



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 01

Harry Potter raced from one hot spot to the next, helping his friends battle the seemingly endless army of Death Eaters. He cast a Bone-Removing Curse at a Death Eater, then noticed Dennis Creevey was injured and trapped underneath some debris. The battle moved away from Dennis long enough for Harry to try to free him. Blood was running from Dennis's ear, probably from a bomb the Flying Squad had dropped nearby mere moments before.

"Come on, mate, let's get you out of there," Harry said as he Levitated the debris from the explosion off of his friend. He pulled on Dennis's arm, trying to get him to his feet and away from the battlefield before the fighting surged back toward them. With another tug, Harry thought he'd succeeded, but he hadn't got Dennis up. He looked in horror at the bloody arm he was holding. There was Dennis's hand, so talented with a Beater's bat, but the arm ended in a ragged stump just above his bicep.

Harry shuddered and dropped the arm, then grabbed Dennis around the chest and lifted, trying to pull him behind a nearby tree. "Hang on, Dennis, I've got you!" Harry shrieked and dropped his friend when he realized Dennis's legs had stayed where they were. Dennis lay in bloody pieces, his normally cheerful young face stilled in a shocked expression.

Harry took shaky steps away from Dennis, forcing himself to get back to the battle. But as he ran over the hill to join the D.A. members fighting there, he saw Fred Weasley lying on the ground, his broom broken under him, his chest a gaping hole, his eyes open and staring right at Harry.

"No! Fred, no!" Harry dropped to his knees beside his friend's body, his heart pounding so hard, he thought it would burst out of his chest. He looked around for George. Surely George wouldn't be far away with Fred hurt! No, Fred wasn't hurt. Fred was dead. Where was George? He looked around frantically. Oh no. There was George, his body sprawled on the ground about ten feet away.

"George! I'm here, mate! Hang on!" Harry ran to George, his feet slipping on the gore-covered ground as he slid to a stop, hoping to help his friend. But no, George had a deep bloody gash across his stomach, his intestines oozing out of the hole. Like Fred, George was undeniably dead.

Harry fell to his knees beside George, a scream building up inside him. "NO!"

"Harry Potter, sir! Wake up! Harry Potter, sir!"

Something was shaking Harry's shoulder with a painfully tight grip. Harry swam out of the depths of his nightmare to see huge green eyes staring into his. Dobby was nose-to-nose with him, his ears drooping, a worried expression on his face.

"Harry Potter, sir! Please wake up!"

"I'm . . . awake, Dobby. Thanks." Harry sat up and held his head in his hands. His room seemed to be spinning around him. He blinked, swallowed hard, then got out of bed and wobbled on shaking legs to the bathroom, where he threw up until there was nothing left inside him. He felt a damp flannel being placed carefully on the back of his neck.

"Thanks." He turned to see who was helping him and saw Dobby standing nearby, wringing his hands.

"Is Harry Potter ill, sir? Did dinner disagree with Harry Potter's stomach? Does Harry Potter want some ginger tea, or—"

Harry waved his hand to stop Dobby from saying more. Just hearing the words "ginger tea" made him nauseous all over again. "Nightmare. Just a nightmare."

The elf shook his head. "Not just a nightmare, sir. A terrible nightmare."

Harry couldn't agree more, but if he said that, he'd feel obligated to talk about his dream, and he really didn't want to do that just now. He took a deep breath and hoped his stomach would quiet down soon.

"I'll be all right, Dobby. Thanks for waking me. Sorry I disturbed your sleep." Harry straightened and took the flannel off of his neck, then wiped the sweat off his face with it. He turned to look at the house-elf. "Did you hear me all the way down in your quarters?"

Dobby took a step back, a guilty look on his face. "No, Harry Potter sir. Dobby stays outside Harry Potter's room at night in case he is needed."

Harry frowned, his brain still muzzy from sleep. "Needed for what?"

"Harry Potter has terrible nightmares and has trouble waking up on his own. Dobby is glad he is here to help Harry Potter, sir."

"How long have you been doing this? And how did you know about my nightmares?"

Dobby wrung his hands again before speaking. "Last night, Dobby hears a noise upstairs when he gets up to start breakfast. When Dobby comes upstairs to find the noise, he hears Harry Potter sir screaming in his sleep. Dobby wakes Harry Potter enough to stop the dream but Harry Potter doesn't wake up all the way. Now Dobby keeps watch outside Harry Potter's door in case he has bad dreams again. Dobby calls Harry Potter's name a long time to wake him tonight."

Harry felt even worse now than he had after waking up from the nightmare. The house-elf was losing sleep trying to look after him. "You don't need to do that, Dobby, but I appreciate your concern."

Dobby is honoured to look after Harry Potter, sir," the elf said with great dignity.

"I don't want to be a bother to you."

Dobby stood as tall as he could, his ears fully erect. "Serving Harry Potter is a privilege, sir! Never a bother!"

Harry smiled. What could he say to such devotion? "Thank you, Dobby. I appreciate your help." He rinsed the flannel in cold water and wiped his face again. "Dobby?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir?"

