted to see him. And she wanted to get together and try shagging again.

The last time he'd tried to get it on with Cho, it had ended with him losing control of himself--TWICE--before he even got anywhere near her goods. He supposed it ought to comfort him that she was willing, even enthusiastic, about giving him a second chance after such a humiliating performance the last time, but it didn't. It only filled him with dread.

"Bugger it," said Harry angrily, slamming the letter on his nighttable. It was late afternoon and he needed to get out and think. A coffee would do it. Or, better yet, an ice cream.

He pulled on jeans and a white, rather tightly fitted t-shirt and a pair of black dragonhide boots, then looked in the mirror. He had given up on his hair, and anyway, messy hair was all the rage among young men these days. He gave himself a once-over; he was lean and muscled from playing Quidditch and from the physical demands of his Auror training, and the t-shirt set off his tan and his flat, muscled stomach. But even knowing that he looked pretty good didn't cheer him up. "Prat," he muttered at the mirror. He grabbed his housekeys, a black leather jacket, and stomped out of the room.

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Diagon Alley was busy, as usual. Harry walked slowly down the street, licking at his ice cream cone and pausing in front of Quality Quidditch Supplies. The latest Firebolt, the X3, had just come out. It was by far the greatest broom Harry'd ever laid eyes on, but he hadn't had much time to play Quidditch lately, and in any case, he wasn't sure he should be spending all sorts of money on a new broom when his older Firebolt was still so good.

"Hey, Harry." The female voice caught his attention and he turned around.



It was Ginny Weasley.

"H-hey," he said, his eyes widening just a bit. It had been a long time since Harry had seen her. "Wow. You--you look great."

"Thanks," said Ginny, smiling. "So do you."

WOW, thought Harry, did she look good. She was a bit taller than he'd last remembered. There were curves on her that he knew hadn't been there before. She was still athletic, lean and muscled from Quidditch, but her hips flared just enough and when did she get those breasts? Not too big, but round and lovely and very cuddly-looking. Harry forced himself not to stare. It didn't help that she was wearing one of those midriff baring shirts that exposed her smooth, taut tummy, or that she had a belly-button ring, which was the sexiest thing Harry had ever seen, or that her jeans were hugging her in all the right places.

She didn't seem to notice that he was checking her out, but hugged him.

"So, uh," Harry asked when she pulled away, "what are you doing here? I thought you were on the road."

Ginny played Chaser for Puddlemere United, with the former Gryffindor Keeper Oliver Wood.

"We're off this week, thank god," she said. "I've been on the road since we left Hogwarts--I barely had time to move in with Hermione, and Mum had to do all my unpacking and what. We play Ireland next weekend. Ron said you guys were going to come and see it."

"Definitely," said Harry.

"Uh, Harry," said Ginny, looking at him a bit funny.

"What?"

"Your ice cream cone, it's melting."

Harry looked down to see ice cream dripping all over his fingers.

"Right," said Harry, feeling really stupid as he took a napkin and wiped his hand clean. "I think I'll just throw this away, don't really want anymore of it."

He chucked the ice cream into the nearest wastepaper basket and turned back to Ginny.

"So, how are you?" Ginny asked, and they began to stroll down the Alley. "You must be relieved to finally get a break from training."

"Yeah," said Harry. "It's tough. We have to do all these tests once a month. They make us do all these drills, too, with spell-casting and such. And we're doing combat training, without wands. Kingsley Shacklebolt's teaching us that stuff. It's wild."

"So that's why you got so pumped up," said Ginny, grabbing Harry's bicep and giving it a playful squeeze.

"Uh, yeah," said Harry, feeling his face get hot and feeling a very embarrassing stirring in his trousers. He quickly thought of dead kittens. The itch in his trousers abated.

"What about your social life?" said Ginny. "Tell me it's more interesting than Ron's. He and Hermione are so bloody domestic these days. When they're not humping each other like dogs."

"Oh, you've heard them, too, I take it?" said Harry, smiling. Ginny and Hermione were room-mates in a flat a few blocks away from Harry and Ron.

"Unfortunately," said Ginny. "Do you have any idea how gross it is to hear your brother--oh, YUCK. I

can't even talk about it without feeling sick."

Harry nodded, and looked down, suddenly feeling miserable again.

"Harry," said Ginny slowly. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Harry.

"Harry," said Ginny, stopping in front of him and giving him a knowing look.

He looked at her. If there was one thing Ginny Weasley was very good at (apart from Quidditch and sex and telling very funny stories), it was seeing through deception. Harry had never been able to put anything past her. He sighed.

"Okay, I'll tell you, but can we please not talk about it here?"

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Ginny's room was a surprisingly spare type of room that was nothing like her old, very girly bedroom in the Burrow. The walls were painted in varying shades of cool blue. Ginny had thrown several piles of clothes haphazardly into a hamper, and several pairs of jeans and some blouses were strewn over her desk chair. There were posters of her Quidditch team and a few photographs of her with her family and friends. Her bed was in the center of the room. She sat down on it and Harry sat down in her desk chair.

"So, what's up?" Ginny asked, leaning back against her headboard.

"Ginny, am I--am I bad in bed?" Harry asked, blushing very red.

"WHAT?" Ginny burst out, and she started to laugh.

"I'm being serious!" said Harry.

"Okay," said Ginny, and she immediately stopped laughing. "Why do you ask?"

"Because," said Harry miserably. "I got this letter. From Cho Chang. She's on holiday next month and she's coming back to England. She said she wants to see me. And, in her words, to 'pick up where we left off.'"

"Well, that's a good thing, right?" said Ginny. "I mean, you've always been a bit mad about her."

"Yeah," said Harry. "She's incredible. But--but you don't know what happened the last time I saw her."

"What happened?"

Harry swallowed. He wasn't sure just WHY he was talking to Ginny, of all people, about this very embarrassing subject, but for some reason she was the only person he'd ever met that he felt totally comfortable talking to, even about the most personal things imaginable. Stuff he couldn't tell Ron.

"It was a disaster," said Harry, his face so red he knew he resembled a large beet with black, messy hair.

"I--I fell apart. Twice. Before--before we'd even gotten anywhere."

"Ah." Ginny nodded and looked away from him for a moment, considering.

"And," she said slowly, "you're worried about how you'll do when you see her again?"

"You could say that," said Harry glumly.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," said Ginny reassuringly. "I mean, it's been ages since then, you've had tons of experience--"

"I haven't," said Harry, feeling utterly wretched. "Y-you were the last girl."

Ginny sat back again, stunned. "R-really?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "I mean, it's not like I haven't tried, okay? But I'm pathetic with girls. I can't talk to them, let alone have sex with them."

"But surely you've--you've done SOME things since--"

"No," said Harry. "I've kissed a bunch of them after dates but they never write, and I never see them again."

"Oh." Ginny didn't seem to know what else to say.

"So," Harry said slowly. "That's why I need to know, if I'm any good, even just a little bit good, in bed."

Ginny regarded him through narrowed eyes. "Do you want the truth?"

Harry gulped. He wasn't sure he wanted the truth, but he figured Ginny would tell him anyway. He nodded.

"You're--well, you were pretty--poor," said Ginny carefully.

Harry felt like he'd just been punched in the solar plexus. He'd expected the truth, just not quite so harshly.

"Okay," he said, in a strangled voice.

"But that doesn't mean you can't get better!" Ginny said quickly. "You have a ton of potential. I mean it."

Harry felt a surge of hope. "I do?"

"Yeah," said Ginny. "You just need some help. Okay, a lot of help."

"Oh," said Harry, feeling a bit indignant now. "And where do you suggest I go to find that sort of help?"

Ginny sat back against the headboard of her bed again. She regarded him yet again, as though considering something.

"I'll help you," she said finally.

"You?" said Harry, stunned.

"Yeah," said Ginny, "unless you think I'm too repulsive to--"

"No way," said Harry at once. "You're not repulsive at all, you're--you're--"

"Yeah, yeah," said Ginny, waving a hand at him.

"You'd REALLY help me, uh, do better?" said Harry.

"Sure," said Ginny. "Look, our Quidditch season's winding down, right? We've already been knocked out of contention for the World Cup. We win our next match, our season's done anyway. So I have a long holiday coming up. You're on holiday. What else do we have to do with ourselves, right?"

Harry stared at her. Once again he was just a little unnerved at how businesslike she could be when it came to sex. But the prospect of getting some help from Ginny in the lovemaking arena--particularly when Harry knew Ginny was very experienced at it and could tell him a whole lot of valuable stuff--was just too tempting to pass up.

"Okay," said Harry. "Yeah. I'll do it. Thanks a million, Gin. You're-- you're saving my life."

"Brilliant," said Ginny, grinning.

## ***Chapter Two: A Lesson in Kissing***

"So let's get started, shall we?"

"What, NOW?" said Harry, surprised.

"Yes, now," said Ginny, sounding very business-like. "You've got just under a month to become the World's Greatest Lover. Time is of the essence."

Harry swallowed. This wasn't exactly what he had in mind. He had rather hoped he'd have a day or two to get used to the idea of Ginny giving him sex lessons.

"Okay," he said.

"Sit on the bed next to me," she instructed, and he obeyed.

"Now, kiss me," she ordered.

Harry swallowed again. He could do that. "Okay." He gripped her by the shoulders and kissed her in what he thought was a very passionate way.

"Whoa, whoa," said Ginny pushing him away.

"What?" Harry said quickly, feeling his pants get tight.

"Slow down, Speedy," she teased, her voice slightly husky. "It's sex, not Beat the Clock."

"Okay."

"First things first: too much tongue," said Ginny. "A girl wants to be kissed, she doesn't want her tonsils cleaned."

"Right," said Harry, shifting a bit in the hopes that his jeans would stop pinching him in his most sensitive areas.

"Second," said Ginny. "You're way too worked up. I mean, we kissed for three seconds and you're practically ready to burst out of your pants."

Harry's hands flew to his crotch. "Uh, sorry."

"It's okay," said Ginny, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Look, you're not a bad kisser, but you need to rethink your whole attitude about kissing."

"I do?"

"Yes," said Ginny lightly. "See, kissing can either lead to other things or it doesn't, but either way, a kiss is what tells a girl whether or not she wants to continue. If the kiss is really good, she'll want to go further, believe me. Maybe not right away, but definitely at some point in the future. A bad kiss? That's a HUGE turn-off."

"So, what makes a really good kiss?" said Harry, fascinated.

"It's all in the approach," said Ginny. "First, you have to relax."

"Right," said Harry, and he shook his head a little and jiggled his shoulders.

"Take a deep breath," said Ginny. He did.

"Now, when you kiss a girl, you need to pay attention," said Ginny. "I mean, really pay attention. A good kiss, it has to be savored. Imagine you're eating a really incredible strawberry. I don't mean start chewing, but if you slow down and you eat a really ripe strawberry and you pay attention to how the

fruit tastes on your tongue, the texture of it. That's how you approach a good kiss."

"Wow," said Harry, his trousers feeling tight again.

"Kiss me again," said Ginny. "Slowly. Pay attention, to your mouth and to your hands. Okay?"

"Right," said Harry. He moved closer to her on the bed. He reached up and brushed her hair back from her shoulders. It felt very soft in his fingers. Then he reached up and touched her face.

"That's good," she said in a low voice.

Encouraged, Harry leaned closer. Ginny closed her eyes. He brushed his lips against hers. He felt a little jump inside his pants and for a very horrible split second he wondered if he'd lost himself again, but he hadn't. He reached up with his other hand and wrapped it around the base of Ginny's neck, and kissed her again, very slowly.

Not too much tongue, he thought, but she opened her mouth and he felt her tongue brush feather light against his.

Oh, god, he thought, his crotch throbbing as he kissed her deeply. She wrapped her arms around him and tangled her fingers in his hair. Their tongues tangled slowly against each other, their mouths moved and pressed together. Harry felt a moan escape his throat. The kiss proceeded for several more seconds, slow and deep and wet, but not too wet. It was perfect.

Ginny broke the kiss; Harry almost protested out loud, but he found he couldn't talk. His pants were pinching him painfully. He was breathing heavily. He couldn't remember ever kissing Susan like that. Or Cho. Or even Ginny, that night at the Yule Ball.

"That was--very good," said Ginny, looking flushed. Her eyes were slightly glazed. "Much better." She took a deep breath and backed away from him.

"You--you see what I mean?" she said, her voice a bit strangled.

"Yeah," said Harry, his brain reeling, his lips on fire, his crotch straining against the confines of his jeans. "Yeah."

"We need to do something about that," Ginny said, her voice more matter-of- fact, and she pointed to Harry's groin.

Harry blushed and put his hands over his crotch again. "I can't help that," he said, a little defensively.

"Yes, you can," said Ginny. "You just need to think about other things so you don't get overly excited."

"But--but you just said," said Harry, still trying to breathe normally, "that I had to pay attention to kissing."

"You do," said Ginny, recovering herself a little. "But the minute you start to feel really excited, think of something totally non-sexual."

"Like dead kittens?" Harry suggested.

"Too gross," said Ginny. "No, something mundane. Like your tests at work, or Quidditch or something. The point is to control your excitement, not kill it."

"Okay," said Harry, nodding.

"Try it again," said Ginny. "Do what you did before, but when you start to get excited, think about something else."

"Right." Harry took a deep breath and leaned in, kissing her again. Wow, her lips were amazing, he thought. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her against him and kissed her slowly and deeply;

she had her hands in his hair again. God, but this was good. He felt himself straining against the fabric of his jeans.

Quidditch, he thought quickly. Quidditch. Ginny naked on a broom--

No, that wouldn't work.

Reports, he thought. I have to file a report at work when I get back from holiday. And mail; how much mail would he have in his inbox when he got back? What state would his desk be in? His desk. Him, kissing Ginny and tearing off her clothes and leaning her back onto his desk and running his tongue--

No! Dead kittens! Dead kittens!

"Okay," said Ginny, breaking the kiss.

"Right," said Harry in a strangled voice. The pain in his crotch had subsided somewhat.

"That was good," said Ginny, smiling and smoothing her hair. Her lips were very red and her freckled face and chest were flushed. "How'd you do?"

"Okay," Harry lied. "I thought of, you know, mundane stuff." Ginny looked pointedly down at his groin.

"Not bad," she said. "See, it just takes a bit of practice." She stood up and breathed deeply; she seemed to be a little flustered herself.

"So, I think that'll do for today," she said. "You seem to have gotten the idea. But there's a lot to cover."

"Right," said Harry, feeling his breathing slow down and return to normal. "So, uh, when--"

"Friday night," said Ginny. "We'll have dinner somewhere and come back here. Hermione's got something with her parents and Ron'll be there."

"Sure," said Harry. "Uh, seven o'clock okay? I'll just meet you here then?"

"All right," said Ginny. She stood up from the bed and headed for the door. Harry got up, relieved beyond words that his jeans were no longer pinching him.

"You can show yourself out?" Ginny asked. She seemed a bit anxious for him to leave all of a sudden.

"Sure," said Harry, feeling a little disappointed that she wanted to get rid of him so quickly.

"See you Friday," she said, and she leaned up and kissed him very fast on the cheek.

"Bye," he said, backing out of her room. "Thanks."

"You bet," said Ginny, smiling. He backed out of her room further and she shut the door.

Harry's erection might have vanished, but the side effects of kissing Ginny, twice, like he had just done seemed to settle in his legs; he felt like he'd been hit with a Jelly Legs Jinx. He clutched the railing as he walked down the stairs. He couldn't wait to finally kiss Cho like that.

## ***Chapter Four: Discussions Over Dinner***

Harry gave one last glance in the mirror at his appearance. His hair was, as usual, a mess, but he hoped it was stylishly messy. Jeans, a button-down shirt and his black lather jacket. His wizard robes hung in his closet; he hadn't worn them since the day his holiday began.

He gave his teeth and breath a final once-over, polished his glasses, and left. It was only a short walk to Ginny's flat. From there they were going to Abercrombie's, a restaurant another few blocks away.

The night air was a bit cool but this was welcome to Harry-the days had been a bit too hot for his comfort. He strolled down the softly-lit streets, noticing how quiet it was. Ron was visiting with Hermione and her parents; Fred and George had taken the weekend to go to Edinburgh with Lee Jordan. Harry guessed the relative quiet was due to a lot of other people taking leave of the city.

He came to Ginny's door and pressed the doorbell. "Who is it?" a female voice called.

"It's Harry!" Harry called back.

"It's open, come on in," said Ginny. Harry pushed the door open and climbed up a small staircase to find himself in Ginny's living room.

"I'll be down in a second," she called. Harry looked around the living room. It was entirely neat and tidy and had obvious feminine touches, like little bud vases with a single tiny blossom in them, and elegantly framed photographs. He liked it, though-feminine, but enticingly so. Then again, most anything that reminded Harry of women these days was enticing to him.

He heard Ginny's footsteps on the stairs and turned to see her coming down. His jaw fell open.

She looked gorgeous. She wore a simple black dress, with thin straps, a deliciously low cut bodice and a slightly swingy skirt that landed above her knees. The dress told Harry that Ginny must indeed have freckles all over, but this only made her look more delectable. His eyes strayed to her shoulders, her collarbone, her cleavage.

"Are you finished?" Ginny asked archly. Her hair was pulled off her face in a clip but the back hung free and long over her shoulders.

"You look amazing," said Harry, blushing a bit at having been caught staring.

"You'll need to learn not to do that," said Ginny gently. "Stare."

Harry looked up at her impatiently. "Oh, come on. How can I not look when you look this fantastic?"

"Thanks," she said, blushing just a little herself. "Shall we go then? I just need to fetch my jacket."

She breezed past him and Harry caught the intoxicating scent of gardenias. His eyes traveled lower to her firm backside and then down over her legs.

"Cut that out," said Ginny, her back to him as she picked up her jacket. But she was laughing.

"Sorry," said Harry.

"So what's the big deal with Cho, anyway?" Ginny asked over their main courses at Abercrombie's. "I mean, yes, I know she's gorgeous and what, but what is it about her you like so much?"

Harry finished chewing his steak and considered for a moment. "I dunno, honestly. I mean, it's a bit stupid, really. I've been mad about her since I was thirteen. You know how things went between us a few years after that. I honestly thought I'd forgotten about her, you know. I mean, part of me DOES forget about her-she disappears to Egypt or wherever the hell she goes for work, stops writing and I

think, all right. I'm done with that. But then she writes me again and, I dunno, everything just sort of comes back. I just want things to go right between us for once. I mean, we FINALLY don't have all this baggage anymore, you know?"

"Timing is everything," said Ginny dryly, sipping her glass of wine. "If you want my opinion, Cho and you probably shouldn't have even tried to hook up that year. I mean, Cedric had just died. You were both a bit of a mess. Especially you. You were a right prat that year, some of the time."

"Yeah, I was," Harry admitted, taking a sip from his own wine glass. "I'm glad you didn't take any of my rubbish."

"Never," said Ginny, smiling. "SOMEBODY has to keep you in line."

Harry smiled back at her. He was having a very good time, he realized. Ginny was a great friend, really. He liked that she was tough, that she challenged him a bit, that she didn't let him get away with anything. It was easy to talk to her, too, about his insecurities. He had never really been able to delve into that stuff with Ron and Hermione, especially now that they were a couple.

"So what about you?" Harry asked, cutting another piece of steak. "Any boyfriends after Colin the Toe Freak?"

Ginny laughed. "You remember that?"

"I remember pretty much everything about that night," said Harry, grinning.

Ginny blushed, just a little. She was very pretty when she blushed, perhaps because blushing didn't seem like the sort of thing a sensible girl like her did very often.

"After Colin," said Ginny. "To be honest, I haven't had a boyfriend since Colin. I dunno, Harry, I think I've written men off."

Harry swallowed his food. "Why?"

"Okay, so I haven't written men off, but I've definitely written off relationships," said Ginny. "They're just way too complicated. And, well, I got my heart broken a few too many times, you know? Dean, that was horrible. You know why he dumped me? Because I wouldn't have sex with him."

"Dean dumped you?" said Harry, stunned. "For that? But I thought you and he."

"I only said we broke up mutually so Ron wouldn't break his legs," said Ginny, taking a mouthful of asparagus. She chewed it thoughtfully for a moment and then continued.

"So, you and Dean didn't. I mean, I always sort of figured," said Harry slowly.

"Harry, I was only fifteen when I was with Dean," said Ginny, rolling her eyes a bit. She took another sip of wine. "I mean, I know I had this reputation as being a bit of a tart in school but honestly, I didn't lose my virginity until sixth year, with Colin."

"Then did you seem so much?" said Harry slowly, feeling a bit guilty over his assumptions about her. "And for the record I never thought you were a tart. ."

She smiled. "Thanks. You were one of the few, though. But as to how I learned, you know, sex stuff. A lot from books-Hermione's got quite a collection. Colin, of course, was into some really weird shit-it was cool at first but you know the whole story behind that. Oh, and plenty of masturbation, naturally."

Harry choked on his wine but thankfully didn't spray it everywhere.

"What?" he croaked.

"Masturbation," Ginny said in a low voice. "Don't tell me you haven't done it."



".sure," Harry admitted, blushing very red. "A little."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "Okay, a lot," said Harry.

"Nothing wrong with it, you know," said Ginny. "It's the best way to get to know your own body, isn't it? Figure out what turns you on and what doesn't?"

Harry started to say something but then stopped. In all honesty he hadn't thought of it that way. To him, spanking it was all about relief; he hadn't really taken the time to give any thought to WHAT he was doing, so long as it resulted in an orgasm and the end of an uncomfortable erection.

Ginny regarded him and smiled. "Then again, maybe you've never thought about it that way." Harry nodded, thinking it was uncanny how easily she could read him, without him saying a word. It was comforting and unnerving at the same time.

"So, uh, nobody since Colin, then?" said Harry, trying to steer the conversation back to her.

"Oh, there've been a few blokes," said Ginny, "but nothing serious. I mean, I got sick of getting my heart stomped on so I decided, to hell with relationships, I'll just have sex for the fun of it. Only I haven't had much luck with that, either. Maybe I'm, like you said, too intimidating or something ridiculous. Which is just silly. I mean, most girls I know don't freak out if a man's been round the block a few times."

Harry nodded, realizing this was true. It was an unfair double standard, really, and he was ashamed of himself for having bought into it, even if it were only just a little.

They continued their meal in quiet companionship, talking about everything and nothing. Harry was enjoying himself again, though he felt his stomach clench in knots when he thought about what was in store for him later. His trousers pinched his tender parts and he thought about dead kittens again, and it helped, but then Ginny would smile at him and his trousers would pinch again. When had she become so beautiful?

They finished their meal, paid the bill and left. Harry began to feel distinctly apprehensive. They walked back slowly to Ginny's flat; she had taken his hand, but he didn't mind so much. He had always liked holding a girl's hand, and holding Ginny's felt comfortable, familiar somehow.

They entered her darkened flat. She had said nothing to him since leaving the restaurant, and he had not found the courage to talk. He allowed her to lead him up the dimly lit stairs to her bedroom. By now he felt half-ready to burst from his trousers as he watched the gentle swaying of her hips, the way her dress floated back and forth and clung to her ripe backside. The smell of gardenias and something else, something wholly erotic, assaulted his nostrils.

They reached her bedroom; she opened the door and pulled him inside. The room was lit by moonlight. She peeled off her jacket slowly-Harry closed his eyes for a moment, trying to think of dead kittens again-and then removed her wand from her pocket. She gave it a wave and suddenly the dozen or so candles were flickering, giving the room, and Ginny's skin, a golden glow.

"Sit," she ordered, pointing to her chair. Harry vaguely noticed that she had tidied up her room. He sat down.

Ginny took a few steps back. Harry swallowed.

"Uh, so, what's tonight?" he said, or rather, croaked.

"A simple anatomy lesson," said Ginny, her voice a bit husky. She drew her curtains shut, closing off the moonlight and leaving only the light of the flickering candles behind. Then, without a word, she reached up and started to peel off her dress.

Harry's eyes turned to saucers as she lowered the thin straps of her dress. The straps came lower, lower, lower, and the dress began to slide down her body. Harry swallowed again and shifted in his seat. A small smile curled Ginny's lips, but he only saw it out of the corner of his eye; he was too busy gawking at the very sexy black strapless bra she wore.

The dress slid further, revealing the belly button ring, then a pair of devastating black lace knickers. Harry's mouth fell open as the dress dropped to the floor. He stared at her for a good few minutes before finally dragging his eyes up to her face. She was spectacular.

"Wow," he choked.

## **Chapter Four: Erogenous Zones**

Ginny sat down on her bed and crossed her slim, smooth, freckled legs.

"So," she said, her voice low but firm, "let's talk about erogenous zones."

"Huh?" Harry asked dumbly, his eyes having fallen on the swell of her breasts, the tops of which were practically glowing in the candlelight.

"Hello!" Ginny said sharply, snapping her fingers. "Pay attention, Harry."

"Right," said Harry, shifting in his seat and forcing himself to look her in the eye.

"Men," said Ginny, rolling her eyes and smiling.

"Men what?" Harry asked, a bit indignantly. "How am I supposed to pay attention when you're prancing around in your knickers?"

"The point of me 'prancing around in my knickers' is to give you a little mental discipline," said Ginny very calmly. "Now, as I was saying, erogenous zones."

"Erogenous zones," repeated Harry, forcing his eyes not to stray back down to her breasts, which looked so tempting and creamy and freckly.

She stood up again. "I suppose I don't really need to tell you to look at me," she said wryly.

Harry shook his head and allowed his eyes to travel up and down.

"All right, then," said Ginny, sounding a bit bemused. "What would you like to do to me right now? Say the first thing that comes into your mind."

"I want to stroke your breasts," Harry blurted, his eyes lingering on them.

Ginny gave a sort of annoyed laugh and sat back down.

"No, no, no!" she said, shaking her head. "Look, you can't just skip over everything and go right for the breasts, okay?"

"I can't?" said Harry, a bit disappointed. He clutched his own hands together to keep himself from reaching out and fondling Ginny.

"No," said Ginny firmly. "Remember, a few days ago, I talked about kissing? How that can be a prelude to other things? Well, so can your hands. But you can't just grab at breasts and think that's going to make a girl drop her knickers for you."

"Okay," said Harry, forcing himself to look at her face again.

She took a few steps toward him, until she stood very close to him, looking down at him. He stared up at her face, still clinching his hands together.

"The body's biggest organ is the skin," she said. "It's sensitive, full of nerve endings, and it really likes to be touched. Everywhere."

Harry nodded, his eyes still fixed on hers.

"Give me your hand," she ordered. He gulped and released his hands and held up his right. She took his hand in both of hers and knelt down so that she was between his knees. Harry's trousers were really pinching at him now; he shifted in his seat as she smirked at him.

"Take a deep breath," said Ginny, and he did. And another.

"Okay," she said softly. "Now, just relax." He nodded, feeling anything but relaxed, and she took his hand and placed it against her face. She released his hand and put her arms at her side.

"Now, just explore me," she said, "with your hands. Okay? Slowly and lightly. If you start to get excited, you know what to do."

"Uh huh," said Harry, his hand frozen against her cheek. He swallowed again and moved his fingers, stroking the skin of her cheek, which was very soft. He traced along her jaw, then over her forehead, then back down, to the other cheek. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them, and her lips parted just slightly. Harry felt a jolt in his trousers as he ran his thumb over her lower lip.

Dead kittens, he thought quickly--it was the only image that seemed to quiet the agony in his groin. He brushed his fingers down onto Ginny's neck, and then along her collarbone.

"That's it," said Ginny softly, as his fingers danced on her collarbone, back toward the base of her throat, and then over the other collarbone. She had leaned in a bit closer to him and he smelled gardenias again.

Still forcing himself to think of dead kittens, Harry brought his other hand up and he stroked gently at her shoulder blades, around the back of them, and then caressed the silk of her hair.

"Not bad," Ginny whispered, leaning in still closer. Harry's hands traveled over her bare back. Her achingly soft, smooth bare back. He felt the satin of the back of her bra, and his hands traveled lower, coming to rest in the small of her back.

Dead kittens, dead kittens, dead kittens. But the ache in his trousers was fighting back. She was now very close to him, arching her back so that her very lovely backside stuck out, the lace of her knickers hugging it enticingly.

"Good," said Ginny lightly, as Harry's hands traveled lower and caressed her bottom.

"God," Harry muttered, willing himself to think of anything other than what he was doing.

"Relax," she said quickly, as his hands moved to her hips, and then back over her bottom again. "Breathe."

He breathed heavily through his nose. The image of dead kittens wasn't working anymore. He breathed hard again, through his mouth this time. He was dying to take off his trousers when he suddenly noticed that he had been caressing Ginny now for at least five minutes without losing himself.

She moved still closer to him and his hands moved from her rear end to her hips again, up the sides of her torso, and over her shoulders again.

"How are you doing?" she asked, her hands still at her sides. She seemed entirely unruffled.

"Fine," Harry said, shifting again in his seat. His erection had to have reached critical mass by now, and he was quite sure he was making some very bizarre faces in the attempt to control himself.

Ginny smiled. "Take another breath," she instructed. "Are you thinking of non-sexual things?"

"No," said Harry bluntly, as his fingers traced circles on her shoulders. "Sorry."

"Then focus on breathing," said Ginny calmly. "You won't be much good to Cho if you pass out because you forgot to breathe."

Harry stopped caressing Ginny's shoulders for a moment--he supposed it oughtn't to have surprised him to hear Cho's name, under the circumstances, but it did. All this time he hadn't been thinking of Cho at all. How could he, really, when Ginny was kneeling between his legs, nearly naked and looking good enough to eat, her red hair spilling down her back?

"Harry?" said Ginny, moving a fraction of an inch closer.

"Right," said Harry. "Breathe." He took a deep, exaggerated breath and felt the swelling in his trousers ease up, just slightly.

"You're doing fine," said Ginny.

"Thanks," said Harry. This was perhaps the weirdest thing he'd ever done, he thought. Caressing Ginny like this as she told him what to do, and Ginny acting as though it were the most normal thing in the world. It was weird, and incredible. For the first time he didn't feel like a completely clumsy idiot. Even if Ginny didn't seem to be too ruffled by what he was doing, at least she was being encouraging. At least he wasn't losing himself.

"Are you okay?" she asked, moving still closer to him. He could have wrapped his legs around her.

"Yeah," he said. "Wh-what now?"

"Kiss me," she said. "Slowly."

He obeyed--not that he needed to be pushed into it. If anything, kissing her now--after his hands had explored much of her bare skin--was even more thrilling than it had been before. Her tongue tasted of peppermint. Harry felt his arms wrap around her and pull her even closer. She moved in and put her arms around his waist. His hands tangled in her hair.

Breathe, he told himself, and he felt himself inhale sharply through his nose as he kissed her. This is good, I can handle this, he thought. She tightened her arms round him and he felt his mouth drift, his lips tracing kisses along her jaw.

"That's good, Harry," she murmured into his ear. His mouth moved lower, to her neck, and he began to kiss the soft, tender skin there as she leaned back. His hands moved to her bottom again.

"Slow," she murmured against his mouth as he kissed her on the lips again. His hands began to move of their own accord, stroking every inch of her flesh that he could reach. They moved from her bottom and up over her back, to her shoulders. His left hand traveled around to her collarbone and over her shoulder and back up to her collarbone, then down, down, until it came to rest on her left breast. Harry's groin was throbbing against his trousers; her breast was plump and fit perfectly in his hand.

"Ginny," he murmured, feeling his hand move carefully over her breast.

"Harry," she breathed. "Stop."

"Wha--?"

She pushed him away from her and he immediately stopped touching her, though it took no small amount of will on his part to pull his hands away from her skin.

"That was good," she said, looking a bit flushed herself, but otherwise quite calm. "You're getting the idea. Do you get what I was saying, about how you can't just jump in and start fondling a girl however you want?"

Harry shook his head. His heart was still racing; his hands were on fire; his lips were burning; his breathing was labored; and his trousers were still pinching him. He couldn't understand why what had just happened hadn't seemed to affect Ginny. Hadn't she felt it, the electricity when they kissed? Hadn't she enjoyed the way he'd touched her? He'd been so careful, so AWARE of the way he caressed her. He could still feel her skin beneath his hands, even as he folded them together and held them over his aching groin. Yes, she'd SAID that he was doing well, but she sure didn't look like he'd hoped. Like she'd had a bloody good time when he kissed her and stroked her. How was it that she was so bloody unmoved, when he was sitting there gasping for breath and struggling to stop the room from spinning?

"Harry, are you all right?" She sat down onto her bed and crossed her legs primly at the knees.

"Fine," said Harry, sitting back onto the chair.

"You're doing really well," she said in an encouraging voice, sitting back on the bed.

"Thanks," Harry said dryly, unable to keep the sarcasm from his voice. "You certainly look like you just had a fabulous time."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Bloody hell, Ginny!" Harry said sharply. "I'm--I'm dying over here and you're sitting there like nothing just happened. I mean, could you at least pretend that you liked what I just did?"

"I did like it!" Ginny snapped. "Why do you think I kept telling you--"

"Then how is it you're sitting there as though you just finished filing your bloody nails?" Harry demanded. He felt his anger and frustration begin to boil to the surface. All this time, he'd never been able to touch a girl properly; he'd never been able to make a girl feel the kind of ache and pleasure he'd felt the few times he'd been lucky enough to have any kind of sexual encounter at all. He knew it was unfair--that Ginny was teaching him what to do, and that he should be grateful to her, but he couldn't help it. Why did she have to be so bloody clinical about it?

"That's not fair," Ginny snapped. "I'm doing you a favor, in case you forgot."

"I know!" said Harry, standing up, his erection finally having calmed down. "But dammit, Ginny. Why--why do I feel like--like I'm no better off than I was before? How am I supposed to know, really know if what I'm doing is good when you don't even--"

"I can't," said Ginny. "I have to maintain some level of control, remember? I'm supposed to be teaching you stuff. I can't very well do that if I lose my head."

Harry looked at her, and she looked back at him. There was something in her eyes, an expression he couldn't quite discern. Her posture was stiff and rigid; her back straight and her fists clenched at her sides, but her eyes were different. Harry couldn't help but think she looked suddenly quite sad. He felt his anger and frustration evaporate.

"Ginny," he said slowly. "I'm--sorry. I know you're helping me out. And I appreciate it. You're the best, I mean it. I just--part of me wishes I knew you were having as much fun as I am."

Ginny slumped just a little and her face relaxed, but her eyes still had that slightly haunted expression.

"Harry, have I ever lied to you?" she asked.

"No," said Harry.

"Please believe me when I tell you that what just happened, what you did, was good," she said slowly. "Better than good. You're a lot better at this than you think you are."

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"I think we should call it quits for tonight," she said, standing up. She headed for her dresser and retrieved a nightshirt, which she pulled on over her head. Harry felt a twinge of regret to see her beautiful skin covered up.

"Okay," he said, relenting.

"Harry, if you don't want to keep doing this--" she began.

"I want to," said Harry. "I--I have to. I can't make a fool of myself again- -"

"You won't," said Ginny, smiling. "You--you did understand what I meant, though, about--"

"About not groping a girl without warming her up a bit first, yeah," said Harry, blushing and smiling at her.

"If I'd been Cho, believe me, I wouldn't have stopped you," said Ginny, giving a kind of forced laugh.

"That's good to know," said Harry, smiling, but feeling very strange. He didn't like talking about Cho, not when he was with Ginny.

"I'm going to give you a few books," said Ginny, opening her desk drawer and pulling out two small volumes and pressing them into his hand. "Look them over; they're very informative. They have a bunch of exercises you can do--breathing stuff--to help you stay calmer. And of course plenty of information on all kinds of foreplay and what."

"I have to read?" said Harry, arching his eyebrows and straightening his glasses.

"Believe me, once you get into these books you won't want to put them down," she said, smiling wickedly.

They stood there for a moment, smiling at one another. Harry felt much better now than he had a few minutes earlier. Ginny was right--she had never lied to him, and she hadn't been lying to him a moment ago. He felt better about himself than he had in ages. Maybe he'd get this whole sex thing right after all.

He suddenly noticed that he and Ginny were still standing there, not talking, but gazing at each other. Her eyes looked beautiful in the candlelight.

He blinked.

"So, I'll be going," said Harry. "Thanks for dinner, and for--for--"

"You're welcome," she said, smiling, but the smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "I had a good time."

"Me, too," said Harry, backing his way out of her room, wondering why--even though he knew she meant it when she said she'd had a good time--her eyes still looked rather sad. Perhaps there was something else going on in her life that he didn't know about. He opened his mouth to say something, to perhaps ask her what was wrong, but she said, "Good night, Harry," and opened the door to her bedroom. He took the hint. Whatever was bothering her was not for him to pry about.

"G'night," he said softly.

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and walked slowly out of her room. He started down the stairs. The only light available was the flickering candlelight that fell from her open bedroom. He walked slowly down the stairs, his hands and lips still tingling. He heard a creaking behind him and turned, hoping to see Ginny at the top of the stairs one last time, but instead he saw only the light from her room fade to dark as she shut her door, leaving him alone in the dark at the foot of the stairs.

## ***Chapter Five: Reading Material***

Harry and Ginny were kissing. Very passionately. Harry's hands were tangled in Ginny's soft red hair; her arms were around his waist. Little moans escaped from her throat.

Harry and Ginny were arguing. No, they were fighting. Ginny was sobbing angrily. Harry was red in the face from shouting. What were they fighting about?

Ginny turned on her heel and marched out of the room, slamming the door behind her with a bang.

Harry sat up in bed, gasping. He blinked and looked around the room; thin streaks of sunlight peeked through the closed shutters. He was alone, in his bed, in his own room. His t-shirt and boxers were soaked with sweat.

He rubbed his eyes and climbed out of bed. As he stood up he saw to his extreme annoyance that once again he was standing at attention.

"Bloody hell," he thought. It was as if the appendage between his legs had a brain and a will all its own. He thought of dead kittens again and this time, the image worked.

He shook his head and took a swig of water from the glass on his nightstand, then checked his clock. Nearly nine o'clock in the morning—far earlier than he'd intended to get up, considering how late it had been when he'd finally gotten home from Ginny's flat. Ron and Hermione had spent the night at Hermione's parents' house, so Harry was alone.

For a moment he considered crawling back into bed, but he realized he was too awake to fall asleep. Then he remembered the books Ginny had given him last night.

"No time like the present," he muttered aloud, fetching the books from his desk.

His eyes scanned the title.

"The Kama Sutra," he read slowly. He opened the book to a random page and gasped out loud. He hadn't known what to expect when he read the books Ginny had given him, but he certainly hadn't expected pictures.

He studied the painting on the page again, blinking. It was clear what the two people in the picture were doing, but as Harry turned the book on its side to study the painting from a different angle, he wondered just how on earth two people could possibly have sex in the manner the two people in the painting were having it. He realized he'd have to start at the beginning with that one.

He put the first book down on his bed and glanced at the second.

"Tantric Sex," he read aloud. He looked on the back cover. "The complete guide to the ultimate in sexual and spiritual fulfillment. Learn how to discipline your body and mind to achieve excellent technique and amazing stamina, and how to achieve perfect pleasure for yourself and your partner."

That's more like it, Harry thought, sitting down on his bed and opening the book to read.

"Chapter One: Breathing," he read. Breathing? He thought back to his session with Ginny the previous night, and how she had to keep reminding him to breathe. He wasn't sure a whole chapter devoted to breathing would be that interesting, but figured he'd at least read the first few pages. Very quickly he became fascinated. Who knew that the simple act of breathing could cleanse and restore the body's balance and something called the chakras?

"A simple breathing exercise, done daily for as little as five minutes, will calm the body and the mind and open the spirit to receive renewed vitality, energy and focus."



Harry read the next page.

"There is a breathing practice in yoga that uses the heroic breath," Harry read. "The heroic breath brings the mind inward, aligns the body with the mind, releases tension and increases mental focus and discipline. To achieve this heroic breath, seat yourself in a cross-legged position on top of several folded blankets. This allows the hips to rest higher than the knees, which allows for freer movement of the breath. Rest hands comfortably on the knees. Sit tall, with the spine in a natural curve, the shoulders back. Close the eyes and focus inward. The sound of the breath is what counts here. As you breathe in through the nostrils, focus on the gentle hiss of air as oxygen enters your lungs. As you breathe out through the mouth, hear the sound of the breath exit your lungs and your mouth. Pay attention to the movement of the abdomen and the chest as you breathe. Do not force the breath in and out."

Harry read over the instructions again. It sounded like a lot of hooey to him, but then again, last night breathing had been the thing that had kept him from losing himself. He felt a stirring in his groin again as he thought of his hands on Ginny, the way her tongue had tasted of peppermints.

"Knock it off," he said out loud to his crotch and blinking again.

He piled up some blankets and sat down on them in a cross-legged position. He was at least grateful that he wouldn't be required to make any weird humming noises, which Parvati Patil had done in her seventh year when she'd taken up meditation as a way, so she said, to open up her Inner Eye (Parvati was a big believer in Divination).

He let his hands rest on his knees and closed his eyes. He sat up tall and focused on his breathing. Into the nose, out the mouth. He heard the hissing noises as he breathed in and out, felt the way his abdomen expanded and contracted, felt his shoulders lift and fall gently with each breath.

He lost track of time. His mind was a blank slate. All he could hear was his own breathing. Into the nose, out the mouth. He felt himself grow strangely lighter. His body seemed to be almost floating, even though he knew he was still sitting on the blankets...

"I'm home!"

Harry jerked and his eyes flew open. He wasn't sure just how long he'd been meditating but it felt like quite some time. He was distinctly annoyed at Ron for having interrupted him. And he was even more annoyed when Ron burst into his room without knocking.

"Hey," said Ron, then took note of Harry, sitting cross-legged on the pile of blankets. "Uh, what are you doing?"

"Don't you knock?" Harry said irritably, getting up.

"Sorry," said Ron. "What's that you're reading?"

Harry felt his stomach give a lurch. He scooped up the book from the floor.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Just...uh...something...something Lupin gave me."

"Lupin?" said Ron suspiciously.

"Yeah," said Harry, his mind searching for a lie. "Uh, it's a history of werewolves."

"Uh huh," said Ron. "Sounds boring."

"Not really," said Harry, hoping he sounded convincing. The truth was he and Ron hardly ever read books unless they had to.

"Maybe I could borrow it when you're done, then," Ron suggested, through narrowed blue eyes. He was now fully inside Harry's room; Harry resisted the urge to tell him to get the hell out. Who the hell

did Ron think he was, anyway, barging in on him like this?

"Uh, sure," said Harry. "Whatever."

"Or maybe I could just borrow this one," said Ron, snatching the Kama Sutra from Harry's bed.

"Gimme that!" Harry snapped, reaching for it, but Ron held it up.

"What is this?" Ron asked turning around to try and look at the title of the book.

"Ron, dammit-" But Ron held the book up again, leaving Harry to jump up and down impotently in a futile attempt to retrieve the book. Damn Ron and his height, his long arms!

"Give it back!" Harry shouted.

"All right, all right, mate," said Ron, laughing. "Just quit jumping around like a bloody prat. You're embarrassing yourself."

"Sod you," said Harry angrily. "Maybe if you weren't so freakishly tall..."

"Six-foot-four is not freakishly tall," said Ron indignantly. "You're just jealous because you're so short."

"Five foot ten is NOT short," said Harry angrily, although of course he WAS jealous that Ron was so tall. "Now give me that book."

"Fine," said Ron, and he handed Harry the book, but not before his eyes caught the title.

"The Kama Sutra," he said, as Harry snatched the book away.

"It's...it's a history," said Harry quickly. "Of...of wizards in India."

"Oh, another history," said Ron dryly. "Nice try, mate. But I've read that one. If it's a history of anything it's a history of sex."

Harry went very red in the face and looked at the floor.

"So," said Ron, grinning, "trying to, uh, 'bone up' on your shagging skills?"

"Oh, shut UP!" said Harry angrily. "You know, just because you and Hermione screw every night doesn't mean you have to rub it in that I'm rubbish when it comes to girls!"

Ron stared at Harry in surprise. "Easy, mate," he said apologetically. "I didn't mean-"

"Yeah, whatever," said Harry, now in a temper.

"Look, Harry," said Ron quickly. "I'm sorry. Honest. I didn't know-"

"Well of course you didn't know!" Harry bellowed. "You're too busy fucking your brains out to notice much of anything these days! Meanwhile I'm out there making a complete arse of myself with women, none of whom will give me the time of day except to say that they went out on a date with the 'famous Harry Potter.' Except Famous Harry Potter is so pathetic every girl dumps him after the first date. It's lovely for you, isn't it, having a girl who's mad about you and who, after TWO AND A HALF YEARS, I might add, shags you stupid every bloody night. It must make you feel great to finally be better at something than me. Ron Weasley, Shag Champion of Britain. And look, there's Famous Harry Potter, what a loser. Only shagged two girls in his life-"

"Two?" Ron interrupted. Harry stopped mid-pace and swallowed. Oops. He hadn't meant to let THAT slip out.

"I thought you said Susan was the only girl," said Ron. "When did you...who's this second girl?"

Harry swallowed again and looked directly at Ron. "Nobody you know," lied Harry quickly, "and I

don't feel like discussing it with you."

"Fine," said Ron, holding up his hands. He didn't seem too upset that Harry had just insulted him. If anything, he looked at Harry with sympathy, which only served to make Harry even angrier.

"Stop looking at me like I'm some freak!" he yelled.

"I'm not!" Ron yelled back. "Bloody hell, Harry, what's wrong with you? Look, I'm sorry you're having problems with girls, okay, but I'm not making fun of you, I swear. And it's not like I'm some bloody male tart or something, all right? I haven't been out there shagging half of Britain, remember? Hermione-you know, my girlfriend? My ONLY girl?"

"Dammit," said Harry, slamming 'Tantric Sex' onto his desk in frustration.

"I'm sorry, okay?" said Ron. "I didn't mean to-"

"Forget it," said Harry. "I'm sorry, too. Shit. I'm a mess. Reading these bloody books, trying to be 'cool' or something. I'm pathetic."

"You're not," said Ron firmly. "And those books are damn valuable, if you ask me." He grinned.

"Taught me most everything I know."

Harry rolled his eyes. "That's great, Ron. But you have a girlfriend, remember? I don't."

"Then why bother reading-"

"Because," Harry said heavily. He might as well come clean about it now. "Cho wrote me, okay? I know, I know," he added quickly, seeing Ron's expression go sour and his mouth open to say something.

"She wrote me last week and told me she's coming into town for her holiday," Harry explained. "She wants to get together and, in her words, start things up again."

Ron shook his head. "Harry, that girl is bad news and you know it," he said. "You and her couldn't even get along for two minutes without fighting."

"So?" said Harry defiantly. "I seem to recall you and Hermione having a row every ten minutes before you finally-"

"That was different," said Ron firmly. "We both liked each other at the time but were too stupid and stubborn to admit it. You and Cho-it just didn't work."

"Ron, I was fifteen," Harry protested. "I mean, not that I'm much better with girls now, of course, but I think I've grown up just a BIT since then. And...and I really like Cho, all right. I always have. I hate that things ended so badly between us. This is a second chance for us, you know? Neither of us has any more baggage hanging over us. I mean, it just might work this time."

Ron looked at Harry for a long moment. "I dunno, mate," he said at last. "I don't trust her. I mean, she played with your mind how many times, Harry?"

"It wasn't all her fault," said Harry stubbornly. "I was a mess, the timing was always bad."

"Yeah, well, maybe that's some higher power trying to tell you something," said Ron. "Maybe it's just not meant to happen between you two."

"I have to try," said Harry. "Okay? I have to give it a chance. I mean, we're both finally free, we're older. I have to try. I'm crazy about her."

Ron sighed and looked down. "All right, mate," he said. "You'll do what you want. But just be careful, okay?"

Harry nodded.

"Don't bother reading the later chapters of that," said Ron, pointing to the Kama Sutra. "Hermione and me tried one of those inverted positions. I can safely say it's not only damn near impossible but it's also damn uncomfortable."

"Uh, Ron, I REALLY didn't want to know that," said Harry, feeling a grin come over his face, relieved that Ron wasn't angry with him for his outburst.

"Hey, I'm just passing along some friendly advice," said Ron, holding up his hands and grinning back. "The Tantric stuff, though-that's excellent. Definitely read up on that. Since I've been doing that breathing stuff, I'm able to go at it for five hours straight-"

"GET OUT!" Harry yelled, laughing and throwing a pillow at Ron's head.

## ***Chapter Six: The Quidditch Match***

It was a bright, clear and very hot Sunday afternoon when Ron, Harry and Hermione arrived at the Quidditch stadium, where Puddlemere United was to play Ireland's Dublin Devils. They all wore rosettes-provided by Ginny-in the Puddlemere colors and each carried pairs of Omnioculars.

"Daily Prophet says Ginny's the most promising Seeker to play for Puddlemere," Ron was gushing as he handed over several Sickles worth of coins to purchase his numerous sweets.

"Ron, if your teeth don't fall out by the time you're 30 I'll be shocked," Hermione scolded, as he stuff his pockets full with hard candies and Chocolate Frogs.

"That's a bit rich, coming from you," said Ron as he popped a whole Chocolate Frog in his mouth and chewed it thickly. He handed her a frog, and she took it, smiling.

Harry rolled his eyes, but he found he wasn't annoyed at all. They were perfect together, he thought, and he felt the usual pang of envy every time he saw how happy his two best friends were together. He'd had that once, with Susan, before she dumped him. Maybe he could have that with Cho, he thought hopefully. Now that she's not sobbing into her tea over Cedric and I'm not sobbing into MY tea over Susan.

They entered the stands and took their seats. Harry felt the usual rush of excitement to see a Quidditch match-the only thing that was more exciting than watching a match was, of course, playing in one. Of all the things he missed about Hogwarts, he missed Quidditch most of all. It had been a constant in his life there-but for a few interruptions-and had seen him through some of his worst difficulties. It was as good a friend to him as Ron and Hermione had ever been. But now he was a spectator. He sighed under his breath. At least he'd get to see Ginny play, finally, instead of only catching glimpses of her as he zoomed around on his own broom looking for a Snitch.

Harry opened the program, which featured smiling, moving portraits of all seven Puddlemere players. Oliver Wood looked as burly as ever, grinning broadly, even a bit smugly, from his photo. Harry's eyes fell on Ginny's photograph. She had a radiant smile on her face and Harry felt his insides get warm as her picture smiled up at him. Her eyes sparkled. Harry suddenly realized he couldn't wait to see her again. He wondered when they'd get together for another lesson. He hoped it was soon. Reading the books she'd given him-which he'd done most of yesterday and well into last night, hadn't really compared.

Harry was just settling into his seat, his mood light and happy, when he glanced to his left and felt his stomach drop.

There, not thirty feet away, sat Draco Malfoy. And next to him, holding his hand and sitting very close, was Susan Bones.

Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Ron and Hermione glance over in Malfoy's direction.

"Harry," said Hermione, quickly, putting a comforting hand on his arm.

Harry swallowed hard. "It's okay," he lied, looking down. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked, glancing at Ron and then back at him.

"Yeah," said Harry, a bit too forcefully. Hermione got the hint and said nothing else, but she exchanged a worried look with Ron.

Harry sat back in his seat, hating himself, and hating Draco Malfoy even more. I'm OVER Susan, Harry thought angrily. I've been over her for ages.

So why does it bother you to see her with Malfoy? a voice inside his head needled him.

Because it's Malfoy! another voice yelled. Your arch-enemy. The dirty great prat who tormented you for your entire existence at Hogwarts, who nearly got your best friends killed. Susan's shagging that...that...

"Harry?" said Ron. "Uh, you okay? The match is about to start."

"Right," said Harry quickly, picking up his Omnioculars.