Harry swallowed hard. It was a stupid question. He knew the answer. But until he heard Dobby's answer, he was going to worry. "Are Fred and George Weasley all right?"

"Dobby believes so, sir. Why does you ask?"

"When's the last time we saw them?"

"Mr. Fred and Mr. George comes for dinner on last Sunday, sir, does you remember?"

Harry's brain finally clunked into gear. Of course they were alive, both as cheerful and funny as ever most of the time, although the loss of their brothers Bill and Percy did cast a shadow over even the ebullient twins at times. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Dennis was probably fine too. It was just a stupid dream. Just a dream. Not real.

"Thanks, Dobby. I'll be all right now. You can go back to bed."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir."

Dobby left the bathroom, but Harry noticed the sound of the elf's feet stopped long before they reached the stairs. Dobby was waiting for him in the hall. He'd probably stand watch by Harry's room for the rest of the night. Harry hated the idea of the house-elf losing so much sleep over him, but he was grateful, too, for Dobby's dedication.

"Dobby?" Harry called.

Dobby raced into the bathroom. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir?"

"If you're going to baby-sit me at night, why don't you and Winky sleep in the next room down the hall? That way, you'll be close by, but you'll be able to sleep, too."

"Oh, no, Harry Potter, sir! House-elves isn't sleeping in masters' beds!"

"You won't be sleeping in my bed, Dobby," Harry said. "Nobody's using that room."

"But sir, that room is master's quarters, human quarters, not house-elf quarters!"

Harry bent down to be eye-to-eye with Dobby. "For now, that room is house-elf quarters because I say it is. OK? You and Winky can move in tonight if you want to. Just don't tell Ron and Hermione that you're staying up here or why you've moved your quarters. They don't need to worry about me. OK?"

Dobby's eyes were swimming with tears. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter is too kind, too generous! Thank you."

Harry gave Dobby a wan smile. "Night, Dobby."

"Goodnight, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby said, then popped out of sight with a loud crack.

Probably off to bring Winky upstairs, Harry thought.

He rubbed his face with the flannel again. He was so tired. He wanted to go back to bed, but his legs just wouldn't cooperate yet—they were still too shaky.

Harry sat down on the floor next to the bathtub and rested his cheek against the cool porcelain. How long was this going to go on? Ever since Ginny left for Hogwarts, Harry had been plagued with horrible nightmares. He was losing weight from throwing up so much. When Ginny was with him, he didn't have so many bad dreams, or when he did, she woke him before they went on too long. She'd only been gone a couple of months now, but it seemed like a lifetime. How was he going to survive the rest of the school year without her helping him through the night?

Finally feeling a bit better, Harry struggled to his feet and caught a glimpse of his too-pale face in the mirror. He turned and studied his reflection more closely.

"You look dreadful, dear," the mirror said. "You need to eat something."

"Oh, shut up," he said irritably. But the mirror was right. He'd lost so much weight that his normally thin face looked gaunt, and there were dark circles under his eyes. What could he do about it? Nothing. With a heavy sigh, he put his hand on the doorknob and was about to leave when he remembered the Glamour Charm he'd put on himself and Ginny as disguises when they went to a concert for her birthday. He turned back to the mirror, thinking hard now. Would it work? What would he have to do? Hmm. What if he made his face just a little more full in the cheeks and

lightened the circles under his eyes? Would that take care of it? He nodded. He'd try it in the morning and refresh the spell whenever he noticed the charm fading. He was tired of hearing how bad he looked all the time.

Harry trudged wearily back to his room, staring at Ron and Hermione's closed door. They'd been married just over a month now, and kept a Silencing Charm on their room for privacy. Harry had set another one on the outside of their room so his nightly torment wouldn't disturb them. He knew they were dealing with their own problems. Besides being newlyweds, they were both grieving over lost loved ones and trying to put the horrors of war behind them while dealing with the stress of going to new schools, Hermione to Oxford Wizarding University, Ron to Auror School with Harry as well as both young men playing Quidditch for the London Lions. Harry was glad he'd thought to put that Silencing Charm on the outside of their door just after Ginny left. His throat was raw from screaming, but they hadn't heard a thing, and Harry was determined to keep it that way.

Harry pulled off his sweat-soaked pyjamas, then dressed in a t-shirt and briefs, shivering a bit in the cold room. He looked at his bed sadly. He wanted to sleep, but he knew he wouldn't be able to relax for a while. He wrapped himself in his dressing gown to keep warm and paced around his room, missing Ginny so much he could taste it. She always found ways to get his mind off the things that haunted him, or to comfort him if he couldn't escape those memories.

He sat down at the little writing desk he'd had moved to his room after Ginny left so he could study without disturbing Ron, Hermione or the house-elves when he couldn't sleep. This same desk had contained a Boggart that had appeared to Molly Weasley a couple of years ago as dead Arthur, dead Ron, dead twins, dead Harry. He knew there was no Boggart in the desk now, but as frequent as his nightmares were, he was almost willing to blame them on the desk. If only it were that simple. If only taking the desk out of the room would solve his problem! He'd burn the bloody thing if it would help, but the problem was in his head. The horrors of war haunted him every night.