The fourteen players zoomed out into the air above the pitch; the Puddlemere United players were dressed in shades of blue; the Dublin team in green and gold. Harry moved his Omnioculars around until he caught sight of Ginny. She had a very focused, intense expression on her face. Her bright red hair she had arranged in a simple plait that fell down her back and caught the light. She was by far the best looking thing on a broom Harry had ever seen. He felt his stomach lighten a bit. Focus on Ginny, he thought, and forget about Susan canoodling with Ratboy.

Surprisingly, Harry found that this strategy worked well. As the game got under way he found his attention riveted on Ginny's team, but most especially on Ginny herself. She was a fantastic player—probably the best Chaser he'd seen since Angelina Johnson, if not better. Her small size gave her an edge in speed, but beyond this was her incredible control and skill with her broom; she had mastered turns and dives and feints that even Harry hadn't quite gotten the hang of.

"It's Ginny Weasley in possession," the announcer blared. "She's...what's this? She's diving! O'Malley, Sullivan and Riordan are all in pursuit. Puddlemere's other Chasers can't get to her! She's put on speed! What on earth is she doing?"

Harry gasped. Ginny seemed to be diving straight toward the ground. No, he thought, she can't be. Not...

"She's nearly on the ground now...she...PULLS UP! INCREDIBLE! Ginny Weasley pulls off a Wronski Feint! You don't ever see that move done by a Chaser! She's...she's pulled up, she's going for goal...whoa, she narrowly dodges a Dublin Bludger and...SHE SCORES! It's 80-70 Puddlemere!"

"Holy shit!" Harry and Ron said together.

"Go Ginny!" Ron bellowed, waving at her. "That's my little sister!" he added, puffing out his chest with pride.

"I can't believe she pulled that off!" Harry yelled, his hands getting raw from clapping. "I knew she was good, but..."

"She told me she practiced that Wonky Faint thing all last year," said Hermione, clapping primly.

"WRONSKI FEINT!" Harry and Ron both yelled.

The game continued. Harry couldn't help but notice that the Puddlemere Seeker seemed to be the weak link—Harry counted three separate occasions where the Seeker, whose name was McCutcheon, missed seeing the Snitch. A few times Harry held his breath as the Dublin seeker began to zoom off in one direction, but Harry quickly realized the Dublin seeker was feinting, trying to fake out McCutcheon.

"Stupid git, falling for that one twice," Harry muttered. If McCutcheon didn't get his act together it might wind up falling to the Chasers and Wood—who was keeping goal more brilliantly than Harry had ever seen him—to win the game for them. But that would mean the game might go on for hours.

It didn't, though. Very quickly after Harry began to feel completely disparaging things for McCutcheon, the Puddlemere Seeker did seem to catch on. He caught sight of the Snitch and zoomed after it, and it was then that Harry saw he was a pretty good flyer after all. McCutcheon dodged two very fast

Bludgers without breaking stride toward the Snitch, and in the next minute, with the Dublin Seeker right behind him, McCutcheon's fingers closed on the Golden Snitch.

"PUDDLEMERE WINS!!!" the announcer screamed.

"Yeah!" Harry and Ron yelled, leaping up from their seats. Harry had never been so thrilled to be a spectator to his favorite game in all his life. The seven Puddlemere players flew in a circle, all of them punching fists in the air, when Ginny circled close by and caught sight of him. Harry beamed at her and gave her the thumbs up, and she smiled and waved. Harry watched her as she zoomed down to the ground, alighting easily from her broom and immediately being crushed in a bear hug by her teammates.

"Let's go," said Ron urgently, grabbing Hermione's hand and leading her out of the stands. Harry nodded, grabbed his Omnioculars and the program and followed Ron—who was easy to spot considering his height and bright hair—out of the stands. Harry couldn't wait to congratulate Ginny.

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They met the team just outside the changing rooms. Ginny was the last to come out; her skin looked freshly scrubbed and her hair was wet. She wore jeans and a white t-shirt. She smiled at Harry. She looked beautiful.

"Ginny!" Ron yelled, clapping her in a hug. "My God! You were bloody brilliant!"

"Your sister won us the game," said a rough voice. Oliver Wood had strode over to them. "Can you believe that Wronski Feint?"

Wood and Ron exchanged greetings, then he and Hermione headed off, Ron announcing that he was starving (despite having eaten a few pounds worth of candy) and that he had to eat right then or he'd pass out dead on the spot. Hermione rolled her eyes but followed him out of the stadium; Ron promised to see Harry later, at home.

"Congratulations, Ginny!" Hermione called, waving. Ginny waved back.

Wood glanced over and spotted Harry. "Harry Potter!" he yelled, clapping Harry heartily on the back. "Good to see you, mate! How's the Auror career?"

"Not bad," said Harry, wishing at that moment that he'd chucked the idea of being an Auror and had instead pursued Quidditch as a career.

"Bet you miss this," said Oliver perceptively.

"Definitely," said Harry. "But you all were amazing. Best match I've ever watched."

"Yeah," said Wood, but his features darkened. "Too bad we're not moving on to the finals, though."

"No kidding," said Ginny, coming to stand next to Wood. "Then again, with the way Wood's been practicing us, it'll be nice to FINALLY get a break."

"No rest for the wicked, Weasley!" Wood said jovially, clapping her a bit too hard on the back. She winced but Wood was just too excited about winning to notice, and Ginny smiled.

"Oi, Katie!" Wood jogged away from them, waving, in the direction of Katie Bell. Harry couldn't help but watch as Wood grabbed Katie around the waist and twirled her around. She laughed as he lowered her and kissed her rather enthusiastically right there on the Quidditch pitch. Harry looked away and cleared his throat.

"Didn't know about them," he said, feeling once again slightly bereft. Wood and Katie headed off, arms around each other.

"They got together last year," said Ginny, looking away as well. Their eyes met and she blushed, just a little.

"Thanks for coming to the match," she said.

"You were brilliant," said Harry. "I can't believe...a Wronski Feint. That was incredible."

"Thanks," said Ginny, blushing, but with a hint of pride in her voice. "You know, I learned that from you."

"Yeah?" said Harry, grinning. "I don't remember teaching it to you."

"You didn't," said Ginny. "I just watched you fly. Whenever I could, you know. In practices sometimes. But I remember in your seventh year how you liked to disappear for hours at a time. I'd see you flying, from the common room window."

"Yeah," said Harry, feeling a bit embarrassed but oddly pleased that Ginny had been watching him.

"I...liked to get away. Especially those first few months, after...Susan. Flying helps me think."

"Me, too," said Ginny. "Maybe that's why we got so good at it. I practiced my arse off after Colin and I split up." She paused. "Anyway, I watched you and I got a decent idea of how to do it."

He looked at her again and saw the same sadness in her eyes that he'd seen only two nights ago. He felt an ache in his chest. She should be happy. No, thrilled. Her team might not be going to the World Cup but she'd just helped her team win a brilliant game. People would be talking about her flying for weeks to come. So why, Harry wondered, did she look so sad? Harry couldn't stand it, he had to ask.

"Ginny, are you...okay?" he asked, taking a step toward her.

"I'm fine," she said quickly, but she didn't meet his eyes. "I'm really tired, actually."

"Oh," said Harry, torn between wanting to push the issue and not wanting to pry. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," said Ginny, looking up at him again. She smiled, but again, the smile didn't reach her eyes.

"You read those books I gave you?"

"Oh, uh, yeah," said Harry, slightly disconcerted by the change of subject and not sure he wanted to discuss this sort of thing right there on the Quidditch pitch. "Uh, you were right. Very informative."

"Maybe," said Ginny slowly, taking a step toward him, "we could get together later this week. You know, to...go over things."

Harry felt a rush of blood race to his groin. He swallowed and conjured up a thousand dead kittens in his mind.

"Yeah," he said, images of dead kittens competing-and losing-against images of Ginny in her knickers, Harry's hands stroking her.

"Great," she said, smiling. "Wednesday?"

"What?" Harry said dumbly, then he blinked and remembered himself. "Yeah, Wednesday."

She smiled at him, and for a moment they only looked at each other. "Um, shall we go, then?" Ginny said. "I'm starving. Maybe we could catch up with Ron and Hermione."

"Oh!" said Harry. "Yeah, uh, let's go."

They started off, and to Harry's pleasant surprise Ginny too his hand and smiled shyly at him.

They were halfway away from the pitch when Harry heard a voice call to him.

"Hi, Harry."



He and Ginny whirled around to see Susan Bones.

Harry felt his stomach drop again. He hadn't gotten a good look at her in the stands. She was just a bit taller than he remembered. Or maybe she was standing up straighter. Her dark auburn hair had been cut stylishly and fell just past her chin. She wore robes-blue ones-and had a tan and a healthy smattering of freckles on her nose. She looked wonderful.

"Hi," said Harry, looking at her and feeling Ginny let go of his hand.

"How are you?" Susan asked, taking a tentative step toward him, glancing at Ginny.

"Fine," said Harry, his jaw suddenly stiff.

"Congratulations, Ginny," said Susan, in an unnaturally cheerful voice. "You were excellent."

"Thanks," said Ginny coolly, giving Susan a slightly frosty smile.

There was a long and excruciating pause. Harry wanted to flee, but his feet seemed rooted to the grass. He wanted to grab Ginny's hand again, in part because he liked holding her hand, but in part because he wanted Susan to believe he'd forgotten all about her, that he'd moved on, that he'd found another girl. A better girl. A girl who wouldn't dump him because he was inadequate in bed and take up with another bloke only a few weeks later.

"Susan, let's go!" Harry's eyes moved from Susan's face to see, about twenty feet off, Draco Malfoy. Malfoy shot Harry a smug smile.

"I should go," said Susan, smiling awkwardly. "It was nice to see you, Harry."

"You, too," Harry lied, his voice working against the lump in his throat. She turned and started off; Harry watched her as she moved toward Malfoy, watched as they came together. Malfoy shot Harry another triumphant smile and put his arm around Susan, and they left the pitch together.

Harry swallowed again.

"Harry," said Ginny slowly. "Are you-"

"Fine," Harry lied. "I'm fine. Let's...let's get the hell out of here."

He stalked away from the field, not waiting for Ginny to take his hand this time.

## ***Chapter Seven: How to Undress***

"Harry, are you sure you're--"

"I'm fine," said Harry stiffly, trying to squelch his annoyance at Ginny for asking him this question a fifth time. They had Apparated out of the Quidditch stadium and into Diagon Alley.

He looked at Ginny as they stood outside her flat, and seeing her face made him feel like a world-class heel. She was concerned for him, and he was being rude to her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't expect to see--"

"I know," said Ginny softly. She smiled sadly at him and put a hand on his cheek. "You're going to be all right, you know."

Harry looked down at her and smiled back. "I know," he said, not feeling like he was going to be all right at all. "Are we--still on? For Wednesday?"

"Sure," said Ginny. "But I'll have to come to your place. Hermione's cooking Ron dinner here."

"Hermione cooks?"

"Not really, which is why I don't want to be here when she starts destroying the kitchen," said Ginny, giggling.

"All right then," said Harry, and he pulled Ginny into a hug, grateful that there was one girl on the planet who treated him like a human being, who didn't mess with his head or break his heart. "See you soon."

She pulled out of the hug and smiled. "Read up on those books," she said, smiling wryly. "I might quiz you."

Harry blushed. "That sounds wicked," he said, grinning wider. "Lots more fun than school quizzes."

Ginny laughed. "G'night, Harry."

"G'night," he said, and he kissed her lightly on the cheek. She turned to enter her flat and was halfway through the door when he stopped her.

"Ginny?" he said. "Thanks."

"You bet," she said, smiling one last sad smile before entering her flat and closing the door behind her.

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The next few days, Harry devoted to reading the two books Ginny had given him. His mind was filled with very vivid ideas of just what Ginny might quiz him on, but the reading itself proved to be rather more boring than Harry expected.

The information was certainly useful--the Kama Sutra alone offered a hundred different ways to bring pleasure to a woman (most of which Harry didn't think he'd be able to do without losing it). But after reading two hundred pages of stuff about sex he began to lose interest just a bit. Even the pictures--most of them rather graphic--struck Harry as humorous, not erotic.

Perhaps I'm just an immature git, he thought.

One thing he did practice was breathing. The idea that he could control himself simply by breathing filled Harry with hope, especially in light of the rather successful lesson he and Ginny had had last week. He found himself meditating several times a day, and he was amazed that it really did seem to calm him down and sharpen his mental focus.

On Wednesday morning Harry awoke early to meditate again, when he heard a soft flutter of wings. Hedwig soared through his open window.

"Hey, girl," he said, getting out of bed and crossing to her. "What have you got for me?"

A letter, Harry saw. He took them from Hedwig's beak and stroked her wing gently. She nipped his finger affectionately and then fluttered over to her open cage, where she settled down for a good long sleep.

A letter, thought Harry. Who'd be writing to him? He looked at the first letter. It was from Cho. Harry smiled as he tore open the letter.

Dear Harry,

Can you believe I'll be in London in two weeks? I can't wait! I heard about Puddlemere United winning--that's amazing. I hate to admit, but that Weasley girl is probably the best player I've heard of in a while. Of course, playing against her was never as much fun as playing against YOU. You always did look wonderful on a broom. Maybe you and I could have a fly on our brooms, for old time's sake.

In the meantime I'm in Cairo. We have a day off between assignments. I can't wait to get the hell out of here. This desert air is murder on my complexion--you wouldn't believe how fast I go through moisturiser! At the very least, I have a good tan, which you'll get to see every inch of, I promise. I probably won't get another chance to write before I make my appearance, so please just meet me at Heathrow. My flight gets in at four o'clock, two weeks from this Friday. See you soon!

Love,

Cho

Harry read the letter again and shifted in his chair. Images of Cho's tan filled his mind and inspired all sorts of naughty thoughts. He couldn't wait to see her. All of her. This time he'd know what to do. He wouldn't lose himself just because she stood naked in front of him, with her gorgeous curves and sparkling hazel eyes her long, brilliant red hair flowing down her back--

Harry blinked. Black hair. Cho had black hair, not red. Cho's eyes were dark brown, not hazel.

"Stupid git," Harry muttered to himself, but then again, why wouldn't he be thinking of Ginny? He WAS getting sex lessons from her, wasn't he? Perfectly natural, then, for him to be thinking naughty thoughts about Ginny. Ginny's just as lovely as Cho, and I'm a bloke, aren't I? Cho's the one I want, but if I happen to think of Ginny from time to time, well, that's to be expected.

He read Cho's letter a third time, and noticed only then Cho's remark about Ginny. "That Weasley girl?" Harry thought, feeling just a little disgruntled.

~~~~~

"Hi."

Ginny was standing in the doorway, framed by the lamplight. She wore a very lovely, very feminine button down blouse, jeans, and sandals that showed off painted toes.

"Come in," said Harry, and as she passed by him he caught the scent of gardenias again.

"You cleaned up the place," said Ginny, her eyes scanning the living room.

"Uh, yeah," said Harry. It had only taken him all day to do it, and the entire time he wondered how the hell he and Ron had managed to let their flat turn into such a pigsty. "I cleaned my room, too," Harry added. "Uh, shall we--go up?"

"All right."

She started up the stairs, affording Harry a perfect view of her delightful backside. He clenched his fists and held them firmly at his sides to keep from groping her right there on the stairs.

She stepped aside as he opened the door to his room.

"Candles," she said appreciatively, as she entered. "I'm impressed."

"Yeah, well," said Harry, blushing. "I like how you look in candlelight."

"Oh," said Ginny. She blushed and looked down, a shy smile on her lips. She looked back up at him, and for a moment they said nothing.

"So," said Ginny abruptly, tearing her eyes away from Harry's, "should we, uh, get started?"

"Yeah," said Harry at once, already feeling his trousers pinch at him as he imagined Ginny stripped down to her knickers again. Or less.

"Have you been working on that breathing stuff?" Ginny asked, as she set down her handbag.

"Yeah," said Harry. "It helps, at least, I think it does."

"Good," she said. Another awkward silence as their eyes met again.

"So, uh, what's on the agenda tonight?" Harry asked.

"Oh!" said Ginny. "Right. Well, undressing."

"Un-undressing?" Harry swallowed.

"You know," said Ginny, smiling, "how to undress a woman properly."

Harry felt a rush of blood between his legs. Perhaps he needed to start wearing looser-fitting jeans.

"Uh," said Harry nervously, "there's a 'proper' way to undress a--a woman?"

"Naturally," said Ginny lightly, smiling at him and tilting her head. "A way that shows your partner you know what you're doing."

"Right," said Harry, laughing nervously.

Ginny took several steps toward him; he was frozen in place. She came to a stop only about a foot away from him. He could smell the peppermint on her breath.

"So, undress me," she said simply.

Harry felt his knees turn to water.

"I've never--I mean, uh, well, it's always been the girl--"

"No time like the present to learn," said Ginny lightly. "Now, just take a deep breath, and start taking off my clothes."

Harry closed his eyes, clenched his fists and looked into Ginny's eyes, which flickered and sparkled in the candlelight. He wasn't sure just what made him do it, but as he reached for her he didn't reach for the buttons of her blouse. He instead put his hands on either side of her face, leaned down and kissed

her slowly, softly.

For a brief instant he felt her spine stiffen, but then she leaned into the kiss, opening her mouth and brushing her tongue against his. The kiss deepened and Harry heard a soft sigh in Ginny's throat. She started to reach up and put her hands in his hair, but he broke the kiss and lowered his hands, sliding them from her shoulders to the bodice of her blouse.

"What was that for?" she asked, her eyes glazed, her mouth red.

"Dunno," Harry breathed, as his fingers began to fumble with the top button of her blouse. "Seemed like the right thing to do."

"You have good instincts," said Ginny, smiling in a dreamy, sexy way. Harry managed to get the first button undone without even watching what he was doing. He moved lower, to the second button, which rested in the valley between her breasts.

"Not bad," said Ginny, as he released the second button and moved down to the third.

"Not too slow?" Harry asked, releasing the third button from its loop and moving down to the fourth.

"Slow is good," said Ginny, leaning into him just a little. He continued to unbutton her blouse, thinking briefly that it had a hell of a lot of buttons for something that was really quite small, but then he finished. The blouse hung open just a little, revealing a peek of white lace brassiere beneath.

Ginny opened her mouth to say something, but Harry silenced her by kissing her again in the same slow way he had previously. She gave a soft little moan and Harry felt himself straining against his trousers, hoping against hope that those sexy little sounds coming from her were real, not faked. He broke the kiss again and ran his right hand up her front, his knuckles brushing against the skin of her tummy and between her breasts.

"You're doing--really well," said Ginny, as Harry raised his other hand. He moved his hands just beneath the cotton of the blouse, brushing her shoulder blades with his palms, and he pushed the fabric of the blouse back, sliding it over her shoulders and dragging it slowly down her arms. The blouse dropped lightly to the floor.

Harry ran his hands back up her arms and brought them to rest on her neck, and kissed her a third time. This time his mouth moved to her jaw and down to her neck.

"Mmm, Harry," Ginny whispered, and she put her arms around him, pulling him close to her. He pulled back just a little, so that his forehead was touching hers; he could feel her breath mingling with his.

"How--how am I doing?" he asked. His whole body was on fire; his groin was throbbing. Her skin was like hot satin.

"Good," she murmured. "Really good. How do you feel?"

"Like I'm going to explode," Harry gasped.

"Breathe," she whispered, and she kissed him lightly. "Breathe."

But Harry couldn't breathe, because he was kissing her and burying his hands in her hair and she was pressed against him, her breasts rubbing against his chest. He kissed her neck again, a bit faster this time, and let his hands wander to her jean-covered bottom, then back up, then around. The feel of her breasts against him was making him go mad. He had to touch her there. He did, taking both breasts in his hands and feeling the weight of them through the thin lace of the brassiere.

"Take off my bra," Ginny whispered in his ear.

"Oh, thank god," Harry moaned. Ginny giggled.

He moved his hands from her breasts around her back and felt for the clasp of her bra. He found it and began to fumble with it. And fumble with it.

"Wait," he said, "I've almost got it."

Except that he didn't. He fumbled with the clasp for two full minutes.

"Dammit!" he said, feeling a bit desperate. "What's holding this thing together, anyway?"

Ginny's lips were pursed together; Harry saw that she was trying not to giggle.

"Don't laugh!" he said, still working the clasp of the bra and still not able to undo it.

"I'm not," she choked, biting her lip. "Honest."

"Shit," said Harry. "Where's my bloody wand?" Alohomora might work on that stupid thing, he thought.

"No wands," said Ginny. "You have to learn how to do this."

"Well, bloody hell!" said Harry, giving up. "How am I supposed to get that thing undone? It's like there's a padlock on it or something!"

"People do it all the time, Harry," said Ginny, smiling. "I take my bra off every night before I go to sleep."

"Well, bully for you," said Harry bitterly, fighting the urge to reach out and tear the stupid bra right off her.

"Try again."

Harry sighed. "Turn around, then."

"No," said Ginny. "You want to be able to do this with your arms around her."

"Her?"

"Cho."

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, his brain not working, his eyes still staring at Ginny's breasts, the nipples of which were just visible through the white lace.

"Better yet, you want to be able to unfasten it one-handed," Ginny went on. "But two hands are fine for now. And by the way, it's a hook-and-eye closure. Same as our school robes, but smaller."

"Oh," said Harry. "Why didn't you say that before?"

"I wanted to see if you could figure it out," said Ginny, grinning.

"You--you--are you DETERMINED to drive me out of my mind?" demanded Harry, his eyes darting from her face to her breasts and back again.

Ginny laughed--a happy, joyous laugh that filled Harry with a kind of warmth that had nothing to do with what was going on in his trousers. She should laugh more often, he thought. Her laugh is like music. And suddenly he wanted to kiss her again, so he did.

The kiss caught her by surprise but very quickly she was kissing him back. His lips moved to her earlobe and he nibbled the skin there, causing her to gasp.

"Try again," she whispered, her hands tangled in his hair.

Harry kissed her mouth again, tasting peppermint on her tongue, and his hands moved to the clasp of her bra again.

Hook-and-eye, he thought, just like our school robes. His fingers moved over the lump of the clasp and he found it. Using both hands, he unhooked the bra. She gasped again.

"Good," she breathed. She stepped back from him, the bra hanging loosely on her shoulders, covering her. Harry swallowed and reached for the straps of her bra. He slid the straps from her shoulders. Lower and lower they went. The lace slid slowly down, and then the bra was on the floor.

Harry didn't notice. He was too busy staring at Ginny, who was so lovely something seemed to catch in his throat. It wasn't just her breasts, though, he realized. It was everything. The slope of her collarbone, the dip at the base of her throat, the way her small, round breasts seemed to be just perfect for the rest of her.

"What?" she asked, looking suddenly very shy.

"You're beautiful," said Harry, looking into her eyes.

Ginny smiled shyly and blushed again. "Thanks," she murmured.

"I--I didn't really notice," said Harry, feeling a bit ashamed. "Before, I mean."

"I don't--I don't think I gave you much of a chance to notice," said Ginny, smiling. "Things were a bit frantic that night."

"Right," said Harry, now blushing himself and looking down. Of course what Ginny really meant was that Harry was so randy that night that he had lost himself in a matter of minutes and then, perfectly fulfilling the stereotype of the selfish male, had fallen asleep almost immediately afterward. "Sorry," he said, feeling stupid.

"Don't be," said Ginny, taking a step toward him. "That's--that's why we're here now. So you know how it feels--to go slow."

He looked up at her again and let his eyes drink her in. "I like slow," he said, grinning a bit wickedly.

"You're not done yet, you know," said Ginny, smirking. "My bottom half still has clothes on it."

Harry felt the grin on his lips widen. "I feel like I'm opening a Christmas present," he said. "Only I can't say I've ever gotten such a good Christmas present."

"Harry, if you don't get started we'll BE here until Christmas," said Ginny, putting her hands on her hips.

"I thought you liked me to go slow," Harry countered, pulling her close to him.

"I do, but there's slow and there's SLOW--"

"Right," said Harry, kissing her. His hands roamed of their own accord, over her back, her shoulders, finding her bare breasts. He heard a moan escape his throat. They felt incredible in his hands, and he began to stroke them, very softly.

"God, Harry," Ginny moaned, throwing her head back. His mouth moved from her mouth, to her neck, to her shoulder. He felt like he could devour her. She tasted delicious--like honey. He felt her arms around his neck and his mouth was drifting lower.

"Ginny," he groaned, putting his arms around her and lifting her. He was kneeling just slightly, his thighs burning from the effort, but then his mouth moved over her breasts, tasting each one in turn. He moaned again, louder, and she gasped. His hands found her bottom again. She was wearing entirely too many clothes. He had to get them off her.

His mouth moved away from her breasts and back up over her shoulder, along her neck, until he

crushed his lips against hers.

"Take them off," she whispered against his mouth.

But his hands were already at the buttons of her jeans, opening them.

"Easy," she whispered, as he gripped the waistband of her jeans and gave them a rough tug.

"Right," he choked. His hands moved beneath her jeans and found her lace-covered bottom. He stroked her there and the jeans began to slide down her hips, lower, lower. Then they wouldn't go any lower. At least, not as long as he was in a liplock with her.

"Slide them off," Ginny murmured, breaking their kiss. Harry blinked. The room was spinning; he could hardly breathe. His trousers were bulging.

He knelt down and tugged slowly at her jeans, sliding them down her thighs, over her knees, until they came to rest in a crumpled pile at her ankles. She stepped lightly out of them and stepped back. Harry looked up.

She glowed in the candlelight. The only thing covering her now was a pair of white lace knickers.

"Oh, my god," Harry whispered.



## **Chapter Eight: The Fine Art of Self-Control**

"My turn," said Ginny.

"Wha-what?" Harry was frozen in a kind of stupor as his eyes traveled up and down Ginny's lithe, athletic body, taking in every dip and curve.

"My turn," she repeated, "to undress you."

Harry swallowed hard. "You-you're going to undress...me?"

"Of course," said Ginny, grinning. Harry couldn't believe it. She was standing there wearing nothing but a very skimpy pair of lacy white knickers and acting entirely nonchalant about it all.

"Uh, are we...I mean...we're not going to...you know," Harry stammered, wishing of course that they would do just that. And very, very soon.

"No," said Ginny firmly. Harry felt his erection deflate. Just a bit.

"Why not?"

"Because," said Ginny patiently, shifting her weight so that her hips moved enticingly. "You need a bit more practice with control. If I'm not mistaken you're about to rip through your trousers as it is. So, I need to help you learn how to calm down."

"I'm supposed to calm down when you're standing there practically starkers?" said Harry in a strained voice.

"Yes," said Ginny simply. "Breathe, Harry."

"Right," Harry choked, sucking in a huge gulp of air and trying not to let his eyes linger on the way the candlelight flickered and cast erotic shadows on her skin. He took another deep breath as she strode toward him, her movements decidedly feline, feminine, outrageously sexy.

"Don't move," she said softly. She came very close to him, stood up on tiptoe, and kissed him slowly, opening her mouth and pressing her tongue against his. He groaned and reached for her but she gripped his wrists.

"No," she whispered. "Breathe. Relax."

Easy for her to say! Harry thought angrily, but then she kissed him again, her tongue doing wicked things in his mouth. He felt her hands move up to his shirt and she began to undo the buttons. She stepped back, breaking the kiss.

"How do you feel?"

"Horny," said Harry.

"Relax," she said again. "You're awfully tense, you know." She continued to undo the buttons of his shirt, moving down.

"Gee, I wonder why," Harry said sarcastically, taking another deep breath as she finished unbuttoning his shirt. He wore a white t-shirt beneath. She reached up and pushed the button-down from his shoulders and pulled it off him and let it drop to the floor. She moved closer to him and kissed him again, grabbing his wrists to keep him from touching her. She broke the kiss again and pulled his t-shirt from the inside of his jeans.

"Are you breathing?"

"Sort of," said Harry, but when her fingers reached beneath the t-shirt and touched his stomach he

sucked in his breath. She gripped the hem of the t-shirt and pulled it upward; instinctively he lifted his arms and let her pull the shirt over his head and drop it to the floor.

"Relax," she said a third time, as her fingers trailed over his chest and stomach, leaving little trails of icy, tingly heat in their wake. Harry shivered.

"Cold?" she asked.

"No," said Harry, sucking in his breath again as she stepped still closer to him. Their bodies-naked from the waist up-were inches apart.

She leaned up again and kissed him, moving her lips and her tongue with his, and then just as Harry thought he was getting the hang of things, that maybe he could in fact handle standing a few inches away from a gorgeous, nearly naked girl without his shirt on, Ginny moved in and pressed herself against him, putting her arms around his waist and trailing her fingers up his back.

Harry groaned as she pressed her breasts against him. The feel of their skin together was sweet agony. He threw his arms around her and was just about to pick her up and throw her on his bed when she gripped his wrists again and pulled his arms away.

"No," she whispered. "Control, remember?"

"This. Is. NOT. Fair," Harry choked, but he let her put his hands to his sides.

"Shh," she whispered, kissing him lightly. "Just stay calm."

Brilliant, he thought, just stay calm. No problem. She pressed herself against him again and he took a deep breath, then another, then another. He was not there. Ginny was not standing in front of him, naked but for a pair of knickers, rubbing her breasts seductively against his bare chest.

Except that he was there, and a million dead kittens couldn't help him now. He concentrated on breathing, which began to get a bit more labored when he felt Ginny's lips leave his and start a trail down his neck. He closed his eyes and let his mind focus on the sound of his breathing, the sound of Ginny's breathing, the feel of Ginny's mouth as she trailed kisses along his collarbone.

He gasped when he felt, rather than heard, her reach for the buckle of his belt. She unfastened it without no trouble whatsoever (they ought to make bras that easy to unfasten, Harry thought for a split second), then pulled it slowly through the loops of his jeans and dropped it on the floor, where a pile of discarded clothing was fast accumulating.

"Okay, Harry?" Ginny asked, trailing her fingers up his bare back.

"Yeah," he said, opening his eyes and looking at her. Big mistake. The minute he saw her freckled face, the way her eyes looked sleepy and sexy and sparkling and the way her bare skin glistened in the candle light, his erection throbbed rather painfully again.

"Close your eyes, if it helps," said Ginny, reaching around and taking hold of the top button of Harry's jeans.

Harry said nothing, only nodded and closed his eyes again. The truth was he wanted to look at Ginny but he knew if he did he might not keep things under control-he was barely doing so as it was. He felt Ginny open the buttons of his jeans, felt her fingers flutter over the waistband of his boxers. He felt Ginny's mouth on him again, trailing over his shoulders, then lower, across his chest. He felt his erection throb again. If nothing else, he thought, getting these damn jeans off will be a huge relief. Provided, of course, he didn't lose himself in the process.

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, forcing himself to breathe, as Ginny began to pull down his jeans. Her mouth had moved lower, lower, onto his stomach.

"Dear god," he heard himself moan, and he clenched his fists at his sides. He opened his eyes for a moment and looked down to see Ginny kneeling in front of him, pulling his jeans down to his ankles, her mouth making light kisses on his stomach.

Stop looking! a voice in his head screamed. The image of Ginny kneeling like that was doing nothing to relieve the throbbing between his legs, but then he realized that he was no longer wearing his jeans, and let out a sigh of relief that nothing was there to pinch at him anymore.

He opened his eyes once more and now Ginny was standing level with him, a foot away, looking him in the face.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"Well," said Harry, trying for a light tone, "I definitely feel a bit better now my jeans are off, thanks."

Ginny giggled. "Poor men. I'm glad I don't have your equipment."

"I'm glad you don't, either," said Harry, feeling his erection ease up a bit. "But they do cause some embarrassment, that's for certain."

She took a step closer to him. "You're doing really well. But now comes the real test."

Harry gulped. "What do you-oh." The last bit came out as a strangled moan. Ginny was reaching inside his boxers and stroking his behind. She pulled her hands out and then moved closer, lowering her hands so that they hung in front of his thighs.

"Look at me," she said. "Look at my eyes."

Harry nodded, and looked into Ginny's eyes, which had taken on a beautiful kind of green/gold glow in the candlelight.

"I'm going to touch you," she said huskily. "Just look at my face, and do whatever you need to do to stay relaxed."

Harry nodded again, his eyes widening. He gasped when he felt Ginny's fingers brush against his thighs, lifting the legs of his boxers.

"God," he whispered, feeling his erection straining at him.

"Think of other things," Ginny instructed. "Talk out loud if you need to."

"Right," said Harry, as her fingers drifted closer to his crotch, but then skipped away. "Uh, Quidditch. School. Charms Lessons. Herbology. Astronomy- oh GOD!"

Her fingers brushed across his swollen erection, teasing him through the fabric of his boxers.

"Keep talking," said Ginny quickly, still stroking him.

"Bludgers," he said out loud, then quickly threw that idea out-thinking of balls wouldn't help his situation. "Uh, uh, shepherd's pie. No, uh, Potions. Bubotuber pus. D.A. meetings. Uh, uh, Professor Sprout!"

"Ew," said Ginny, stopping mid-stroke.

"Give me a break!" Harry gasped.

"Right," said Ginny, and she resumed fondling him. Only this time she reached inside his boxers.

"Dead kittens!" Harry said loudly, hoping like hell he'd remembered to close all the windows in the house so that the neighbors didn't hear. "Oh, my GOD. Uh, uh, Blast-Ended Skrewts. Spattergroit! Polyjuice Potion! Professor Umbridge!"

"Now that's REALLY gross," said Ginny, pulling her hands from the inside of his shorts.

"It's working, isn't it?!" Harry cried, torn between wanting her to continue what she was doing and wanting to run from the room and never let another girl touch him like that again. It was pure, unadulterated, fantastic, wonderful torture.

"I think that's good for now," said Ginny, stepping back from him.

"Oh, come ON!" Harry protested, realizing that yes, indeed, he DID want a girl to touch him like that. He wanted Ginny to touch him like that. He wanted a whole lot more to happen. "We can't quit now. It was working! I can handle more stuff, I swear!"

"Harry, I don't want to...overdo it with you," said Ginny.

"You won't!" Harry insisted, but now he was sounding a bit whiney.

"Harry," said Ginny, eyeing him perceptively.

"This isn't fair," Harry grumbled, feeling his erection deflate a bit. He sat down heavily on his bed.

"I know it's hard," she said sympathetically.

"Bad choice of words, Gin," said Harry, running a hand through his hair.

"Sorry." She paused in the midst of buttoning up her blouse. "Look, Harry, the whole point of this isn't to get you into bed with me. It's to...to prepare you to go to bed with Cho, remember?"

"Yeah," said Harry, not really caring to think about Cho at that moment.

"Do you really think Cho would appreciate it if you had sex with me right before having sex with her?" Ginny was pulling on her jeans now.

"She wouldn't know," said Harry stubbornly.

"But you would," said Ginny, sitting down at his desk chair. "And I know you, Harry. You're too good, you're too honest a person to hide your feelings. You couldn't live with yourself. And to be perfectly frank, I don't know that I could live with myself."

"What?" Harry asked, surprised. "Why?"

"Because you're my friend," said Ginny. "I want you to be happy. That's why I'm helping you. To give you a bit of confidence, maybe, so you don't go around feeling like you're not good enough for the girl of your dreams. I don't want to ruin it for you, and if we had sex, it would ruin it for you."

Harry looked at her and felt a small lump in his throat. She knew him better than he realized.

"You're incredible, Ginny," said Harry, meaning it. "How do you know what's going on in my head when half the time I can't even figure it out?"

"I pay attention," said Ginny. "I'm also not quite so horny as you all the time. Being constantly randy has a way of clouding one's mind."

"Shut up," said Harry playfully, blushing.

"I should go," said Ginny, smoothing her hair. "Take this." She handed him her bra.

"Uh, that's your bra."

"Of course," she said, rolling her eyes. "Practice on it, opening the clasp. Next time I want to see you do it one handed, okay?"

"Okay," said Harry, feeling a bit better now that Ginny was fully clothed. Well, almost fully clothed.

She wasn't wearing her bra. Harry felt a slight stirring in his shorts. Good lord, he was incorrigible. Or rather, IT was incorrigible.

"And keep reading those books," said Ginny. "Foreplay, you know? It's really important. You...uh...you showed some aptitude in that...tonight." She went red in the face.

"I did?" said Harry, blushing.

"Yeah," said Ginny, pulling on her jacket. "Didn't you hear me...you know...moaning?"

Harry swallowed hard. "Uh, yeah," he said, feeling the stirring in his shorts grow stronger. He probably should just stay seated. "I...sort of wondered...you know, if you were faking it."

"I wasn't," said Ginny. She looked briefly at her shoes and then at him. "You have great hands, you know. Rough, but...gentle. Did you...read about that in the books?"

"No," said Harry, finding it suddenly difficult to talk. He had turned her on! he thought wildly. He, Harry Potter, biggest loser in the universe when it came to women, had managed to sexually arouse Ginny Weasley! He felt like throwing himself a party. He felt like grabbing Ginny and tearing off her clothes and throwing her on the bed and doing more things to her. Instead he sat, frozen in place.

"Well, it was good," said Ginny, picking up her handbag and blushing very red, so that her face matched her hair. "Keep it up."

"Oh, it's up," Harry blurted, shifting slightly.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Men," she said, grinning. "Honestly."

## **Chapter Nine: Correspondence**

A few days later Harry sat on his bed, poring over the books Ginny had given him. He turned to the tenth chapter in "Tantric Sex" and scanned the chapter title. His eyes went wide.

"The Art ." Harry gulped. THAT was something he'd definitely never done. He'd heard about it, of course. Supposedly it was one of those things that drove women mad and made them want to shag a man silly. He turned the page and began to read, his eyes like saucers.

"The clitoris is the most unique sexual organ on the human body. Unlike the ovaries, testicles, penis and vagina, it contributes neither function nor assistance in the reproductive process. It does not produce cells which create new life. Its sole function appears to be that of providing sexual pleasure."

Harry swallowed and shifted, his jeans pinching him again. He felt a rush of jealousy. Lucky birds, he thought, to have an organ that didn't do a damn thing except get them off.

Yeah, well, women get pregnant and have painful childbirths and have periods and cramps and what, said another voice, so it's probably a fair trade-off.

He read on.

"The stimulation of the clitoris produces a powerful orgasm in the female. Indeed, it is believed that a certain percentage of women can ONLY achieve orgasm through clitoral stimulation. It is not always easy to achieve clitoral stimulation through intercourse alone."

Harry stopped reading. He hadn't realized this. Then again, he hadn't realized a lot of things about girls' bodies.

"Oral stimulation of the clitoris," Harry read, shifting again on his bed, "is among the most intimate acts in the repertoire of erotic foreplay. Unfortunately there are many who believe cunnilingus to be dirty or unpleasant; others claim to be 'turned off' by the natural scent and/or taste of a woman's sexual organs. But if this is at all a fair statement, then it can also be fairly stated that many women report to be 'turned off' by the natural scent and taste of the man's sexual organs and fluids. This is not surprising, considering modern society's demands for regular bathing and the wearing of various scents and perfumes to cover up human odors. While this practice might have lead to more pleasant commutes on public transportation, it is also perhaps at least partially responsible for dulling the senses to the delights of natural sexual aroma and taste. Oral stimulation brings intense pleasure to the recipients, which can and usually does, in turn, provide pleasure to the giver."

Harry read all this again. He had to admit, the idea of 'stimulating' a girl with his mouth had seemed a bit, well, off-putting. But then again, that whole area of a girl's body was incredibly mysterious; everything was tucked away and hidden. As Harry read the passage a third time he realized, with a kind of disappointment and embarrassment, that he hadn't ever really SEEN any of these hidden parts of a girl.

"No wonder I don't know what the bloody hell I'm doing," he muttered.

He turned the page, and gasped. Lo and behold, there was a rather detailed line drawing of those mysterious girl parts. His eyes widened even more.

"Wow," he whispered, studying everything intently. It all seemed very complicated to him, but it looked quite pretty. Rather like--like a flower. He wondered if Ginny looked anything like this, and he felt a rather powerful throbbing between his legs.

"HARRY!"

The bedroom door burst open and Ron flew in. Harry slammed the book shut and shoved it under his pillow, but Ron didn't seem to notice.

"Dammit, Ron, KNOCK, would you?"

"Sorry," said Ron quickly, "but you'll never believe this! Ginny's playing in the World Cup for Britain!"

Harry blushed and bit his lip--not three seconds ago he was thinking very naughty thoughts about Ron's little sister. To hear Ron mention her made him feel just a bit awkward and even a little ashamed.

"Well," said Ron impatiently. "Aren't you going to say something? About a member of my family playing in the bloody WORLD CUP!?"

"That's brilliant!" said Harry brightly, finally registering fully what Ron was saying. "But--wait. Her team was eliminated from--"

"Not her team, you dolt," said Ron, pacing excitedly about the room. "Just Ginny! See, what happened was one of Britain's Chasers got this really weird illness where he was all dizzy and he couldn't control his bowels and what--"

"Uh, skip that, would you?" said Harry, screwing up his face in disgust.

"Right," said Ron, and he sat down on Harry's desk chair, then stood up again. "Anyway, so apparently these scouts were at Ginny's match last weekend and they saw her flying and they were all impressed, and when that Chaser got sick they decided to ask her to play."

"Wow," said Harry, impressed. "But, uh, don't they have alternates and stuff for the British national team? Why not use one of them?"

"None of them can do a Wronski Feint," said Ron proudly. "But that's beside the point. Ginny was on the short list for the national team, didn't you know? But she missed the cut--just barely. Of course she was better than the bloke who got the spot but you know Quidditch--still that stupid sexist attitude about girls playing--"

"Ginny was in contention for the national team?" Harry asked, awed.

"What, didn't she tell you?"

"No," said Harry. "I wonder why."

"Well, she was pretty cut up about not making it," said Ron. "I had to drag it out of her. I didn't even know she'd tried out. Maybe she didn't want to hash over it with everyone."

"I'm her friend," said Harry, feeling just a bit stung. "She could have told me."

"Well, now you know," said Ron. "And she's on the team! And if she plays well they just might keep her on. Probably as an alternate at first, but, alternates wind up playing all the time in the regular season. Anyway, we have tickets to the match; it's next Saturday."

"No way," said Harry, standing up. "Enough for--"

"All of us, yeah," said Ron. "Even better seats than the last time we went. So you're coming, aren't you?"

"Bloody hell, YEAH," said Harry, grinning. "Wow, Ginny playing on the national team, that's amazing. Your sister, she's--something else."

Ron folded his arms and raised his eyebrows. "You say that like it's some big surprise or something."

Harry reddened. "No," he said quickly. "I mean, she's just--not the same girl I remember when we were twelve. You know, always putting her elbow in the butter dish and not talking to me and what."

"Uh huh," said Ron, his eyes narrowed.

"What?"

"Nothing," said Ron. "You've just spent a bit of time with her lately, that's all."

"So?" said Harry, a challenge in his voice. "We're friends. Good friends. Anyway, you're always doing stuff with Hermione. I'm supposed to just hang out by myself, am I, while you two are off doing-- whatever it is you're doing?"

"No," said Ron, sounding a bit defensive. "And I don't spend every waking minute with Hermione."

"Not quite," said Harry. "Look, Ginny and me are just good friends, all right. Nothing else."

"Whatever you say, mate," said Ron, grinning. "Now, are you going to quit reading those dirty books and come out and have breakfast with me or what?"

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We're just friends, Harry thought again, as he returned to his room later that day to look over some long-neglected papers from work.

And they were. Ginny was a great friend. She was entirely different from other girls. Perhaps it was because she was an athlete--she didn't seem to care if she broke her nails or her hair got a little messy. She was just completely un-self-conscious. Or maybe it was because she was honest and totally unaffected. Ginny didn't lie; she didn't let him off easy, she never told him what he wanted to hear. But she was compassionate, too. Warm. Friendly. A great listener.

Harry found himself ignoring his stack of work papers and picking up a photograph from his desk. It was the only photo of Ginny he had, and it was the two of them, together, on the day of her graduation from Hogwarts. She had a radiant smile on her freckled face and was waving at the camera; then she leaned over and pecked Harry on the cheek. Harry saw that in the photo, he was grinning from ear to ear. At least, when he wasn't gazing at her and the way her hair caught the sunlight. He watched the photo again, watched as they repeated their antics over and over again, and felt a wonderful warmth spread through his chest. He was lucky, he thought, to have a friend like Ginny. It wasn't often that a bloke and a girl had what they had.

He set the photo down and opened his desk drawer and pulled from it Ginny's letters from her final year; she had written him about twice a month. The letters were mostly mundane and full of rather girlish gossip, but Harry hadn't minded. In fact, he really enjoyed reading her letters. She had a wicked sense of humor and every letter she sent made him laugh, in particular the ones that disparaged Professor Snape or complained about her N.E.. He found one that she had sent toward the beginning of the term last September.

Dear Harry,

You'll never believe this, but I've been made Quidditch captain!!! McGonagall told me tonight after dinner. I nearly passed out. I mean, talk about filling big shoes--yours, of course. Try-outs are this Friday and let me tell you I'm bloody nervous. I mean, I'm excited and all but I don't really know if I have the right personality to be a captain. I do have a bit of a temper--"

"No kidding," Harry murmured, smiling.

--and I tend to be a bit impatient with people. I was always impressed by how naturally it came to you. You know, being a leader. Maybe you



could give me a few pointers, if you're not too busy with your Auror stuff anyway.

Ron tells me it's going well, but of course he bitches constantly about all the little tests and analyses you two have to go through. He keeps trying to convince me I should join up but I highly doubt it. McGonagall's steering me toward playing Quidditch professionally, though she says it might be tough because the pro teams are only slowly letting girls get into it. Honestly, here it is the twentieth century and my favorite sport in the world is acting like some old boys' club. Oh well.

In any case I hope you're doing well and enjoying living in London with my big brother. Be warned, he's a right pig. And not just when it comes to eating. If you're able to keep your flat clean for more than a day with him living there I'll be bloody impressed.

Take care!

Love, Ginny

He smiled again and flipped through the rest of the letters, nearly all of which were bright and funny, then put them back into his desk. He wasn't sure why he'd never gotten rid of them. Maybe because they were such a comfort to him. His first year of Auror training HAD been very tough. Ginny's letters were a source of strength, he realized, that got him through his more difficult weeks.

He glanced at the photograph of them again. She was so pretty, he thought. Why hadn't he noticed it before? His mind drifted to their last "training session," and he felt his neck get hot and his crotch tingle.

"Work, work, work," he muttered, shutting his desk drawer. He really needed to focus. He pulled a piece of parchment from the stack on his desk and began to read it, and within a minute was bored out of his mind. The paperwork part of his job had never been fun.

A soft hooting and rustling at his open window brought his eyes up.

"Hey, Hedwig," he said, standing up and crossing to the window. She fluttered and landed on his forearm, a parcel in her beak.

"What's this?" Harry asked softly. He pulled the parcel from her beak, and she fluttered over to her cage.

There were two items. The first was a postcard from Cho. He felt his stomach begin to dance nervously as he looked at the photograph on it.

It was Cho herself, wearing a very skimpy red bikini and sitting by a huge swimming pool. She was wearing sunglasses, her black hair was wet and shiny and hung over her shoulder, and her hand was in the air, as though waving at him, but the photograph itself was still. A Muggle photo.

"Wow," he muttered, feeling another stirring in his trousers. He turned the postcard over and read.

Hi, Harry!

I know I said I wouldn't have a chance to write again before I came to London but on my day off I went to this really great hotel in Cairo and I was sitting by the pool and this photographer was going round taking photos for postcards. I just bought this new bikini--isn't it CUTE?-- and I thought, why not? It'll give you something to think about until I get

there.

Hope all is well. Can't WAIT to see you!

Love, Cho

Harry propped the postcard up on his desk next to the photograph of him and Ginny, then turned his attention to the letter still unopened in his hand.

He turned it over to see the return post, but there was only an address, one that was unfamiliar to him. Curious, he broke the wax seal on the letter and opened the parchment and started to read. He felt his stomach drop.

Dear Harry,

I'm sure it comes as a bit of a surprise to hear from me. I hadn't intended on writing to you at all after what happened between us, but seeing you last weekend changed my mind.

My intention in writing to you is not to hurt you. Lord knows I've done more than enough of that.

"Damn straight," Harry muttered, feeling a lump form in his throat.

I just wanted a chance to explain myself. To explain why things had to be the way they turned out to be.

Please understand, my leaving you had NOTHING to do with you. I loved you. A little part of me still loves you and always will.

Harry snorted derisively, but his anger couldn't compete with the ache that now filled his chest.

I left you because I was a coward. Because I loved you too much, and I was afraid of what that meant for me. We were so young and I was so caught up in you that I started to drown. I was losing myself. I had to step back.

But beyond this was my fear of losing you. Knowing that HE was after you and that he wouldn't stop until you were dead. I had nightmares for weeks after what happened that night at that house. The night you almost died. And I couldn't do anything to help you. Not one damn thing. I realized I was going to have to sit back and let you face him, because that was your destiny. It was eating me alive inside. I couldn't face it. I lost so many people I loved, Harry. How could I stand to lose you, too?

So I ran away. To this day I regret not telling you why I did. You probably think I dumped you because of how awkwardly things went for us that day in the cave, in France.

Harry closed his eyes very tightly and swallowed.

But I didn't. I loved that day, and everything about it. I hate knowing that I caused you so much pain. And for whatever it's worth, please understand that I never dumped you for Terry Boot. Terry was a close friend of mine since we were very little; I turned to him because he was the only person who could have possibly understood what I was feeling. Whatever the rumours were, I NEVER slept with him. Not once. I never even entertained the idea. I let you think I was with Terry because it was

easier, ironically, for you to believe that I was some sort of heartless tart rather than a stupid coward.

I hadn't expected to tell you any of this but seeing you last weekend brought up so many feelings and questions that I realized I could not move on completely with my life until you knew why things happened the way they did. Why I did what I did. I hope in time you will come to understand.

My only wish for you now is to find the same happiness that I have found. You deserve it more than anyone I know. You are a truly special person, Harry, and I'll always remember what we had together as one of the most precious times in my life. I hope in time you can do the same.

All the best,

Susan

Harry read the letter a second time, his throat working, his eyes burning. He hadn't felt this raw, this horrible, since the day Susan had told him it was over between them. Part of him didn't want to believe a word of what she wrote, but Susan had always been, at heart, an honest person. Some small part of him couldn't help but pity her for having felt it necessary to lie, and uphold that lie, after so very long.

He knew on some logical level that her letter ought to have made him feel better. She hadn't, after all, dumped him because he was a lousy lover. She hadn't tossed him overboard and jumped into bed with Terry Boot. She really had loved him, Harry, after all.

But somehow this only made him feel worse. She had dumped him because she was too afraid to stick with him. Because she couldn't handle what it might mean to lose him. He remembered how he had pushed his own friends away, so many times, when they had tried to help him. How they had refused to budge, how they had jumped into danger with him and fought by his side, even when he wanted only to lock them all in a room and do it all by himself. He had never realized at the time that he might be hurting his friends by pushing them away. But now, knowing that Susan had done the same to him, he knew. It was the worst, most empty, most awful thing he'd ever known. It was like losing Sirius all over again, multiplied by a hundred.

A hot rush of anger came over him and he crumpled Susan's letter in his fist and slammed it into the wastepaper basket.

"Bugger!" he growled, suddenly furious. Who did she think she was, writing to him now? He was OVER her, didn't she understand? He'd spent the past two years getting over her. It wasn't fair, her writing to him and stirring old feelings up again. Bad enough that he'd had to see her in the company of Draco Bloody Malfoy. Bad enough to know she was actually HAPPY with that prat. But she had the nerve to disturb his, Harry's peace by writing some blubbery confessional to him about how sorry she was to have hurt him? Did she even understand that she'd just stabbed him in the heart yet again?

Harry ran a hand through his hair and wiped at his eyes.

"Work," he said out loud, picking up the parchment he'd abandoned when Hedwig had returned. His eyes strayed to the postcard with Cho's photo on it, then to the photo of himself and Ginny. Ginny was leaning over and pecking him on the cheek once again. Harry watched as he put an arm around her and mussed her hair. He felt the constricting pain in his chest ease somewhat.

## **Chapter Ten: Solace**

"Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry blinked and looked up at Ginny, who was sitting across from him at the dining room table, her eyes filled with concern.

"Yeah, fine," Harry lied. Ginny was over at his flat again; Ron and Hermione were at Hermione's; this time Ron was cooking Hermione dinner ("Hermione's good at a lot of stuff," Ron said, "but cooking is NOT one of them.").

Harry and Ginny, meanwhile, had agreed to meet at Harry's flat for another go at Harry's sexual education. Ginny had been training daily for the World Cup match since being chosen for the team, but tonight she had the night off.

"Are you sure?" Ginny asked, picking up her wine glass and taking a sip.

Harry looked at her. She looked very beautiful tonight; her hair was pulled up in a kind of knot and she wore a simply white blouse and a skirt with a deep green floral pattern on it that enhanced the green in her hazel eyes. Her lips were wet and shiny. Just looking at her made him feel a bit better.

"I'm sure," he said, smiling. "You look fantastic, by the way."

She blushed and smiled. She seemed to be blushing a lot these days, but Harry didn't mind one bit. "Thanks."

"How's the Quidditch going?" he asked, wanting to steer the conversation away from himself.

"It's okay," said Ginny. "I'm the only girl on the team. The blokes are having a bit of a difficult time dealing with it, I think. I haven't really bonded with them."

"They're not being rude to you?" said Harry, feeling instantly affronted on her behalf.

"No, nothing like that," said Ginny. "But, you know, I think before it was just 'the guys.' Now I come along and mess up that dynamic a bit. I feel like I have to work twice as hard and fly twice as well just to prove myself or something. But I think they're starting to come around."

"Blokes can be real idiots sometimes," said Harry, smirking. "But you knew that."

"Yeah, I knew that," said Ginny, grinning. "Of course, women can be a handful, too, so I guess it balances out in the end."

They looked at one another in silence for a few minutes. She watched him, studied him as though trying to crack through his veneer of light-heartedness. He looked away, not wanting her to know why he didn't feel himself tonight. He didn't want to burden her with the source of his woes. He said the first thing that came into his mind.

"Uh, do you want...to go upstairs?" he asked.

She smiled. "Sure. Let's just clear this up first." She and Harry rose from the table and quickly cleared the dishes with their wands.

"Dinner was amazing," said Harry. "Where'd you learn to cook like that?"

"Mum, naturally," said Ginny. "It's the only domestic thing I'm remotely good at. But don't tell anyone. It'd ruin my sterling reputation as a tomboy."

Harry watched her put away the dishes and watched the way her skirt lifted as she reached up to pile the plates in the upper cabinets. She looked nothing like a tomboy just then.

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"Sorry about the mess," said Harry quickly, as they entered his cluttered, messy bedroom. "I meant to clean up but...but I have all this work I need to catch up on, only I haven't really been able to keep my mind on it..."

He hurried over to his desk and started to straighten it, when his eyes fell on the letter. He stopped, and swallowed. He hadn't meant to leave it out. He'd meant to throw it away. He HAD thrown it away, three days ago, but then he had dug it out of the wastepaper basket and smoothed it out and read it again and again and again.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry's head jerked up. "Uh, nothing," he lied, and he quickly stacked a pile of parchment on top of the letter. "Just...found something I need to deal with at work. I'll have to, you know, first thing tomorrow."

"Oh," said Ginny, but she didn't sound all that convinced. She didn't push the issue, however, but instead crossed to the desk and placed her handbag next to the stack of papers.

"So," said Harry, in a falsely cheerful voice, "what do you want to, uh, go over tonight?"

Ginny looked up at him with her probing hazel eyes. "I thought we might discuss, you know, chapter ten of 'Tantric Sex.'"

"Oh," said Harry, blushing a bit. He sat down on his bed. "That."

"Yeah, that," said Ginny, smiling, and taking a seat at his desk chair. "Then I guess we should revisit the whole undressing issue-you did really well the other night but maybe another go-around would, uh, firm things up for you, if you'll pardon the expression."

"Right," said Harry, trying to smile, thinking of the letter that was hidden beneath the stack of parchment. He swallowed and looked at Ginny.

"Harry," said Ginny. "What's wrong? You're not yourself tonight. Please talk to me."

He looked at her, saw the concern in her eyes. Somehow, seeing Ginny regard him with compassion and concern, he knew SHE would understand.

"She wrote to me," said Harry, his voice feeling strangled.

"Who, Cho?"

"No," said Harry, looking down. "Susan."

Ginny took a deep breath. "Ah."

"She...she told me why...she dumped me," said Harry, finding it suddenly very hard to talk.

Ginny said nothing, only nodded. Harry was grateful for this. No jumping in with all sorts of advice, no gratingly annoying sounds of sympathy. Just a silent nod and an open ear. Harry took a breath and continued.

"Do you know why she dumped me?" he said, feeling a bitter taste form in his mouth. "Because...get this...she 'loved me too much.' How's that for irony? She was afraid, she said. After what happened. You know, at...at the Riddle House? She said...she couldn't bear the thought of losing me when she'd lost all these other people she cared about. So she dumped me."

Ginny still said nothing, but moved from his chair and took a seat next to him on the bed, and silently took his hand in hers.

"The thing is," Harry went on, gripping Ginny's hand and finding it still harder to talk, "I thought...I

was over her. I really did. I mean, yeah, I...I got a bit upset when I saw her at your Quidditch match but you know...a few days later I wasn't upset anymore and I thought...okay. You're over her. You can get on with it. But then she writes me this bloody letter and...and suddenly it's all there. It all comes back. This...this ache. Right here." He pointed to his chest and looked at Ginny, whose eyes were shiny.

"It's not supposed to hurt anymore," said Harry miserably. "But it does. It still hurts like bloody hell and...and I HATE it. I'm sick of..."

He fell silent and swallowed against the lump in his throat. He felt like crying, would have welcomed tears, but he wasn't sure he wanted to in front of Ginny. He'd never cried in front of anyone in his life; he'd always thought it was a bit weak, really, a bloke crying.

He'd done it of course. Plenty of times. He cried himself to sleep for months after Sirius died, but always silently, always alone, always when he was absolutely certain nobody could hear him. He'd cried when Susan threw him over. But he couldn't quite reconcile himself to believing that crying was anything other than a sign of weakness. Girls cried, he told himself. Not me.

Ginny was still silent but she had put her arm around his shoulder. He felt her stroking his hair.

"I just..." he said, not sure why he was talking but unable to stop "...I just don't understand why it still bothers me. I mean, she's moved on. Why can't I? Why...why did she have to tell me the truth? It doesn't make me feel any better. I mean, she leaves me because she's too scared to be with me? She throws away what we had because...because she's afraid? How's that supposed to make me feel, knowing that? And, dammit, I was over her. I was over IT, the whole bloody thing. I didn't need this, Ginny. I don't need this. I don't need to hear, two years after the fact, that the first girl I ever cared about dumped me and tossed away something really good because she was too much of a coward to hold onto it. I just want to bloody well be OVER her!"

He felt himself choke a little on those last words and swallowed hard again, forcing back the burning in his eyes.

Ginny moved closer to him, and at last she spoke.

"Nobody ever really gets over losing someone they care about, Harry," said Ginny.

"Thanks, that makes me feel a whole lot better," said Harry bitterly.

"Harry," said Ginny slowly. "Susan...she was your first girlfriend, okay? Your first love. I mean, who ever gets over that completely? You think I'm 'over' Dean, just because we went out when I was bloody fifteen years old? I loved that stupid blighter and it hurt like hell when he threw me over, and sometimes it still hurts. But ask yourself this. If Susan came to your door tomorrow and begged you to take her back, would you do it?"

Harry looked at Ginny, taken aback by the vehemence of her words. He'd had no idea that Dean had truly hurt her feelings back in school. But then, why would he. Friends Harry and Ginny might have been, but Harry had never truly gotten involved in Ginny's personal life, had he? He'd never asked Ginny how she felt about much of anything. He'd always gone to her with his own problems. But he'd never bothered to find out about her.

Bloody selfish prat, he thought suddenly.

"Harry?"

"No," said Harry at once. "I wouldn't take her back."

Ginny nodded, and let out a heavy breath, as though relieved by this, but that struck Harry as a bit odd. Why would she be relieved about that?

"Well, there you go," said Ginny. "Look, Harry, maybe what you really miss is having a relationship. I mean, you had a good one with Susan. You two looked pretty happy together, from what I recall."

"We were," said Harry, smiling sadly.

"Who wouldn't miss that?" said Ginny. "Having a good relationship with someone? A friend who understood you? And hell, the snogging didn't hurt, did it?"

Harry felt himself laugh in spite of himself.

"So you're saying I don't miss Susan," said Harry. "I just miss..."

"The idea of being with someone, yeah," said Ginny.

Harry looked at her and nodded, feeling the tightness in his chest relax just a little. "That...makes sense, I guess."

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

"Ginny," Harry said suddenly. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For...for being selfish, with you," said Harry. "I'm always dumping on you with my problems; I did it all through seventh year and I never once asked about you. I...I don't think I was a very good friend to you."

Ginny blushed and looked down. "You...you had quite enough on your plate, as I remember."

"Yeah," said Harry, which was true-there was Voldemort to consider back then, of course. "But I still could have asked you. About you."

"It's okay," said Ginny, meeting his eyes, but she looked sad again-as sad as she'd looked that day on the Quidditch pitch, after she'd flown so brilliantly.

"What's wrong, Ginny?" Harry asked, moving closer to her.

She looked down and let go of his hand.

"Nothing," she mumbled.

"Ginny, look at me," Harry said, suddenly feeling the weight of her sadness wrap itself around him. He put a hand under her chin and tilted her head up. When she looked at him he felt a pang. Her eyes were swimming with unshed tears.

"What happened to make you so sad?" he asked, brushing away a tear as it fell.

She said nothing for a moment, but her lower lip trembled.

"I...I..." she stammered, and she swallowed. "I can't..." She shook her head and looked down again, and her shoulders began to shake. She couldn't seem to talk. She could only cry.

Harry watched her for a moment, feeling wretched. He'd never been all that good at dealing with a girl's tears, but somehow this was different. This was Ginny crying, for reasons he couldn't fathom, and it cut him to the quick to see her so unhappy. He put his arms around her and pulled her close to him.

She let out a kind of strangled sob and sank against him, letting him hold her. Harry rested his cheek against the top of her head and stroked her hair. He said nothing-she seemed to need to do nothing but cry right now, so he let her do it.

After a while her sobs quieted. She took a few hearty sniffs and sat up. Her eyes were red and puffy and her face-tear stained. She looked heart- breakingly beautiful.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping her face. "I...I didn't mean to lose my head on you like that."

He brushed her hair back from her face. "You don't have to apologize," said Harry. "I just...wish you'd tell me what's been bothering you."

"It's stupid," said Ginny, waving a hand impatiently and sitting back from him.

"Not if it's making you this upset," said Harry forcefully.

She looked at him and smiled sadly. "Okay, maybe not stupid. But...I mean...I guess when you told me about Susan writing you...it made me think...of Dean...and of Colin...and hell, even of that stupid Michael Corner, can you believe it? And the other blokes I've dated or otherwise been involved with and...and how...oh, hell...I guess seeing you so upset made me remember what it felt like to get my own heart broken. Pretty silly, isn't it?"

"No," said Harry, taking her right hand in his left and fetching her a tissue with his right hand. He handed it to her and she dabbed at her eyes and nose.

"I guess that's why I've given up," said Ginny. "On relationships, you know. I mean, yeah, they're wonderful at first but then...boom!...something happens and suddenly you find that the person you've lost your head over has just...ripped your heart out of your chest and stomped on it."

"That's a pretty vivid way to describe it," said Harry, smiling grimly. "Vivid but accurate. But...you've really...given up? On...on love?"

"Yeah," said Ginny, smiling wryly. "I mean, I've...I've been round the block a few times, Harry. You know that. I'm not nearly the tart people thought I was in school, mind, but...well...I've been there, done that. And I really don't feel like revisiting the whole broken heart thing."

"Oh," said Harry, feeling sad that she should feel like this. "But...but how do you know...I mean, for all you know there could be someone out there who's perfect for you-"

"Oh, come on, Harry," said Ginny, a slightly bitter tone to her voice. "You don't REALLY believe in that whole 'two people are destined for each other and nobody else' junk, do you?"

"Yeah," said Harry defensively. "Look at Ron and Hermione!"

"They're the exception, not the rule," said Ginny sadly. "And who knows? Something could happen tomorrow and they break up. Nothing's certain, Harry. Nothing's guaranteed. Nothing, that is, except my own behavior, my own choices. The way I see it, why...why take the risk?"

"Because it feels bloody good, even if it doesn't last," said Harry vehemently. "Look, I'm not saying I liked being dumped by Susan, but...but I sure as hell wouldn't trade what happened between us just because...just because of how things ended up. I had some good times with her."

Ginny smiled at him sadly. "I wouldn't trade my time with Dean or Colin or anyone else, either," she said. "I...I just don't care to repeat history, that's all."

Harry looked at her and felt...a bit hurt. He wasn't sure why. It shouldn't really bother him like this, hearing her rather cynical view on human relationships. I mean, it wasn't like she was HIS girlfriend. But for some reason it stung to hear her disparage love as she did. Even if she had been hurt badly more than once.

"You were never a tart," said Harry suddenly.

Ginny gave a kind of bitter laugh that turned into a soft smile. She looked into his eyes. "Look at us, would you? A couple of very messed-up people, aren't we?"

Harry shook his head and smiled in spite of himself. "You're a cynic and I'm a loser."



"No, you're not," said Ginny firmly. "Any girl would be lucky to have you."

He looked up at her, at her hazel eyes, which shone green in the candlelight. At her hair, which caught the flickering of the flame and looked like spun gold. At her skin. She leaned close to him, closer, took his face in her hands and kissed him slowly.

Harry closed his eyes and felt his insides freeze up. He couldn't do this. Not tonight.

"Ginny," he said softly, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I-I don't think I'm up for a lesson tonight, actually."

She moved closer to him and stroked his jaw with her thumbs. "I'm not giving any lessons tonight," she murmured.

He blinked and looked into the depths of her eyes, where he could see his own bespectacled reflection, and he slowly understood what she meant. He felt blood rush to his groin and his whole body started to tingle.

"Are you sure?" he whispered. "I thought you said...if we..."

"Forget what I said," she said in a low voice. "Just...just be with me. Tonight."

## ***Chapter Eleven: Passion***

Harry stared at her for a long moment. A very small part of him knew they shouldn't. How would he feel afterwards? Would the guilt be too much for him? Would he be able to face Cho?

But as Ginny shifted on the bed and moved closer to him, her hand in his hair, stroking the back of his head, all thoughts of Cho fled his mind. At that moment there was only Ginny, looking beautiful and offering herself to him, offering to let him drown his pain inside her, and asking him to let her do the same. Harry felt a powerful throbbing between his legs and suddenly knew he couldn't possibly say no to her. He knew he wanted her more than anything.

"Yeah," he whispered, taking her face in his hands and kissing her. She gave a soft moan and leaned into him, taking his tongue into her mouth, tasting him, and her fingers tangled in his hair.

Slow, he thought, as he lowered her gently back onto the bed. Go slow.

"Harry," she whispered, as his lips left her mouth and trailed over her face and down her neck. He nipped softly at the skin with his teeth, then moved to her earlobe and nibbled there. She gave another soft moan.

Harry let his weight settle gently down on top of her as he moved his mouth back to hers, kissing her deeply. Her hands pulled at his shirt and then moved beneath it to stroke his back. He sighed at her touch and turned his head as her mouth moved over his jaw, onto his neck.

Ginny tugged his shirt higher, and Harry pulled himself up, just enough, to let her remove it completely. She tugged it over his head and he felt his glasses go askew.

The shirt came off. Ginny giggled at the sight of his glasses half-hanging off his face.

"Damn things," he muttered, taking them off and tossing them on his desk. He yanked his right arm free from the sleeve of his shirt and then settled back down on top of Ginny, kissing her again, willing himself to slow down even as his body begged him to get on with it.

His hands were roaming over her, exploring her curves above the fabric of her clothes. His hands moved over her breasts, across her tummy, to her hips, down her thighs, which were smooth as silk. He took a deep breath to keep himself from tearing her clothes off, and moved his hands back to the bodice of her blouse, which he began to unbutton, as slowly as he could. He kissed her mouth again and she shifted just slightly to give him better access to the buttons.

He was halfway finished with the blouse when he stopped kissing her (he realized he really needed to breathe) and looked down at her. Her hair was spread out on the bed like a fiery halo and her face and freckled chest were flushed. Her lips were red and wet from kissing, and her eyes were glazed, erotic.

"Wow," he murmured, finishing with the blouse and pulling it open to reveal a pale pink lace brassiere.

"Kiss me," she whispered, and he did; his right arm was under her shoulders now and his left hand traveled from her waist up to her breasts, where he stroked them through the lace of her bra, his thumb making gentle circles across her nipples.

"Oh, god," she moaned, tightening her arms around him.

His mouth moved to her neck, across her chest, to just above her breasts, where he was now dying to taste them, lick them.

"Take it off," she whispered urgently. "Please..."

He moved his mouth up to hers and kissed her again; he couldn't get enough of her. He gripped her

tightly and rolled her on top of him. Her skirt hitched up as she straddled him and pressed her pelvis against his.

"Oh," Harry groaned, his left hand moving to her bottom and cupping the left cheek firmly, pulling her pelvis into his again. She pulled off her blouse and kissed him again, and his right hand traveled up her back and found the clasp of her bra. He unhooked it.

She laughed gently against his mouth.

"What?" he croaked, gripping her lace-covered bottom.

"You did it," she said, her breath hot as it mingled with his. "One-handed."

He grinned wickedly. "I've been practicing," he rasped, kissing her hard, gripping her round the waist and rolling on top of her again. His groin was throbbing in agony but somehow he was holding it together.

He was kissing her again, her mouth, her face, her neck, her collarbones, her chest. He groaned out loud as he moved his mouth over her breasts; she gave a gasp and arched her back, which only aroused him more. His left hand moved over the outside of her thigh. Ginny shifted beneath him.

"Touch me," she whispered urgently, as he brought his mouth back up to hers. "Please." She shifted again and took his left hand and put it between her silky knees.

Harry closed his eyes and kissed her again, more slowly this time, and let his hand move upward, upward, upward, until it came to that private, mysterious place that was covered by lacy knickers. Ginny gave a whimper and her knees fell open as he brushed his hand across that place.

He stopped kissing her and looked down at her. Her lips were parted and her eyes were cloudy, her lids half-closed. She was breathing in short gasps, her chest rising and falling, her skin glowing in the candlelight. He caressed her between her legs and she arched her back again, moaning softly. It was the sexiest, most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He caressed her again and felt wetness through the knickers and felt another surge between his own legs.

"Mmm," Ginny moaned, closing her eyes and moving her hips beneath his hand. Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to breathe. Don't lose it now, he thought.

"Take them off," Ginny begged, arching her back again as he stroked her over her knickers.

"Everything."

Harry's eyes widened, just a bit, and he nodded. His free hand moved to her hip and found the zipper on her skirt and tugged it down, then gripped the waistband. She arched up again and he pulled the skirt down over her hips, over her legs, her knees, past her ankles, where he let it drop.

Now for the knickers, he thought, looking back up at her. He swallowed.

Slowly, he thought. Breathe. His hand caressed her hip and gripped the elastic of the knickers and he pulled. He pulled them lower, lower, feeling the silk of her thigh, the smooth, hard muscle of her calves; he sat up slightly and slid the knickers over her ankles and let them drop on the floor.

He turned back to her and his breath caught. He swallowed again, hard, at as a lump rose in his throat.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered, in awe of her. His hand moved from her ankle and slowly back up her thighs. He leaned down and kissed her slowly, as his hand moved again between her legs, touching her.

She gasped and threw back her head as he began to stroke her.

Gently, he told himself, trying not to lose control even as she moaned out loud. She was wet there, a

silky, sexy kind of wetness; the skin was very tender and soft and utterly female. He stroked her again and again, loving the way it felt.

She gave another hitching gasp and looked into his face. He remembered the page in the book, with the diagram, and felt overcome. Suddenly touching her with his hands wasn't enough.

"Ginny," he said, his voice ragged, "I want to...oh, god...let me...let me taste you. Please."

Ginny gave another gasp and put her arms round his neck.

"Are you sure?" she asked, her voice a reedy whisper.

"Yes," he begged, "yes."

She nodded. He kissed her mouth and trailed his lips and tongue down, over her shoulders, the smooth valley between her breasts, down to her tummy. He was nervous, so nervous he trembled. He wasn't sure, really, if he could do this. He just knew he wanted to.

He shifted as she moved her legs apart. He was dizzy from the scent of her- the raw female scent. He closed his eyes and inhaled, his erection straining against his trousers, and he lowered himself slowly between her thighs, trailings kisses along the soft skin. He found the place between her legs and took another deep breath, and lowered his mouth to her.

He moaned at the taste. It was like honey, but something else. Erotic, earthy, completely arousing. She gave a small cry and began to sigh, and her hips arched up to him, opening her to him even more. He tasted her again, and again, and again, his own desire spiking every time he heard her cry out and felt her arch up.

Breathe, he told himself, and he breathed through his nose and shifted his weight again, his mind spinning, his erection aching. He heard her breathing, panting, gasping as he tasted her over and over again. She gave a loud cry and jerked beneath him, and Harry found himself gripping the bedspread and trying not to pass out from the knowledge that he'd just given her an orgasm.

She lay there on the bed, her legs still splayed, looking very naked and very beautiful, as Harry pulled himself up and lowered himself gently onto her. She gazed up at him and smiled.

"Wow," she whispered, and she kissed him.

Somehow the act of her kissing him, when he could still taste that most secret part of her, only made his erection strain even more, and he groaned. He kissed her back, tangling his hands in her hair. This was way, way better than he had ever have imagined it. And he still hadn't lost himself.

"I need you," she whispered in his ear, her hands going to his belt and unfastening it. "Please."

She pulled his belt from the loops of his jeans and tossed it carelessly on the floor, then pushed him over, rolling him onto his back. She straddled him.

"Oh, my god," Harry gasped, blinking hard and swallowing and forcing himself to think of other things to calm down his raging erection. But it was difficult, with Ginny naked on top of him, straddling him. She began to kiss him across his chest and stomach and he felt his hands move into her hair again. Her hands worked at opening the buttons of his jeans, undoing them all rather faster than he'd undone hers. She gave them a tug, sliding them down over his thighs; Harry grunted in relief as his erection was released from the confines of the jeans; Ginny smiled and pulled the jeans down over his ankles and let them drop on the floor, then pulled her self back over him and kissed him on the mouth.

He moaned when he felt her hands slide inside his boxers, stroking him.

Dead kittens, dead kittens, he thought, but it did nothing to calm the storm between his legs, the ache.

And then Ginny was pulling down his boxer shorts, and suddenly there was nothing between them. Not one scrap of clothing.

"Dear god," he gasped, as she lowered herself over him; he felt the wetness of her sex brush against his own and realized he had to be inside her, right now, or he might go mad from wanting.

He kissed her hard, wrapping his arms around her, and rolled her over onto her back, his body covering hers.

"Wait," she whispered, as he began to ease himself between her legs.

"What?" he asked, a little desperately.

"Condom," she whispered raggedly.

"Right!" he said, having completely forgotten about that. He rolled off her and threw open his nightstand drawer.

Condoms, condoms, condoms, where the bloody hell were they?

He found several of them. Thank god, he thought. He grabbed one and tore open the wrapper and put it on—all this took about three seconds.

Ginny giggled as he lowered himself back onto her; he kissed her hungrily as he lowered himself onto her again, finding her, entering her.

He gasped and groaned.

"Look at me," Ginny whispered. "Look at me."

He did, he looked right into her eyes. He couldn't bring himself to move—it felt so damn good that he knew if he moved he'd lose it.

But then she began to move beneath him, slowly, her eyes closing and opening, her mouth open.

"Move with me," she whispered, kissing his lips. He did. He sank into her more deeply, sucking in his breath. Then deeper—god, it felt like heaven. She began to rock slowly, back and forth, and he moved with her. It was incredible; the way she felt, the way he felt inside her, the way they moved. He wasn't sure just how he was managing to control himself, but right then he hoped he could stay inside her forever, feeling like this.

"Harry," she whispered, her breath hot in his ear, as he moved within her, faster, harder.

"God, Ginny," he cried, leaning down over her, his face inches from hers, his eyes locked in hers. His hands moved from her face to find her hands; he gripped them tightly and pressed them into the bed. She shifted beneath him just slightly and began to moan, faster and louder, with every movement.

She gave a loud cry and arched up, shuddering under him again. Harry's control snapped; it was too much, and he felt a cry burst from his throat as he lost himself inside her, his whole body quivering and trembling with the release.

He sank onto her, his heart pounding, the blood loud in his ears. The only sounds were those of his breathing, her breathing, their beating hearts, the rattle of the wind against the window pane. Their foreheads touched and he released her hands; she wrapped her arms around him and he brushed her hair back from her forehead. They were covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and the room was heavy with the scent of sex.

"Ginny," he whispered. "Ginny."

She smiled and stroked his face, his brow, ran her fingertips along his scar.

"That was lovely," she murmured, kissing him lightly on the lips.

He swallowed, his breath still a bit ragged even as his heartbeat finally began to slow.

"It...it was?" he asked, still unsure of how he did.

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes."

"I never knew...it could be...like that..." he whispered, nuzzling her and kissing her lips softly.

"Me, neither," she whispered. Harry met her gaze and felt a thrill of warmth in his chest, his abdomen.

"Really?" he asked, wanting to believe he'd done it right, that it had been as wonderful for her as it had been for him. The look in her eyes told him all he wanted to see.

"Yes," she whispered, kissing him slowly. He kissed her back and felt the warmth in his belly move lower.

"You don't suppose..." he murmured, as his mouth trailed to her ear, "...we could have another go..."

"You're incorrigible."

## **Chapter Twelve: Complications**

Harry lay awake. He was exhausted-it was almost five o'clock in the morning by the time Ginny fell asleep, having made love a few more times in between long talks about everything and nothing. But he couldn't fall asleep.

Ginny had dropped off some time ago; she was asleep with her head on his chest, her arm draped over him; Harry's arms were wrapped around her, his fingers stroking her by now very tangled red hair.

The ache he'd felt before, the ache brought on by Susan's letter, was gone, replaced by a kind of bittersweet nostalgia. He realized suddenly that he could forgive Susan for hurting him. They might never really be friends, but he could live with what had happened. He could, indeed, move on. His eyes fell on the stack of papers on his desk, on Susan's letter, which rested atop them. Then they fell on Cho's postcard, which he'd lain flat.

Cho, he thought. She'd be coming here soon. For the first time since hearing from her those few weeks ago, he wasn't sure he wanted her to come. What, in the end, would happen between them? His mind traced back to their days at Hogwarts, to his fifth year when he'd tried, and failed, to be with Cho. He knew now that it had been way too soon for them to come together. The timing had been wrong then. But then she'd come to see him the following year at Halloween. It hadn't gone right then, either.

But what had gone wrong? He couldn't talk to her, for one thing. He couldn't have sex with her, for another. The more Harry thought about it, it seemed that the only success he'd had with Cho was in being her pen-pal. Was that really the basis of a relationship?

Or more to the point, was that what SHE wanted? She lived in Egypt now. Even if she wanted something more serious with Harry, how would they deal with that kind of separation? It wasn't as if they had much of a history together to base a relationship on, especially a long-distance one. But what if all she wanted from him was sex?

Ginny sighed in her sleep and snuggled up closer to him. He looked down at her and felt his stomach tie itself in knots. Ginny had been right-he DID want someone in his life again, someone to love who'd love him back. He might be a randy dog most of the time but in the end sex wasn't the first thing he wanted.

He gazed down at Ginny again and felt his stomach clench harder. What about Ginny?

They were friends, good friends. They got on well. They'd just had a very lovely evening in bed together. But Ginny, she said she'd given up on relationships. She didn't want them anymore. She was too scared.

"You don't REALLY believe in that whole 'two people are destined for each other and nobody else' junk, do you?" she'd said. And Harry had insisted he did.

But did he? The fact was that he'd been very happy with Susan, and had she not broken things off with him, they might still be together. But they were not. And there had been times when he'd been happy with Cho, as well; it was just that the timing never seemed quite right for them. And as he brushed a strand of hair from Ginny's forehead he realized he might well be happy with her, too.

So he had been wrong, then. There wasn't just ONE person on earth he could be happy with; there might well be any number of girls out there with whom he might find and share love. It wasn't finding that ONE person, it was finding a good person at the right time and under the right circumstances.

He looked down at Ginny again, and felt a kind of hollow ache fill his chest. She shouldn't be so cynical, not when she was so young. Eighteen years old and already experienced had hardened her

heart.

He glanced over at the postcard from Cho and only felt more confused. He'd told Ron he wanted another chance with Cho, just to see if he could make it work. Part of him still did.

Then why are you lying here with your arms around Ginny? a voice inside his head asked.

Ginny sighed in her sleep and stirred slightly; Harry shifted and lay down on his side and gazed at her, caressing her freckled cheek with his thumb. The night had been the most extraordinary of his life, and now all he wanted was for time to stop and let him stay here with her, talking to her and making love to her and convincing her that she was wrong, that love was worth the risk, that he was worth the risk.

But it was no good, he thought sadly. Ginny was stubborn, and did he really want to relive what it felt like to open his heart up to a girl that he knew would push him away?

He brushed his lips across her forehead and closed his eyes. As he dropped off to sleep at last, a small part of him wished he might never wake up.

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Sunlight poured into the bedroom and Harry blinked and opened his eyes. He turned and saw Ginny, awake, lying on her side and smiling at him.

"Hey," she said softly. "I wondered when you'd wake up."

Harry rolled onto his side and moved closer to her. "Go easy on me, Gin. You wore me out," he said, grinning, running his hand up her bare arm. She giggled and moved closer to him, kissed him lightly on the lips. She backed away, and her face became serious.

"Harry," she said slowly. "I just...thanks. For everything. For last night. It was lovely."

Harry swallowed and felt a lump rise in his throat. Tell her, a voice in his head yelled. Tell her you want to be with her, that she's dead wrong, that you can be happy together!

"You're welcome," he said instead, and he forced a grin.

"I think it's safe to say you don't need lessons anymore," said Ginny, propping herself up on her elbow and running her fingers through his messy hair.

"Oh, I've graduated, have I?"

"Yes," she said, "with honors." She rolled on top of him. Harry, despite the ache in his chest, instantly felt an erection coming on. She rubbed her breasts against him.

"Ah," he said in a low voice. "Do I...get a diploma and everything?" He reached up and tangled his hands in her hair and pulled her to him, kissing her mouth.

"Maybe," said Ginny, kissing him with her mouth and tongue, "but...let's worry about that later, shall we?"

"Right." He should stop, he thought. He shouldn't do this again, not after spending half the night awake brooding over what might lay in store for him and Ginny, or him and Cho, down the road. But he couldn't resist Ginny, not when she was kissing him like this and straddling him and rubbing her naked breasts against him and making him swell between his legs.

"Do you have any condoms left?" she whispered.

"I hope so," he gasped. He kissed her again and reached over toward his nightstand, feeling around the surface for another condom. He was so involved in what he was doing with her that he barely heard the pounding on his bedroom door. He barely heard it swing open.



Several things happened at once. Ron, as was his habit to barge into Harry's room, came striding through the door. Harry didn't see him at first, as he was rather busy with Ginny.

Ron, however, saw what was going on in Harry's bed.

"What the hell-" he said, in a very loud voice.

Harry just managed to register that Ron was in his room and had seen Ginny in his bed when Ginny gave a yelp and leapt off Harry, diving under the covers. The force of her movement and the momentum shook the bed and caused Harry to roll right out of it, banging his head on the nightstand.

"OW!" he yelped.

"RON, GET OUT!" Ginny screamed.

"What the BLOODY HELL!?" Ron bellowed.

Harry's eyes streamed as he started to get up, and then he realized he didn't have a stitch of clothing on; he grabbed for a pillow and held it in front of him, trying to ignore the throbbing in his forehead. Ginny was still bellowing at Ron to get the hell out.

"Ron, for god's sake, do you EVER KNOCK?!" Harry snapped, holding his aching forehead with one hand and the pillow, covering his very naked privates, with the other.

"I did knock!" Ron snapped. Harry looked up at Ron and gulped. Ron-who always looked a lot bigger somehow when he was angry-was white in the face, his fists clenched at his sides.

Shit, thought Harry, suddenly realizing that Ron was standing in his room and that he, Harry, was not wearing anything and that Ginny was not wearing anything (though she had pulled the covers of the bed up over her shoulders).

"I assume," said Ron, his nostrils flared, his eyes menacing, "that there is a VERY GOOD EXPLANATION, Harry, for what my sister is doing here."

"Ron, stop it!" Ginny hissed. "It's none of your damn business!"

"I'm speaking to Harry," said Ron, not looking at Ginny.

Harry gulped again. Between Ron being six inches taller than he and outweighing him by forty pounds and having a very bad temper, Harry knew whatever he said next would be the difference between Ron letting him live or not.

"It's not what you think," Harry blurted. He instantly knew this was the wrong thing to say.

"Oh yeah?" said Ron, taking a step toward Harry, his knuckles white from clenching his fists. "What do I think?"

"Ron-"

"Quiet, Ginny!" Ron snapped. Ginny gave an exasperated snort and threw up one hand, the other clutching the covers over herself.

"Look, Ron, I swear," said Harry quickly, backing away, holding up one hand. "There's nothing...I mean...it's not what it looks like..."

"It LOOKS like you've been shagging my little sister!" Ron growled, taking three more steps toward him; Ron's stride was so long he closed the distance between him and Harry easily.

Harry gave a choking laugh and backed up right into the wall.

"Well, uh, yes, but, I assure you my intentions are entirely honorable," said Harry quickly, his voice

strangled and very high. "We're uh...you see..."

Ron advanced on him and Harry pressed against the wall, still holding the pillow in front of his privates and feeling distinctly vulnerable just then.

"You're WHAT?" Ron asked.

"We're going out," said Harry quickly. "We're...we're in love!"

"What?" said Ron.

"What?" said Ginny.

"We're in love," Harry repeated, looking over at Ginny desperately, hoping his eyes told her what to do next.

"You are?" Ron demanded.

"We are?" Ginny asked, and then her eyes met Harry's and she understood. "Oh, yes, uh, we are!" she added, smiling brightly. She stood up on her knees, holding the sheet in front of her and wrapping it carefully around her.

"Yeah," said Harry weakly, smiling. "I'm mad about her, Ron. Honest."

"Absolutely mad," said Ginny, nodding vigorously, tying the sheet round her like a toga and walking slowly over to Harry. "And you know me, I'm just...CRAZY about Harry." Her eyes were glittering

"Crazy," repeated Harry, nodding, as Ginny put an arm round his neck. He put his free hand on her shoulder and realized just how absolutely ridiculous he must look, standing there naked but for a pillow covering his naughty bits.

Ron, meanwhile, was gazing with narrowed eyes at him, then at Ginny, then back at Harry. Harry held his breath. He hoped Ron wouldn't beat him up too badly.

But then Ron's face broke into a wide grin, and he began to laugh.

Harry felt his knees go soft and he nearly sank to the floor in relief, but Ginny started to laugh, a bit too loudly, and Harry quickly joined in.

"That's brilliant, mate!" Ron said, clapping Harry hard on the shoulder. Very hard.

Harry winced and smiled. "Yeah," he said, glancing at Ginny, who was still laughing a bit too hard.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ron demanded.

Harry and Ginny looked at one another quickly.

"Well," said Ginny slowly.

"Uh, we...we weren't sure how...you'd take it," said Harry.

"Right," said Ginny, taking up the story and running with it. "I mean, come on, Ron, you practically were ready to kill Harry ten seconds ago. You can't blame us for keeping you in the dark, now can you?" She gave him a knowing, scolding sort of smile.

Ron blushed very red.

"Yeah, well," said Ron, "I think I can be forgiven for looking out for my little sister."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Ron, I appreciate it, but I assure you, Harry and I are...deliriously happy together."

Ron grinned again and backed away. "This is excellent," he said heartily. "I always knew you'd figure

out my sister was perfect for you, mate. And Ginny! All this time I thought you were over Harry."

Harry and Ginny laughed again, very unnaturally.

"Oh, that," said Ginny. "Well, you know, I guess I never really got over my thing for him after all."

"Yeah," said Harry, smiling a bit wildly. "And...and Ginny IS perfect for me! We're...we're GREAT together." Please don't kill me, he thought again, even as Ron was backing off.

"Well, this is great news," said Ron. "I'll have to tell Hermione. And Mum and Dad of course, Mum'll probably start planning your wedding tomorrow."

"NO!" Harry and Ginny yelled.

Ron stopped and stared at them. "What?"

"Uh, you can't tell Mum and Dad," said Ginny quickly.

"Why the bloody hell not?" Ron asked, sounding a bit angry again.

"Because," said Harry quickly, "we...uh...well, I mean, this JUST happened, see, Ron and we...we kind of don't want everyone to know right away."

Ron's eyes narrowed again. He wasn't buying it.

"What I mean is," Harry said quickly, his mind working, "we...we'd rather be the ones to tell them. Ourselves."

"And," Ginny added quickly, "uh, we need a couple of weeks to sort of get used to the idea of us, you know, as a couple. Before we start shouting it to the rooftops and everything."

Ron grinned and nodded. "I get it," he said. "But I can tell Hermione, can't I?"

"Sure," said Harry. "Just, uh, tell her to keep it quiet. For now."

"You bet," said Ron. "I'm starving. Want some breakfast?"

Harry blinked, his mind a whirlwind. Two minutes ago Ron had been ready to strangle him and now he was inviting him down for breakfast. And Harry STILL didn't have any clothes on.

"Uh, no thanks," said Harry quickly. Ginny simply shook her head. Harry cleared his throat, looked pointedly at Ron, then down at the pillow he was holding. Ron's eyes fell on the pillow for a split second and he seemed to realize that Harry was standing there with no clothes on.

"Right," said Ron. There was a pause. "Uh, yeah. So, I'll just see you a bit later then, Harry?"

"Sure," said Harry. Get out, get out, get out! he thought, resisting the urge to run at Ron and shove him bodily out of the room.

"Right, then," said Ron, suddenly looking very embarrassed. "See you."

And he hurried out of the room and shut the door behind him.

Harry and Ginny stared at the spot where Ron had just stood, and both let out huge breaths.

"Dear god," Harry choked, still clutching the pillow over his crotch.

"That was close," said Ginny. "I thought he was going to throttle you for certain."

"It's a good thing your brother doesn't have a gun," said Harry weakly. "Are they ALL this protective of you?"

"Pretty much," said Ginny. "Ron more so, though, because he's just a year older."

Harry nodded, his knees still weak, and he crossed the room, pillow still in front of him, and sat down on the bed.

"Now what?" he said, wondering just what the hell he'd gotten them into to get OUT of being beaten to death by Ron.

"I guess we're dating," said Ginny wryly. "Only, uh, this could be a problem, what with Cho coming and all."

"Cho," Harry repeated. "Shit." He'd forgotten all about Cho in the past several minutes. He looked up at Ginny. "She's coming here thinking...thinking we're going to get together and I just told Ron you and me are-"

"Wait," said Ginny quickly, sitting next to him on the bed. "There's an easy way out of this."

"There is?" said Harry, because for the life of him he couldn't see what that way might be.

"Sure," said Ginny. "Look, Cho's not coming for another week, right? So, we pretend to go out, just to keep Ron off our backs. Then right before Cho shows up, we break up. Or rather, I break up with you, because if you break up with me Ron'll pound you."

Harry looked at her. "Are you sure?" he said, feeling very uncomfortable with this. He didn't like lying to his best mate, and he didn't like the idea of pretending to date Ginny when a part of him ACTUALLY wanted to.

But she doesn't want you, you stupid git, a voice in his head told him. Remember? She's done with love, with relationships. Get over it. Cho wants you; don't waste your time on Ginny, on a girl who's afraid to stick with you.

"I'm sure," said Ginny, meeting his eyes and smiling. "Look, it'll be easy. I have Quidditch practice every day until the World Cup. So you wouldn't even have to hang around me that much."

Harry felt a pang. "But I like hanging around with you," he said, smiling at her.

She smiled back at him. "Yeah?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. They looked at each other for a long moment. "I guess," said Harry finally, "this means...we won't, uh..."

Ginny blushed. "Well, no," she said. "I mean, I have practice every day, it goes for hours. And...well, I told you. After last night you really don't need me anymore."

You're wrong, thought Harry suddenly. But he couldn't bring himself to say it to her. He couldn't bring himself to tell her what he was feeling, because he knew she'd reject him. He blinked and forced himself to speak in a lighter tone.

"I'm that good, am I?" he joked, but it felt forced.

"Pretty much," said Ginny, smiling in a strained sort of way. "I mean, I had a really amazing time and all. Cho won't know what hit her."

"Yeah," said Harry, feeling very sad and confused and wishing he could muster up the courage to tell her that last night meant more to him than simply drowning his sorrows or preparing himself for another girl. That he wasn't even sure he wanted that other girl anymore.

Cho wants you, the voice in his head said. Ginny doesn't. Get it?

I get it, he thought.

"I should go," said Ginny softly.

Don't go, Harry thought.

"Okay," he said. She stood up and let the sheet drop, affording Harry another view of her. He closed his eyes; it hurt to look at her, to see how beautiful she was in the light of day. She started to gather up her discarded clothes and put them on. Harry took a breath and followed her example, scooping up his boxers and pulling them on, then reaching for his jeans.

They dressed in silence; Harry stole glances at Ginny as she fastened her bra, pulled on her skirt, buttoned her blouse, smoothed her hair and tied it back up in a knot. Only last night he'd taken those clothes off her, loosened her hair so that it flowed over her shoulders. He'd made love to her how many times and explored every inch of her and loved every second of it. And now she was leaving. It was over. He pursed his lips. He had to move on.

They finished dressing and without a word Harry crossed to the door and opened it. Ginny moved past him and paused in the doorway to look up at him.

"I had a good time," she said softly, her eyes beautiful and sad.

"Me, too," he said, his voice husky. "Thanks, Ginny. For everything."

"My pleasure," said Ginny, smiling. But she didn't move just then.

"Good luck," said Harry, "with the Quidditch. I'm...I'm coming to the match, you know."

"Yeah, I know," she said. "Thanks. Good luck to you. You know, with Cho."

Harry nodded but said nothing. Stay, he wanted to tell her. But then she leaned up and kissed him very softly on the mouth.

His whole body tingled from that kiss and he started to reach for her, to crush his mouth against hers and carry her back over to the bed, but she was already pulling away, already turning and going out the door, heading for the staircase. He closed his eyes for a moment and started to follow. This was it. It was over. Ginny wasn't for him. Accept it, he thought, and move on.

He started down the stairs after Ginny, so lost in his own thoughts that he collided with her at the foot of the staircase.

He blinked, not sure just why she had stopped. Then his eyes traveled to where Ginny was staring, and he felt his stomach plummet.

Ron was standing in the living room, managing to look both shocked and smug at the same time.

"Look who's here, Harry."

Standing next to Ron was Cho Chang.

## **Chapter Thirteen: The Plan**

"Hi, Harry."

Harry swallowed, his throat stuck, his eyes frozen open like plates. It couldn't be. She wasn't due for another week. What the hell was she doing here?

"Cho," he said in a strangled voice. "Hi." She looked exquisite, her black hair loose and flowing down her back. She wore a black miniskirt and a rather fitted little t-shirt, and she was very tan.

"You're...you're early," he added.

"Yes, well," she said, smiling up at him brightly, "I managed to get an extra week off work."

"That's great," Harry lied. He looked at her, forcing a smile, then looked back at Ginny, who was looking resolutely to the floor and blushing.

"Don't you have something to tell Cho, Harry?" Ron asked, giving him a pointed look.

"What?" Harry said quickly, but then he saw Ron's eyes go to Ginny. SHIT. He and Ginny were-at least in Ron's universe-a couple.

"Right," said Harry. "Uh, yeah."

"Harry-" Ginny began.

"What's up?" Cho asked, ignoring Ginny.

"Well, uh, Cho, you see," said Harry slowly, moving down the stairs past Ginny, not able to look at her. "Uh, Ginny here...and me. We're...sort of...well, going out."

Something flashed in Cho's eyes. Disappointment, and something else. Jealousy? She glanced at Ginny and back at Harry.

"Oh," she said slowly. "I didn't know," she added, giving Harry a very pointed look.

"It only just happened," said Harry quickly. "I mean, only JUST. I was going to write to you today and tell you all about it."

"Only just?" said Ron. "But you told me earlier-"

"In any case," said Harry very loudly, interrupting Ron and shooting him a significant look, "I'm really sorry. I wasn't expecting you so early, see. I...I meant to save you a trip."

"Uh huh," said Cho, looking both hurt and angry. "Well. I suppose...I should just go."

"No!" said Ginny quickly. Harry whipped his head around to stare at her. She widened her eyes significantly at him. Right, Harry thought. She's trying to help me, trying to keep Cho here, for me.

"What?" said Cho, staring at Ginny.

"Cho," said Ginny slowly. "Look, uh, I know this is a bit awkward but...well, you've traveled all the way here, haven't you? Why cut your holiday short? I mean, you and Harry are friends, aren't you?"

"Well, yes," said Cho slowly. A bit too slowly.

"Well, I'm going to be in Quidditch practice every day for the next week, you know, preparing for the World Cup-"

"You're playing in the World Cup?" said Cho, looking impressed in spite of herself.

"Yes," said Ginny quickly, "and I just won't be around to spend time with Harry, see. I know Harry

wants to catch up with you, don't you Harry?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry quickly, wishing he could run screaming from the room right then.

"Since I can't be around, why don't you and Harry hang out?" said Ginny. "I mean, it's fine with me. I'm not jealous or anything."

"That's good to know," said Cho, her dark eyes glittering a bit.

"It's perfect, really," Ginny went on, regarding Cho coolly. "You can keep Harry occupied and spare me a whole lot of guilt for not getting to spend time with him myself."

"That's generous of you," said Cho sleekly, shifting her weight so that her hips moved in a very appealing way.

Ron, meanwhile, had watched this whole exchange with his mouth open, like a fish. He started to say something but Harry shot him another meaningful look.

"That's a great idea, love," said Harry a bit loudly, crossing to Ginny. "There's the spare bedroom she can use. That is, if Cho wants to." He looked at Cho and gave her what he hoped wasn't a pained smile.

Cho gave Harry a sweet and frankly seductive smile. "I'd love to, thanks."

"Excellent," said Ginny, her voice a bit tight as though it was costing her something to be polite to Cho. "That's settled. And now I really should get home. I have to get ready for practice."

"Of course," said Cho, smiling sweetly.

"Mind," Ginny went on airily, crossing the room and walking with a distinct and very sexy swing to her hips, "I don't know how I'll be able to sit on my broom properly, after the way Harry shagged me last night. What was it, baby, six times? Seven? You have such...limitless stamina, honestly. I'm bloody well exhausted."

Harry's mouth dropped open. He tried to talk but only a choking bark came out. Ron made a similar kind of noise. Cho said nothing, but pursed her lips.

"How nice for you," she said, through gritted teeth.

Ginny smiled breezily at her and opened the front door and walked out.

"Uh, Ginny!" Harry called loudly, finding his voice at last. "Can I TALK to you a minute? Outside?"

"Of course," she said, in a kind of purr.

Harry practically sprinted across the living room and shot out the door, shutting it behind him. He whirled on Ginny.

"What the BLOODY hell was that?"

"I'm helping you," said Ginny sharply.

"Telling Cho we shagged last night helps me?"

"Yes," said Ginny. "I saw the way she was looking at you, Harry. She wants you badly, can't you tell?"

"Yeah, I'm sure she's dying to have at me now!" said Harry sarcastically.

"Harry," said Ginny, rolling her eyes. "In case you didn't notice, I talked up your skills in bed AND I made her jealous. That means she'll want you even more. Trust me, I know how that girl thinks. She likes challenges. She wants to compete with me, over you-it's a turn-on for her."

"That's weird," said Harry.

"I never said girls weren't weird," said Ginny loftily.

"Bloody hell," said Harry, running a hand through his hair. "This is nuts. Cho shouldn't even be here yet!"

"But she is," said Ginny firmly, "and we're just going to have to deal with it."

"How?"

"We stick to the original plan," said Ginny. "We break up next week sometime and you, in your agony at me dumping you, go tumbling into Cho's arms."

"But-"

"Look, Harry, do you want to be with Cho or don't you?" Ginny said, her voice a bit harsh. "Because I'm trying to make that happen for you."

"I...I know," said Harry, feeling miserable. He thought of Cho, how scrumptious she looked, and he knew that a strong part of him still desired her. "I...I do want Cho." Of course I do, he told himself. Of course.

"Fine," said Ginny, her voice still slightly sharp. "Then just trust me on this, let me handle things. You just hang out with Cho when you can, figure out what it's like to be friends with her first. I mean, that's sort of an important part of any relationship right?"

"Yeah," Harry mumbled.

"And next week when I dump you, she'll be there to help you pick up the pieces," said Ginny. Harry couldn't help but notice the slight bitterness in her tone, but he said nothing.

"All right," he relented. Anything to make this situation a little less agonizing than it had so rapidly become.

"I have to run," said Ginny.

"Wait," said Harry, grabbing her arm. "When will I see you again?"

"Two days," said Ginny. "Let's meet at Fortescue's, at two o'clock-I've got a three hour break between my morning and evening practices. And bring Cho. And tell her you're meeting me."

"Right," said Harry, bewildered.

"Bye," she said, leaning up to peck him on the cheek. At that moment Cho opened the front door. Ginny grabbed Harry by the chin and kissed him full and long on the lips. Harry cursed himself as he felt a stirring in his trousers-he was stuck in the most awkward situation of his life and he STILL couldn't fully control his lust!

"Bye," Ginny said again, flashing Harry a very seductive smile. "Bye, Cho!" she added in a honeyed voice, waving sweetly.

Cho said nothing, only smiled, and waved back, her eyes looking daggers at Ginny. Ginny skipped away down the street, her hips swinging, Harry's eyes fixed on the curve of her luscious backside.

"So," said Cho.

Harry blinked and whirled around; Cho's voice was like hearing a loud scratch of a needle across a record.

"You and the Weasley girl," said Cho, smiling a bit dangerously. "Who would have thought? I must say I'm disappointed. I was so hoping to have you to myself."



Harry could think of nothing to say to this and settled for laughing nervously. He began to wonder why the hell he'd woken up this morning at all.

## **Chapter Fourteen: Confusion**

The following week was nothing short of agony for Harry. Between having to lie to Ron and Hermione about his relationship with Ginny, missing Ginny terribly, and having to hang around Cho-who he still lusted after-and pretend to act somewhat normal, he felt like he might well lose his mind.

Ginny was true to her word; the few times she, Harry and Cho were together she did all she could to make Cho jealous. Harry was simply too mentally drained to stop Ginny when she crawled into his lap or kissed him on the lips or made yet another very bawdy comment about Harry's skills in bed. That he was caught in the middle of two very beautiful, very smart, very sexy young women where before he was lucky to have even a homely one give him the time of day gave him no joy whatsoever.

The one bright spot to it all was that due to Ginny's busy practice schedule, Ron didn't question Harry spending so much time along with Cho, especially after Harry assured Ron (repeatedly) that it was thoroughly fine with Ginny for Harry to do so. Ron accepted this (grudgingly) and in short order was spending his usual amount of time with Hermione (which was every day for hours at a time). The reprieve gave Harry no small sense of relief. At least he could participate in this crazy plan without Ron breathing down his neck.

Cho, meanwhile, was only making things worse for Harry. Every time they were alone she flirted with him, rather brazenly. She seemed to own and wear only clothes that showed off as much of her gorgeous skin as possible. She was constantly licking her lips and tossing her luxuriant hair. She backed off only when Ginny was around, but Harry had the distinct impression that this was not out of respect for Ginny but because Ginny was always crawling onto Harry's lap.

Toward the end of the week Harry got so frustrated by it all that he took Ginny aside one evening when they were out strolling Diagon Alley.

"Can you ease up a BIT?" he asked.

"Why, is it turning you on?" Ginny asked archly.

"Yes!" said Harry furiously. "I can't bloody concentrate."

"Relax, Harry, it's just one more day and then I'm dumping you," said Ginny, smiling a bit sadly.

"Oh," said Harry. "Uh, right."

"Walk me home, okay?" she said. "Then you and Cho can go back to your place."

He nodded, and the three of them walked back to Ginny's flat, not saying much. Harry didn't really want to think about being 'dumped' by Ginny tomorrow. It's not real, you prat, he told himself. But it felt real.

Harry walked Ginny to her door; Cho hung back, staring down at her fingernails as though they had become the most fascinating thing in the world.

"G'night," she whispered.

"G'night," he said, suddenly wanting to carry her through the door, lock it behind him and never come out.

"One last kiss," said Ginny, her voice a bit strangled. "Make it good, okay?"

Harry tried to speak, but he couldn't. One last kiss? That was it? He was never going to taste her peppermint tongue again? How could he stand it?

Ginny looked up at him, her eyes both expectant and a bit sad. He swallowed and took her face in his

hands and lowered his mouth to hers.

Harry kissed her slowly at first but then felt overcome by something, and suddenly he was kissing her harder, wrapping his arms around her tightly, tangling his hands in her hair, her silky red hair.

Ginny broke the kiss. "Harry," she whispered. "Cho...she's watching."

"Yeah," said Harry, feeling miserable as he let go of Ginny.

"Hey," she said, smiling. "Cheer up. The girl of your dreams is here, remember?"

He looked at Ginny and smiled, but it felt forced. "Yeah," he said again.

"Bye, Harry," said Ginny, touching his face with her palm. She turned and walked inside, shutting the door firmly behind her.

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"Ready to break up?"

"I guess so."

Ginny took a deep breath. They were in Harry's room; the door was open. Cho was downstairs in the living room reading Witch Weekly. It was time for the show to begin.

"I hate you, Harry!" Ginny screamed. "I'm sick of being with you!"

"Yeah?" yelled Harry, feeling an ache in his chest, "I...I hate you, too!"

"I never want to see you again!" Ginny cried, and she stomped dramatically out of his room and down the stairs, sobbing out loud.

Wow, thought Harry, she's pretty convincing.

"I don't want to see you again, either!" Harry yelled, stomping after her. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cho look up from her magazine and stare at them.

"You think you're so great," said Ginny. "Well, you're NOT! The only things you're good at are Quidditch and...and fucking!"

Harry started to retort but he couldn't.

"Yeah," Ginny went on, feigning tears. "I mean, so what if you gave me the greatest sexual pleasure I've ever known?! It's over! We're through!"

"Fine by me!" Harry hollered, torn between wanting to laugh out loud at Ginny's performance-what idiot would believe something so over the top?-and wanting to run screaming from the room. He'd wanted to do that a lot lately.

"Fine!" Ginny yelled, stomping to the front door. "And I don't care that you're hung like a horse or that you gave me multiple orgasms every night! I don't even care that you fucked me up the arse!"

Harry's mouth dropped open. He was standing behind Cho, who was staring at Ginny. He felt his mouth curl into a smile in spite of himself, but then Cho whipped her head around and he quickly put on a devastated kind of pout.

"Good-BYE!" Ginny screamed, and she flung open the front door and stomped out, slamming it behind her so hard that the walls shook.

Harry and Cho were silent, staring at the place where Ginny had just stood.

Cho turned to Harry, her face a mask of sweetness and sympathy.

"Oh, Harry," she whispered, putting a hand on his arm. He looked at Cho and found that he had nothing to say. She stood up and pulled him into a hug. He tried not to think about Ginny as he put his arms around Cho.

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"I heard about you and Ginny," said Ron, sounding annoyed, as he, Harry and Cho ate breakfast the following morning. "What'd you do to piss her off so much?"

"She dumped me, mate," said Harry, glancing at Cho, who gave him a sympathetic face. Harry tried not to smile.

"You must have done something," Ron insisted.

"I'm telling you, I dunno what I did," said Harry firmly.

Ron glared at him, then at Cho, then at Harry. "Uh huh."

"Ron, I was there," Cho said quickly. "It was really quite a row. Ginny just sort of exploded and dumped Harry right in front of me and then she stormed out."

Ron nodded, but still looked a bit suspicious. Harry quickly changed the subject.

"So, uh, I do still want to go to the World Cup," said Harry. "That is, if it's okay with you."

Ron looked at Harry but then nodded. "I guess so," he said. "I mean, I've got the tickets, don't I? Might as well use them."

"The Quidditch World Cup, I can't wait," said Cho, smiling, taking a sip of orange juice.

"Uh, what?" said Ron, a bit rudely. "Who said anything about you going?"

"Ron!" Harry snapped, appalled.

"Oh," said Cho, blushing very red. "Uh, well, I just thought, you know..."

"You DO have a ticket for Cho, don't you?" said Harry severely. "Ron?"

Ron swallowed his cereal. "Well, uh, no," he said. "I mean, I didn't think she'd be going."

"Oh," said Cho, looking very awkward.

"What do you mean, not going?" Harry said angrily. "Of course Cho would want to go, she played Quidditch, remember?"

"Yeah, well, I forgot, okay?" said Ron defensively.

"You forgot," said Harry, exasperated. "That's great, Ron. Because of you I have to miss the World Cup now. Thanks."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, but Cho spoke over him.

"Oh, no, Harry, you shouldn't miss the match on my account," she said.

"I'm not leaving you here by yourself, am I?" said Harry, furious. He couldn't believe it. If there was ONE thing he'd wanted to do tomorrow it was see Ginny fly in the World Cup. He didn't know when he'd ever get the chance to do it again. But Harry couldn't leave Cho alone, not when she'd made such an effort to come and visit him.

"Harry, I'm sorry," said Ron, standing up as Harry snatched up his cereal bowl in disgust and practically threw it into the sink.

"Forget it," said Harry, not wanting to look at Ron just then. Ron said nothing, but put his own bowl in

the sink and left the kitchen, looking very embarrassed.

Harry felt more wretched than ever. He missed Ginny; he still wasn't sure how to deal with Cho.

She'd certainly been sympathetic to him yesterday; they'd gone out to dinner together and he'd made a big show about how much Ginny had meant to him. Except that it wasn't entirely a big show. Ginny DID mean a lot to him. But didn't Cho? Hadn't he always wanted to make things work with her?

Harry ran a hand through his hair as he dumped the rest of his orange juice down the drain. He had never been so confused in his life. Was it even possible that he could care about two girls at the same time?

Ginny doesn't want me, Harry thought. She told me as much. Cho does-she's been throwing herself at me since she got here. What's your bloody problem? You're wasting time moping over a girl who doesn't want you when Cho, beautiful, sexy Cho, is practically ready to attack you on the spot?

Harry turned back to Cho.

"I guess we'll have to make other plans for tomorrow night," he said.

"Are you sure?" she asked, looking up at him with her big brown eyes.

"Positive," said Harry.

"Okay," said Cho, standing up, looking pleased. She crossed to him and hugged him, and Harry hugged her back. She smelled good. Like lilies. Not as appealing as gardenias, but nice.

She pulled back just a little. "I missed you, Harry," she said, smiling, her voice low and seductive. Harry felt the familiar stirring in his jeans, and suddenly she leaned in and kissed him, very slowly. Tingles went up and down his spine when he felt her tongue.

They kissed for several more seconds, Harry enjoying it, liking the way her hair felt in his hands. Her soft red hair.

Black hair! a voice in his head shouted.

Harry broke off suddenly.

"Harry?" Cho asked. "What's wrong?"

"Sorry," said Harry, backing away. "I just...uh...you know, it's a bit...a bit soon...maybe..."

"Oh!" said Cho, looking upset. "You're right! I'm so sorry!"

"No," said Harry quickly. "It's okay. But...can we just, uh, just hang out? You know, like we've been doing?"

Cho gave him a look that told him very plainly that she was disappointed, but she nodded. "Of course."

"Great," said Harry, feeling relieved and not quite knowing why. He'd liked kissing her. What was the problem?

"I have a great idea," she said suddenly. "Why don't I cook you dinner tomorrow night?"

"Okay," said Harry. "Uh, I didn't know...can you cook?"

Cho laughed. "Of course! I learned from my mum and dad," she said brightly. "Do you like Asian food?"

"Sure," said Harry, although he really hadn't had any Asian food.

"Excellent," she said. "I'll cook a real, traditional Chinese/Korean feast, okay?"

"Sounds fantastic," said Harry, smiling and thinking of Ginny's marvelous cooking.

## ***Chapter Fifteen: Realization***

The following morning Cho and Harry went into Muggle London and Harry found himself being lead into a very exotic Asian market. Cho chatted on excitedly, explaining the many strange and unique spices and foods she was buying. Some of them looked a bit dubious to Harry, such as the dried tuna flakes Cho was planning on making soup-what she called "miso"-with. She loaded up on seafood, as well-something Harry had never particularly liked too much.

"Just give it a whirl," she said airily, putting a bag of chopped up squid in her shopping basket. "I'm telling you, it's delicious."

Harry only nodded and tried not to look too disgusted when she considered buying some jellyfish. She decided against it though ("That's probably a bit TOO exotic for you."). And eating squid isn't, thought Harry sarcastically, as he loaded a pile of something called kim chee into his own basket. If Ginny were cooking him a meal, she'd make his favorite stuff- shepherd's pie, roast chicken, potatoes...

Stop thinking about Ginny! he thought angrily. Cho flashed him a beautiful smile and for a moment, Harry did not think about Ginny.

They left the market with their purchases and returned to Harry's flat off Diagon Alley. Cho told him she'd need plenty of time to start on dinner and that he should "go do something with himself" while she busied herself in the kitchen. Harry agreed and went up to his bedroom, locking the door behind him. He suddenly felt overwhelmed by the desire to be alone.

He sat down at his desk, thinking that perhaps now would be a good time to finally tackle all the work he'd left piling up. But then his eyes fell on the photograph of himself and Ginny. He picked it up and traced his finger along her red hair.

In four hours the World Cup would commence. Harry wished he could watch it on television, but there were no televisions in the wizarding world. He smiled at the photograph, and felt the ache return to his chest. He could only hope that Ginny flew well; even if Britain didn't win, he hoped she flew well. She deserved to be on the national team. She was the best player he'd ever seen. Maybe if she flew well, she'd finally be happy, finally lose that sad look in her eyes.

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"Bon appetit," said Cho, in a delighted sort of voice. Harry smiled at her, a bit stiffly, and sat down, his eyes roaming the very crowded dining table. There were all sorts of strange dishes. The Asian starch of choice was quite clearly rice, which Harry liked well enough, except that the rice seemed to be mixed up with all sorts of different kinds of seafood and vegetables. There were dumplings as well, and all sorts of sauces. It didn't look half as bad as he thought it might.

"Dig in," said Cho, clearly very pleased with herself. Harry smiled at her enthusiasm and dished himself up some of the food. He took some of the rice, a bit of a noodle dish, and a few of the dumplings, then spooned himself a few of the sauces. One was some sort of mustard and the other was a kind of slightly grainy, green mashed sort of paste.

Harry smiled again at Cho, who had begun to eat her food, except that she wasn't using a knife and a fork; she used two long sticks and took dainty, graceful bites.

"What are those?" Harry asked, fascinated and a little impressed that she was able to eat like that without dropping food all over the place.

"Chopsticks, silly," said Cho. "Want to try a pair?"

"No thanks," said Harry. "I'll end up wearing more food than eating it."

Cho laughed, very raucously. Harry didn't think the joke was all that funny, but he smiled all the same. He took a tentative bite of the rice dish. It was pretty good, actually. A bit salty, perhaps, but the seafood hadn't been overcooked and the vegetables were relatively crisp. Encouraged, he took another bite, and decided that he liked this Asian stuff. He picked up one of the dumplings. Feeling inspired, he dipped it into the mustard and then spread a healthy smear of the green paste over it and popped it into his mouth.

"Oh, no, Harry, don't do that!" Cho cried.

Harry immediately saw why. The sauces were beyond spicy-it was like eating fire. He began to cough and sputter and his eyes began to stream, his forehead to sweat, and his nose to run.

"Oh, dear," said Cho, standing up and fetching some tissues.

"What-" Harry choked, taking a sip of water, then downing his whole glass in one. His mouth was on fire. He was sure his tongue had shriveled up completely. "What WAS that?"

"Wasabi and hot mustard," said Cho sympathetically. "I'm sorry, I should have told you."

"It's okay," Harry croaked, standing up and filling his water glass again from the tap and downing that as well. "I think I'll stick with the rice stuff."

Unconsciously Harry looked at his watch. Five o'clock. The match was starting in two hours, and his mind wandered to Ginny. What had she done today to prepare? Had she rested, or perhaps she got up early this morning and had another practice session? Harry suspected the latter, even if the team itself hadn't done so. Ginny was tenacious about flying; she wouldn't want to sit around all day doing nothing. She'd want to be up there, flying one last time before the match.

"Harry, you okay?" Cho asked. Harry looked at her and sat down quickly.

"Fine," said Harry.

"The match starts in a few hours," said Cho, picking at her food. "I wish we could have gone."

"Me, too," said Harry sadly.

"I wanted to bring my broom but my stupid boss told me I had to travel like a Muggle," said Cho. "So my broom's back in Cairo. Or else I would have said we could go to that park, just down the road, and have a fly."

"Yeah," said Harry, taking a mouthful of rice.

"You still have your old Firebolt?" Cho asked.

"Yup," said Harry. "Haven't flown in ages, though. First year Auror training is pretty much both feet on the ground."

"Do you ever regret, you know, not pursuing Quidditch professionally?"

"Sometimes," said Harry. "But I like doing Auror stuff, too. I mean, especially because of my parents, Sirius, you know. I feel like...I'm giving back somehow."

"Me, too," said Cho. "I mean, with being a Curse Breaker. I thought about Quidditch as a career myself, you know. But, I dunno, I thought I'd rather do something worthwhile with myself."

"Quidditch is worthwhile," said Harry, feeling suddenly defensive.

"For entertainment, sure," said Cho, sipping her wine.

Harry said nothing but looked down at his food, feeling his appetite disappear. He was annoyed. Why



was Cho disparaging Quidditch as a career? Lots of worthy wizards and witches played the game. It was bloody hard work, the pay wasn't great, and just because it wasn't saving the world, well, it was doing some level of good, bringing wizarding communities together from around the world and creating some level of harmony. Providing a welcome focus away from the daily drudgeries of life.

"Of course," Cho went on, dabbing her lips daintily with her napkin, "I do have to give a little credit to the Weasley girl. I mean, professional Quidditch is still a big boys' club. It's about time a woman made some inroads there. And I've been reading about her, too. I had no idea she could pull off a Wronski Feint. Still, I wonder how her family reacted to her being a Quidditch player. Probably the same way they reacted to those twins opening up a joke shop. I mean, yeah, the joke shop makes all sorts of money, but look at Bill Weasley, and Charlie, and Percy. Hell, look at Ron. He's an Auror, too-I have to admit I never thought that would happen. He never struck me as the sort who got really good marks. Then again, I suppose hooking up with Hermione Granger had its benefits."

Harry stared at her as she continued to chatter. Did she even realize she was insulting his best friends?

"How is Hermione, by the way?" Cho asked, smiling sweetly at Harry. "What does she do at the Ministry?"

"She's an Unspeakable," said Harry, "so I don't really know what she does."

"Oh," said Cho, not sounding remotely impressed. "I guess that's worthwhile. I mean, nobody knows, do they, so who's to say? I dunno. Unspeakable-that always struck me as the sort of title the Ministry throws out there to make the job sound more dangerous and worthwhile than it really is, you know?"

"My parents were Unspeakables," said Harry sharply.

"Oh," said Cho, having the grace to look embarrassed. "Right. Sorry. Well, I suppose...they must have done all sorts of scary undercover work, then." She flushed bright red.

"Anyway," she said lightly, forcing a laugh, "I hope Britain wins the match. Not for that Weasley girl's sake, mind, not after the way she-"

"Her name," said Harry furiously, standing up, "is Virginia Weasley."

Cho swallowed. "Sorry," she said again, but she didn't sound sorry at all. If anything she sounded affronted. "But I thought after what happened between you two yesterday...well, I AM on your side, Harry. I mean, she broke your heart. What a heartless bitch!"

"Don't you call her that!" Harry snapped. "What happened yesterday was not her fault, it was mine, okay? And...and Quidditch is a damn fine career for any witch or wizard to choose."

"I never said it wasn't!" Cho retorted hotly, standing up herself.

"Yeah, you did," Harry shot back. "Before you went on to call my best mate stupid and make it sound like his relationship with my other best mate was some sort of business arrangement. For your information those two love each other and respect each other and I wish to hell I had even a tenth of the relationship they had. Not that you would understand anything about love!"

"Oh, like you're an expert!" Cho snapped. "I'm not the one who got dumped yesterday, remember? You have a history of that, don't you, Harry? Getting dumped by redheads?"

"Oh, very funny," said Harry, stung. "I seem to recall you dumping me more than once! You dumped me because...because I was inexperienced, for god's sake! What kind of person does that?"

"Oh, please," said Cho, rolling her eyes. "Look at you, Mr. High and Mighty Morality. The day after your little girlfriend dumps you you're sticking your tongue in my mouth! Don't talk to me about love and all that rot, Harry! You're no better than anyone else. No, you're worse, because you're a hypocrite

and a coward!"

"What are you talking about?" Harry demanded.

"I came to see you because I thought we had a chance," Cho said furiously. "But now I see I was way off base. Fine. I can live with that. But for you to stand there and lecture ME and tell me I don't know from love is a crock of shit! If you love that Weasley girl so much what the hell are you doing here with me, then?"

"I-I told you!" Harry protested, suddenly feeling very defensive. "I didn't want to-"

"-leave me alone?" Cho interrupted. "Bullshit! You thought maybe you'd cry on my shoulder and I'd take you to bed or something, didn't you?"

"Well, I don't know WHERE I got that impression!" Harry bellowed. "That you might want to try and get me into bed. You've been throwing yourself at me for a week! Pardon me for being a bloke and noticing!"

"Yeah, well, I wanted you, okay?" said Cho furiously. "Pardon me for going after what I want! At least I don't sit on my hands like SOME people! At least I make choices instead of waffling and whining and acting like some stupid, wishy-washy git!"

"What are you saying?" Harry demanded.

"I'm saying make a decision!" Cho snapped. "I came to see you because I wanted you, because I like you. I was under the clearly mistaken impression that you liked me."

"I do-" said Harry, suddenly feeling a bit weak from their argument.

"No, you don't," said Cho, her voice softer now, a bit sad, as the whole tenor of their conversation changed. "You like me well enough and you might be attracted to me but I can see it in your eyes, Harry. You're trying to convince yourself of things, some of which are there and some of which aren't."

Harry stared at her, totally thrown off and uncertain about what to say.

"Harry," said Cho. "I'm sorry for what I said about your friends. I mean it. But I'm not sorry for going after you, for pursuing you. Okay, sometimes I'm selfish, I admit. But if there's one thing I learned after Cedric died, it's that I'm not going to be afraid of life. I'm not going to be afraid to take chances. Maybe that makes me a bit heartless sometimes, but in fifty years when I look back on my life I'll be able to say I lived it."

"I don't understand," said Harry, even though part of him did.

"I'm standing here," said Cho, "and I want you. If you don't want me, I can live with that. I can go back to Egypt and accept it, because I gave you and me a chance. But there's another girl playing Quidditch in an hour who's mad about you and wants you even more. Are you going to stand here in this kitchen and do nothing?"

Harry blinked. "How...how do you know...you can't know that Ginny..."

"Harry," said Cho, shaking her head. "Haven't you seen how she looks at you? The way you look at her? You sit here and accuse me of not knowing what love is like and you don't even recognize when you're in love yourself."

Harry swallowed hard. Cho looked very sad just then, and he felt wretched. Once again they had descended into another horrible brawl, only this time it was worse, because however angry he might be at Cho for her mean comments about his friends, he knew she had a point. He had been a coward.

And he loved Ginny.

"I'm sorry, Cho," he said, meaning it. "I'm sorry about you and me...about everything." She nodded, tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, too," she said. "I didn't mean what I said about your friends. I've always been a bit jealous of them, you know. The way they were able to get close to you when I wasn't."

"Yeah," said Harry awkwardly. He didn't know what else to say. He was sad that things were through with him and Cho, but also very relieved.

"Harry," said Cho. "What the hell are you doing standing there? Didn't I just scream at you to get going? You're going to miss that bloody match!"

"Oh, shit!" said Harry, checking his watch. "Right. But, uh, my ticket-I don't have it!"

"So sneak in!" said Cho, rolling her eyes.

"What about dinner-"

"I'll clean up, just go!"

"But what about-"

"Harry, GET GOING!"

"Right," he said, feeling a huge weight lifting from his chest, feeling a thrill of anticipation. He was going to that bloody Quidditch match and he was going to find Ginny and swear up and down that he loved her, no matter what. "My wand," he said, grabbing it from the side table in the kitchen. "I need my Firebolt!"

"You don't have time to fly there!" said Cho. "The match is in Scotland! You'll have to Apparate there!"

"Right," he said. "But...oh, shit. I've never Apparated that far!"

"Well, no time like the present, is there?" said Cho.

"God," Harry said. "Okay, uh, I just need a jacket." He ran to the hall closet and yanked out his black leather coat. "Uh, right. So, I guess I'll just go."

"Bye, Harry," said Cho, smiling at him, her eyes sad.

Harry lifted his wand, but then his eyes met Cho's and he crossed the room and hugged her tightly.

"Thanks," he whispered into her hair. He stepped back. Her eyes were full of tears again, but she was smiling at him.

"So," said Harry. "Listen. If I splinch myself, call St. Mungo's, okay?"

She laughed and nodded. He closed his eyes, waved his wand, and heard a loud CRACK!

## ***Chapter Sixteen: The World Cup Final***

CRACK!

Harry opened his eyes, which he'd squeezed shut. He shoved his wand in the back of his jeans and immediately began to grope at himself, hoping he hadn't left any part of him behind in London. He gave a huge sigh of relief to see that all his limbs were intact; his eyes were in place. His hands wandered to his crotch...

"Thank god," he said out loud.

He was standing just outside a huge stadium. Other wizards and witches around him were Apparating with loud pops and crowds were filing slowly into the stands. Harry's eyes scanned the crowd desperately-if he could find Ron or the other Weasleys he wouldn't have to worry about sneaking in.

"Come on, come on," he muttered, looking for a sign of red hair. Then he sighed out loud with relief. Ron was a hundred feet ahead of him, and Harry was thrilled beyond words at that moment that his best mate was so tall, red-haired and easy to spot.

"Ron!" Harry yelled. "RON!!!"

Ron turned, his eyes scanning the crowd, as Harry jogged toward him, weaving in and out of clusters of people.

"Harry?"

"Ron!" Harry panted, catching up.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to watch the match," said Harry. "What's it look like I'm doing here?"

"I thought you were with Cho," said Ron, his eyes narrowing.

"Dammit, Ron, I'm in love with your sister and Cho went home and I really hope you have my ticket because I came here to watch Ginny fly!"

Ron stared at Harry for a moment, and then comprehension crossed his face, and he grinned.

"Right, then," said Ron, reaching into the pocket of his own jeans and producing a crumpled World Cup ticket.

"Thanks," said Harry, taking the ticket and resisting the urge to hug Ron right there.

"I told you Cho was all wrong for you," Ron said as they started toward the stands.

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"Hi, Harry!" Hermione threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. "You made it! What happened to Cho?"

"I'll tell you later," said Harry under his breath. "Or better yet let Ron explain."

She nodded and took her seat next to Ron.

"Harry, how are you, mate?" Fred and George Weasley both clapped him heartily on the back; they were wearing black leather pants and had on elegant silk shirts.

"Nice clothes," said Harry. "Are you going to a Quidditch match or a rock concert?"

"Somebody has to hold up the family name when it comes to fashion," said George loftily, flopping

into his seat. "Bill's turned out to be such a disappointment."

"Bugger off, Fred," said Bill, laughing and shaking Harry's hand.

"I'm George, you long-haired git," said George.

"Hey, Harry," said Charlie, patting Harry on the back. "Glad you made it."

"Me, too," said Harry.

"Hi, Harry," said Percy, leaning on his cane and shaking Harry's hand. "Lovely evening for a Quidditch match, isn't it?"

"Oh, Harry!" Mrs. Weasley crushed him in a hug. "I'm so happy to see you here!"

"Hullo, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, shaking Harry's hand when Mrs. Weasley had let go of him.

"Hi," said Harry. "Wow, you must be really proud of Ginny."

Mrs. Weasley burst into tears. "It's wonderful!" she bawled.

Fred and George rolled their eyes.

"Get a grip, Mum," said Fred, leading her to her seat and winking at Harry.

"My little girl," said Mr. Weasley, his own eyes misting over. "Who would have thought? My little girl's a champion Quidditch player!" He took his seat next to Mrs. Weasley and the two of them held hands and read over the program.

"I can't believe it," said Ron, as Harry sat down next to him. "My sister. My kid sister. Playing Quidditch in the World Cup."

"Don't tell me you're going to start crying, too," said Harry.

"He might," said George.

"I'm getting a little weepy myself," said Fred.

"Now, now, Fred," said George. "Save the waterworks for-AH!"

George pointed up at the banners rounding the stadium. Fred gave a hoot.

"There it is!" said George, clasping a hand to his chest dramatically as he gazed upon a large advertisement for the joke shop. "Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, the Number One Joke Shop in all Britain! Oh, it brings a tear to the very eye!"

"Today the U.K., tomorrow, the world!" Fred rhapsodized.

"Nice ad," said Harry, grinning.

"These two haven't shut up about that bloody ad since they told us three weeks ago," said Bill.

"It's almost as bad as when I yammered on and on about cauldron thickness, isn't it?" mused Percy.

"Worse," said Charlie.

"Shut up," said the twins.

"Will you lot be QUIET!" Mrs. Weasley hissed. "The match is about to start!"

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"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the final match of the four hundred twenty-sixth Quidditch World Cup!"

"Blimey, is that Ludo Bagman commentating?" Fred asked, peering through a very fancy pair of Omnioculars.

"Do you know that git STILL hasn't paid us back the money he owes?" George said indignantly.

"Hush!" Mr. Weasley hissed. The huge banner showing Fred and George's ad wiped itself clean and became a scoreboard that read ENGLAND: ZERO, SCOTLAND: ZERO.

"And now I must ask for silence, please, ladies and gentlemen," said Bagman, "as we welcome the Scottish Team Mascots!"

In the next instant about a hundred assorted performers—all of the men, all wearing kilts and sashes in various tartans—appeared on the pitch. There were about twenty bagpipers; still others were banging on various drums. Then there were about fifty sword dancers, doing a rather wild sort of jig, swinging gold swords that flashed against the bright setting sun. Next came a procession of men carrying a St. Andrew's flag, followed by still more who were wearing a huge costume that, Harry thought, must be the Loch Ness Monster.

"I wonder if those blokes are wearing kilts in the traditional fashion?" Mrs. Weasley mused.

"What's the traditional fashion?" Ron asked, peering through his Omnioculars as one of the sword dancers lit the blade of his sword on fire and began to twirl it wildly like a baton.

"No knickers underneath," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Ew!" said Ron, Fred and George at once.

The show ended, however, with none of the Scotsmen displaying anything other than very good dancing and very fine bagpipe playing.

"And now, the English National Team Mascots!"

A parade of men dressed as Buckingham Palace Guards came onto the pitch, carrying a huge Union Jack. Behind them was a kind of marching band, made up of various brass horns and drums, playing "God Save the Queen." Behind them were female acrobats wearing rather skimpy versions of the traditional "Beefeater" costumes. Harry, Ron, and the rest of the Weasley men sat up straighter and gazed happily down at the very nimble young women, who were in the midst of performing all sorts of rather flexible and dangerous acrobatics.

"Close your mouth, Ron," said Hermione, rolling her eyes.

Behind them came a huge float and, Harry saw (when he tore his eyes away from the acrobats), a witch wearing an elaborate beaded gown with a sash and a massive jeweled crown on her head. She had a sceptre in her hand and was waving beatifically at the crowd. She looked rather like the real Queen, right down to the several fat Corgi dogs circling and barking frantically at her feet.

"They really went all out, didn't they?" said Mrs. Weasley appreciatively.

"Can't blame them," said Fred. "England hasn't made it to the finals in ages."

"And now, please welcome the Scottish National Team: MacLaren, MacGregor, MacDonald, McGrady, MacMillan, Wallace and Boyd!"

"Lot of Macs on that team," Ron said dryly.

"MacMillan-Ernie MacMillan?" Harry asked.

"Nah," said Fred. "Ernie's older brother, Angus." The Scottish team was dressed in sky blue and white and their cloaks bore the St. Andrew's flag on the back. Cheers went up in the stands and the bagpipers

played a quick tune.

"And now," Bagman shouted, "please greet the English National Team: St. James, Stimson, Radcliffe, Lynton, Clyde, Bodwell aaaaand Weasley!"

Harry leapt to his feet, along with Hermione and the Weasleys, and hooted and cheered as Ginny appeared in the air. England was wearing navy blue robes with red trim; the back of their cloaks were imprinted with the Union Jack. Harry looked at Ginny through his swallowed. Ginny looked incredibly small and vulnerable compared to the other players, all of whom were men. Her hair was pulled in a tight plait and she looked nervous, but determined.

"Virginia Weasley joins England tonight, filling in for Chaser Philip Ashford, who has fallen ill," Bagman boomed. "Now let's say hello to our referee, all the way from Cairo, Egypt, the chair of the International Association of Quidditch, Hassan Mostafa!"

Harry recognized Mostafa at once; a dark-skinned, smooth-pated man with a thick black mustache. He wore silver robes and carried a broomstick in one hand and a box under his other arm. He swung himself over his broom, hovered for a moment, then kicked open the box and released the Quaffle, two Bludgers, and the tiny Golden Snitch.

"And they're off!" Bagman screeched. "It's...MacMillan, MacLaren, MacDonald- ooooh, MacDonald takes a Bludger to the shoulder. And it's...Weasley, Lynton, back to Weasley. Look at that girl fly! Nice Bludger dodge. Weasley passes to Lynton, who passes to Bodwell who passes back to Weasley-OUCH! Bodwell takes a Bludger to the chin-he looks all right though. Weasley dives, then it's-oops, bad luck there, Weasley-MacLaren has the Quaffle, passes to MacDonald, who passes to MacMillan and...ANOTHER Bludger...and, it's Weasley in possession again. She's putting on speed-whoa, NICE dodge there-beautiful Sloth Grip Roll-she's heading for goal, passes to Lynton, to Bodwell, to Weasley and-she SCORES! Ten points to England!"

"Yeah!" Harry yelled, not even bothering to sit down anymore, his head moving in every direction as he tried to follow Ginny's movements through his Omnioculars. Her face was screwed up in concentration but she allowed herself half a second to relish her score, then got right back into it.

The match got faster, and as in the last World Cup Harry had been to, Bagman had been reduced almost entirely to simply calling out the names of the Chasers as they passed the Quaffle back and forth. The match also got rougher. Harry felt a rush of fear for Ginny-the Scottish Chasers were now brutally crashing into the English Chasers, trying to knock them from their brooms. Ginny had only avoided being hit so far thanks to her tremendous speed and skill with her flying. But one good hit by a Scottish Chaser-all of whom had to outweigh her by a good hundred pounds-and she would go flying off her broom.

"Oh, dear!" Mrs. Weasley screamed, gripping Mr. Weasley's arm, as Ginny shot upward and narrowly missed colliding with a Scottish Chaser who'd barreled toward her. She was in possession of the Quaffle again, hurtling toward the goal, dodging another Bludger, jerking out of the way of yet another Scottish Chaser.

"Come on, Ginny," Harry muttered, clenching his fists tightly, praying she wouldn't get hurt. He peered through the Omnioculars again; after fifteen minutes of play Ginny's face was covered in sweat and her jaw was set. She dropped just as another Bludger zoomed past, nearly crashing into her head, and then shot upward, avoiding another Scottish Chaser; she passed to Lynton, who zoomed around the back of one of Scotland's goal posts. The Scottish Keeper moved slightly to his left; Lynton hurled the Quaffle at Ginny, and she threw it through the far right hoop with all her strength.

"Another goal for Weasley!" Bagman hollered.

"All right, Ginny!" Harry and Ron yelled. But in the next instant a gasp went up in the crowd as MacDonald plowed right into Ginny. Harry felt his heart leap into his throat as Ginny-hit from behind-went flying off her broom.

"GINNY!" Harry, Hermione and the Weasleys screamed as one.

Harry yanked his wand out of his pocket to stop her fall, but in the next instant he saw that he didn't need to. Somehow, she had managed to hold onto her broom with one hand. She caught herself; the crowd gasped as she dangled, sixty feet in the air, clinging to her broom with one hand.

"TIME OUT!" Mostafa screamed, blowing his whistle. "FOUL!"

"It's a foul to Scotland!" Bagman bellowed, as Ginny reached up with her other hand and gripped her broom. Lynton and Bodwell zoomed to Ginny's side; Bodwell grabbed Ginny round the waist as Lynton gripped the handle of her broom, and together they hoisted her back on. A cheer of relief went up in the stands.

Harry watched through his Omnioculars, his heart pounding, his hands trembling. Ginny's two teammates seemed to be asking her if she was okay; she nodded and grinned at them and wiped her sweaty brow, but she was white-faced and looked genuinely shaken.

"She's okay!" Charlie yelled, watching her through his own Omnioculars.

"Dear god," Mrs. Weasley whimpered. "I don't know if I can take much more of this! Those horrible men, they're...they're trying to hurt my baby!"

"Easy, Mum," said Charlie, putting a hand on her arm. "Ginny's tougher than she looks. And anyway, she's a girl playing a man's sport-she's got to take her lumps, just like everyone else."

Harry glanced at Charlie, who winked at him. Harry nodded but said nothing; he didn't the idea of Ginny "taking lumps." Part of him couldn't help but feel protective, even though he knew Ginny would be furious if she knew; she had always hated being small, had always hated the idea that boys were stronger and faster at many physical things; so she had pushed herself hard at Quidditch and became a better player than most anyone, male or female. She was a true equal on a broom.

Except that now she wasn't. She was the only girl-and a small one at that- facing an enemy team made up of huge, Crabbe and Goyle-like men who clearly didn't feel any sort of chivalry toward their female opponent. If anything, they seemed even more determined to go after Ginny, as if to prove she couldn't take what they dished out.

Harry didn't have time to reflect on these thoughts, though, for the match had started again. The Scottish players resumed their brutal play, but England responded in kind; Harry was wildly impressed with the two English Beaters, Clyde and St. James. At least they were playing defense for the Chasers.

England scored four more goals-two of them by Ginny. The score was sixty to zero. Scotland got even nastier. The three Chasers closed ranks and tightened formations, making it nearly impossible for the English Chasers to snatch the Quaffle away. Ginny was making several daring attempts to zoom in and through the Scottish formations, which made Harry's stomach clench in fear every time-but she was so small and nimble on her broom that she always managed to get away before any of them could smash into her. The problem was that she couldn't get anywhere near the Quaffle.

"MacMillan to MacDonald, back to MacMillan, heading for goal, and...he SCORES! Ten to Scotland."

English Keeper Stimson pounded the air with his fist in frustration. Harry glanced around for the Seekers; Radcliffe was circling the pitch; Boyd circled in the opposite direction. Neither of them seemed to be able to find the Snitch.



Harry, however, spotted it almost at once, and wished he were out there playing, wished he was going after the Snitch and ending the match once and for all so that the three huge Scottish Chasers couldn't make any more attempts to unseat Ginny and sent her tumbling.

"It's over there, you stupid git," Harry muttered. "Turn to your left. Your LEFT."

As if hearing Harry's words, Radcliffe snapped his head to the left and his eyes fell on the tiny Snitch. He whirled around and sped after it.

"Radcliffe's making a move; Boyd's following," Bagman screamed. "What's this...Weasley has the Quaffle-how did she break the Scottish formation!?"

Harry's eyes shot back to the Chasers; the three Scotsmen looked furious and pelted after Ginny as one as she raced away from them toward the Scottish goal hoops.

She was fast, but the Chasers were gaining. Harry sucked in his breath. Suddenly the three Chasers broke formation-MacDonald stayed on Ginny's tail but the other two flew off in opposite directions at breakneck speed.

"Oh, no," Harry whispered, as MacMillan and MacLaren each circled round and zoomed toward Ginny, flanking her.

"They're going to smash into her!" Hermione screamed. Ginny whipped her head to both sides and saw MacMillan and then MacLaren racing toward her. MacDonald, meanwhile, had closed the distance and was reaching out, trying to get a hold of Ginny's broom. The English Chasers swerved toward Ginny but then Lynton took a Bludger to the gut and nearly fell off his own broom.

Several things then happened all at once. Ginny put on one last burst of speed, shot upward, and hurled the Quaffle away, where it was caught by Bodwell. MacMillan, MacLaren and MacDonald-all of them shocked that their quarry had gotten away-were going too fast to stop; MacLaren managed just barely to jerk his broom away but MacMillan and MacDonald collided, hard, sending their brooms spinning; MacDonald held on but MacMillan slipped back and nearly fell, catching himself only at the last second. Bodwell swerved around just behind the Scottish keeper Wallace, swerved back around to the right and swatted Wallace's broom with the end of his own, then swung the Quaffle hard through the center goal hoop. Radcliffe, meanwhile, went into a dive, which Boyd copied. Radcliffe added speed and reached out, the Snitch just inches away from his fingers.

"Come on, COME ON!" Ron and Harry yelled. Hermione was gripping Ron's arm tightly; Mrs. Weasley gripped her husband's; both were silent and white faced. The other Weasleys were stock-still.

Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Ginny catch the Quaffle and fly low, out of the way of the Scottish Chasers, who were still recovering from their collision and-in MacLaren's case-near miss.

Radcliffe dove even faster, then pulled up just in time and zoomed after the Snitch, only a few feet above the ground now. Boyd wasn't so lucky; he waited a split second longer, then pulled up, but the end of his broom handle caught the dirt, and Boyd went flying over his broom, hitting the ground and skidding to a halt.

Radcliffe leaned forward a little further, his fingers touched the Snitch...

WHAM! A Bludger caught Radcliffe hard in the side of his face. A scream went up from the crowd, but Radcliffe leaned forward and by some miracle, his fingers closed around the Snitch. Clutching the Snitch in his hand, Radcliffe looked up, a huge ugly bruise forming on his face; his jaw looked broken. His eyes rolled up into the back of his head, his broom slowed, and he rolled right off, landing on the ground a few feet below. Mostafa blew his whistle.

A roar went up from the crowd as Bagman screamed "IT'S OVER! RADCLIFFE CAUGHT THE

SNITCH! MEDICAL UNITS ARE RACING ONTO THE PITCH-

Ginny circled round and flew low toward Radcliffe, still clutching the Quaffle under her arm, screaming with delight even as her eyes fixed on the unconscious form of her teammate, when MacLaren pounded into her.

"FOUL!" Mostafa screamed.

"GINNY!" Harry croaked.

Ginny was only seven feet above the ground, at most, but Harry felt his heart leap into his throat again when she grunted, dropped the Quaffle, and fell from her broom. She landed hard, on her side, and lay still.

"Oh my god!" Mrs. Weasley screamed. As one, the Weasleys, Harry and Hermione leapt from their seats.

## ***Chapter Seventeen: Harry's Girl***

The Weasleys started out of their seats and out of the stands, Harry right behind them, his eyes on Ginny.

Please let her be okay, he thought, but she wasn't moving. Harry felt his stomach plummet.

English fans were pushing and shoving to get out onto the pitch; brawls were starting in the stands among English and Scottish fans. Several loud, grunting roars announced the presence of armed security trolls and wizards. Harry gulped as the pandemonium increased. He couldn't see the pitch now, from where he stood; the Weasleys and Hermione were clumped together, trying to move even as floods of people left the stands.

"Bloody hell!" Mr. Weasley shouted. "Slow down, would you?!"

Stick together, Harry thought, stay with the Weasleys. He grabbed a Weasley's shoulder-Charlie's, and followed the lot of them down the steps, their footsteps banging against the wooden stands so hard that the whole structure was shaking.

At last, after what seemed like an eternity, Harry's feet hit solid ground. The sun had disappeared and a weak moon was up; candles and torches lit the field now. He couldn't see Ginny anywhere-there were hundreds of spectators crowding the field. Harry saw two medics carrying Radcliffe out on a stretcher; Radcliffe was awake now but he was moaning and babbling nonsensically. Where was Ginny?

"There she is!" Hermione squeaked, pointing across the pitch.

Harry's head swung round and found her, and he felt the knot in his stomach relax. She was sitting up, talking to a medic, who was handing her some kind of potion. She drank it down in one, nodded, and allowed the medic to help her up.

The Weasleys rushed over to her, Ron gripping Hermione's hand tightly, Harry at their heels, when he slowed. Hermione hung back and joined him, to let the Weasleys alone for a moment.

"Hermione, get over here!" Ron bellowed happily, beckoning to her. He stepped back from Ginny, who was pale and looked exhausted, her hair a mess. Her eyes fell on Harry, and she bit her lip. Harry took a step, and stopped. He wasn't sure how to react now. He started over to her slowly, his eyes never leaving her face.

Hermione hurried over and hugged Ginny.

"Congratulations, Ginny!" she screamed, even as Ginny gave a loud groan.

"Hermione, ease up," Ron said, "she's bruised her ribs."

"Sorry!" said Hermione, quickly letting go of Ginny.

Ginny's brothers all hugged her in turn-delicately-followed by her parents. Mrs. Weasley was sobbing and fussing over her daughter, insisting that she ought to go to St. Mungo's; Ginny shook her head, insisted she was fine, just a bit sore; then Ginny looked back at Harry.

Harry was about eight feet from where Ginny stood when he stopped. He didn't quite know what to do. He felt himself go red in the face.

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat loudly. "Why don't we, uh, just...go get the car?" His eyes swept the group knowingly, and he started away from the pitch.

"Arthur, wait!" said Mrs. Weasley. "Where are you-"

"Come along, Molly," said Mr. Weasley, who turned back to Harry and gave him a wink. Harry blushed even redder.

"Let's go," said Bill firmly, eyeing Fred and George—who were sniggering behind their hands—and Ron, who was looking from Ginny to Harry and back again.

"Come ON, Ron," said Hermione, through gritted teeth. Ron blinked.

"Oh, right," he said, "yeah." The Weasley men and Hermione all started off, following Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Harry watched them go for a moment, then turned back to Ginny, who was standing quite still, her arms around her middle, as if hugging herself.

He took two more steps toward her. "Hi," he said in a strangled voice.

"Hi," she said.

"You okay?" he asked. "You...you gave me a scare back there."

"I'm fine," she said, a bit stiffly. "Just a little bruised up. What are you doing here?" she added. "I thought...I thought you were with Cho."

"I was," Harry admitted, taking another step toward her. "But...uh...she went home. And I couldn't miss seeing you play. You were brilliant."

"Thanks," said Ginny. "But...wait...Cho went home?"

"Yeah."

"I thought," said Ginny slowly, "I mean...you and she were...you know..."

"No," said Harry. "No. Cho and me...it just wasn't working."

"Oh," said Ginny uncertainly. "You didn't...she didn't...I mean, uh...did you..."

"No," said Harry, understanding what she meant and saving her the embarrassment of having to ask him directly if he'd gone to bed with Cho. "Not even close. I...couldn't."

"Oh," said Ginny again. He took one more step toward her; she seemed frozen to the spot. "Why...why couldn't you?"

"Because," said Harry, taking another step toward her. He was only a few feet away from her now. "I kept thinking about someone else. I kept wishing I was with someone else."

Ginny looked at Harry and started to shake her head. "Harry..."

"I love you," he blurted, taking two more steps and closing the distance between them, putting his hands on her shoulders. Her eyes went wide. Overhead the clouds gathered, darkening the world around them.

"Wh-what?"

"I love you," he repeated. She opened her mouth slightly, but said nothing; it was as if she'd been hit with a Silencing Charm. The silence stretched; Harry couldn't stand it.

"Aren't...aren't you going to say something?" he asked, his heart constricting in his chest.

Her eyes filled with tears. "You...you bloody bastard," she whispered, her face contorting with fury. She shook herself free of him and marched past him.

"What?" Harry cried, stung, and he started after her. "Ginny, wait! What the-"

"How dare you?" she cried, whirling on him. "You...you think you have the right to show up here

tonight after...after..."

"After what?" Harry cried, horrified that she'd reacted this way. "I told you I didn't sleep with Cho! I don't want Cho!"

"Dammit, Harry!" Ginny cried, tears rolling down her face. "You can't just come here and tell me you love me, okay?"

"Why the hell not?" Harry snapped. "It's true!"

"And how did you come to that conclusion?" Ginny retorted. "Because we slept together?"

"N-no!" Harry said. Ginny glared at him and put her hands on her hips.

"Well, all right, Ginny," Harry said angrily, "I'm not going to lie and say that wasn't a part of it, but...for god's sake. That's not all of it!"

"Then what is it?" Ginny asked, wiping her tears away angrily.

Harry looked at her-how could he possibly put into words all that he felt for her?

"I love you because you're you, okay?" he said. "You're smart and funny and the best Quidditch player in the world and my best friend. I love your temper and your freckles and your jokes and...and...the other night-"

Ginny stiffened and backed away. "So we're back to sex, then?" she said frostily.

"No!" said Harry desperately. "Oh, for god's sake, Ginny, I'm not going to lie and say I didn't have a really good time that night, okay? I loved it; I loved being with you and making love with you and yeah, I want to do that again! But it meant a lot more than just drowning my sorrows. It meant something-when you left that morning and...and I thought I'd never get to hold you like that again or touch you or kiss you...that I couldn't talk to you like we talked...it felt like some part of me was dying inside, okay?"

Harry swallowed; his throat hurt a bit as he fought to speak through the lump there; his heart was pounding and constricting in his chest.

Ginny shook her head and started off again, not really walking in any direction but pacing. Thunder rumbled overhead.

"Dammit," she said angrily. "I'm OVER you, Harry! I...I got over you in fourth year! I...I'm not that same stupid little girl who spilled food all over herself every time I was in the same room with you. I'm OVER you!"

"You said nobody ever gets over a first love," Harry retorted, moving in front of her again. "Or was that just bullshit?"

She stopped and stared up at him, her eyes stricken. "It...it was a stupid schoolgirl crush..."

"What is it now, then?" Harry demanded, stepping in front of her again. "Are you going to tell me you haven't felt ANYTHING between us this past month? Can you look me in the face and tell me you felt nothing the other night? That it meant nothing to you?"

Ginny's eyes filled with tears again. Overhead, the clouds broke, and rain began to fall.

"Look me in the face and tell me you don't love me, that the night we spent together didn't mean anything, and...and I'll go," Harry said, feeling his stomach clench as he spoke. "I'll leave you alone forever and never bother you again."

"Dammit, Harry, you don't GET it!" she stormed. "How many years I...I wished you'd just LOOK at me

for five seconds. You have no idea how thrilled I was when you finally started talking to me, like a person, like a friend. At last, I thought, he finally sees me. But you didn't! Not really. I was always Ron's little sister, wasn't I? You confided in me about all your girl problems, didn't you? And sure, we wrote letters back and forth last year but so what? I was always Ron's sister to you! And then, when I see you last month what's the first thing that happens? You're crying on my shoulder about another girl!"

"You OFFERED to help me, remember?" Harry protested. "I never asked you to do it, you offered-"

"Because I love you, you idiot!" she screamed, and tears poured down her face, mingling with the rain, that came faster, soaking her sweaty hair, her robes.

Harry didn't feel the rain just then. He only felt an arrow pierce his heart as he replayed in his mind over and over again the words he'd just heard Ginny shriek at him.

"Oh, god!" Ginny cried out, throwing up her hands. "Don't you see? I just wanted you to be happy, that's all I've ever wanted for you! Life's been so mean to you, hasn't it, but I thought...maybe...maybe I can help. I was arrogant enough to think I could make you happy! Only I was stupid! I...I gave in, I...I went to bed with you because...because I wanted you so badly. I lied to you because...because I wanted to be with you like that, because...because I thought if I told you the truth that...that you'd...I'm sorry, Harry. I never should have agreed to...but I just wanted you to be happy, only...only I fell in love with you all over again and...and...suddenly I wasn't doing it anymore to help you, it was...to be with you. I ruined your chance with Cho because...because I wanted you for myself."

Tears spilled silently down Ginny's face as she looked at him. She looked hurt, sad, ashamed.

Harry stared at her for a moment, stunned by her confession, when slowly, comprehension filled him. He took her by the shoulders.

"You didn't ruin anything with me and Cho," he said slowly. "Cho and me ruined it by ourselves, a long time ago. And you did make me happy. Happier than I ever thought I could be."

"But I lied to you," said Ginny, looking down at her wet shoes.

"If you lied to me, then I lied to you," said Harry. "All those times we spent together, and I never told you how much you meant to me? I looked you in the face and told you I wanted her and I was lying."

"Harry-"

"I don't CARE how we came together, Ginny," Harry said fervently. "I only care that we did. You and me, we fit. I can't stand the thought of not being with you, of not being near you. I...I want to spend every day talking to you and touching your beautiful hair and holding you and...laughing at your jokes and...and watching you play Quidditch and making love to you and...and counting all your freckles and eating ice cream cones...and waking up next to you." He moved his hands to her face.

"Really?" she whispered, her voice barely audible above the rain. She moved closer to him.

"Really," he said softly, brushing a clump of her wet hair back from her forehead.

She smiled up at him, her eyes still tearful, still blinking against the rain.

"I'm scared," she said. "What if...what if it doesn't work-"

"You can take on a whole Scottish Quidditch team but you're afraid of how you feel about me?" Harry asked gently.

"Harry, you...you know what I mean..."

"I'm scared, too," he said, a bit more forcefully. "I'm terrified. I don't know what's going to happen,

Gin, I can't...promise you things will be perfect or that they won't change. But I'll take that chance. I'm...I'm asking you to take it with me."

He moved closer to her. "I love you, Gin. Be with me. Be my girl."

Ginny gave a kind of strangled sob.

"Bloody hell," she croaked. "How's a girl to say no to that?"

She began to laugh.

Harry gave a kind of strangled gasp as it sank in that she was saying yes to him, she was telling him she loved him and wanted to be with him. His face broke into a grin as pure, unadulterated happiness filled his heart.

"Well," she said, putting her hands on her hips, "are you going to stand there like a lump or are you going to kiss me?"

Harry looked at her-she was soaked through and her eyes were red and puffy and she looked more beautiful than ever. He smiled even as he lowered his mouth to hers, as he put his arms round her, and then they were kissing and laughing and kissing some more and not feeling the cold as the rain pelted down on them and thunder rumbled on the air.