Harry looked at Merlin's empty perch and regretted letting the phoenix stay at Hogwarts, where he was enjoying visits with Dumbledore, McGonagall and Fawkes. Harry had talked with Merlin several times about his nightmares, but the old wizard had no more idea how to cure Harry's nightmares than Dobby did. Harry had considered using his Pensieve to remove the memories of the war, but dismissed the idea as soon as he'd thought of it. After what he went through when he removed too many memories at once after Casey's death, he wasn't going to use a Pensieve to help him forget anything. He'd just suffer through the pains of recovering from the war and returning to a normal life the same way everyone else did, one day at a time.

Merlin's only comment on the subject was that such suffering after a war's end was part of a warrior's lot in life, and that Harry would learn how to deal with his memories in time. Merlin said he'd experienced the same thing many times himself when he was human, and had seen many others suffer through it, including King Arthur. Arthur, like Harry, became a warrior far too young and had a great deal of trouble dealing with the emotional pain that was part of the aftermath of war while he was also learning how to rule his people wisely. Merlin's only suggestion to Harry was going to the Land of the Phoenixes to heal, but Harry had promised Ginny he wouldn't go there again since it was so easy to lose track of time in that magical place. Besides, Harry was too busy to take time off at the moment. And after spending several nights in phoenix form, hoping the transformation would allow him to sleep better, he wasn't certain even the Land of the Phoenixes would help. As a phoenix, as any of his Animagus forms, really, he still had his human sensibilities, which meant he still had the dreams of a human, so he still suffered from his nightmares. Some distorted sense of right and wrong made Harry think that, if he were going to dream about things he'd done during the war, he should dream them in human form. It felt like a point of honour for him, although he couldn't explain why. Silly, really, but there it was.

The worst part of the nightmares was suffering through them alone. Without Ginny there to comfort him, Merlin's wisdom was the best reassurance Harry could find. He wished the old mage were here. He missed his company.

Just as he finished that thought about Merlin, the phoenix appeared in a flash of light.

Harry smiled, both glad and relieved to see his friend. "What are you doing here?"

Merlin chirped, telling Harry he'd heard his wish, so he'd come. He continued chirping, beginning a conversation with the young wizard.

"Thanks. Yeah, I had another rough night. I can't go back to bed yet. And yes, I know I look like hell." After another meaning-filled chirp from Merlin, Harry replied, "In a little while. I just can't relax yet." Merlin settled in Harry's lap and began crooning his soothing song. "That helps. Thanks a lot."

Nightmares weren't his only problem. At the oddest times when he was awake, he'd see flashes of battle memories that blinded him to what was happening around him. Thankfully, these usually lasted only a second or two, but still, they were quite disturbing. Visions of his friends who'd died or been badly injured broke his heart over and over in his dreams or during these flashes when he was awake. Sometimes the visions were his imagination playing tricks on him, as in the dream he'd had tonight. He realized that part of the problem was that he still had an overwhelming fear for the safety of Ginny, Ron and Hermione, as well as himself. In his rational mind, he knew these fears were groundless. Voldemort and the Death Eaters were gone, after all. He knew that! But his sleeping or exhausted mind simply wasn't rational.

Harry pulled out a piece of parchment with a project he'd been working on and tried to make some progress with it, but his mind simply wouldn't cooperate. He looked at his ring and wished he could call Ginny on it, but it was the middle of the night. Then again, she had told him to call whenever he needed her, and right now, seeing the image of her beloved face above his ring was the most comforting thing he could think of. After another moment's hesitation, he pressed the stone and said her name. A moment later, she appeared, her hair sleep-mussed, her eyes puffy and shadowed with sleep.

"Hi, Harry," she said through a yawn. "Is everything OK?"

"I'm sorry, sweet girl," Harry said, already feeling better. "I shouldn't have called so late."

"I don't mind. I was dreaming of you, actually. The reality's a lot better than my dream." She gave him a smile that warmed his heart. "Are you all right? You look pale. Bad dreams again?"

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

She chuckled. “Then why did you call? Never mind, I know why. I love you, Harry. I wish we could be together. I’d protect you from those nightmares!”

“I know you would. I wish we could be together too.” He sighed. “Just talking to you has helped a lot. Are you still having nightmares too?”

“Yes, but when they start to get bad, Trouble wakes me up. Nothing like needle-sharp kitten claws to pop you out of a dream quickly! I’m so glad you gave him to me. He’s still a little stinker, but so much fun, and he does look after me well.”

Harry smiled. “I’m glad. If I find another part-Kneazle kitten, I may keep it for myself if Trouble’s that good at stopping your nightmares. But I’d rather have you wake me than a kitten.”

“Mmm, me too. Harry, maybe it was a mistake to decide not to live in your quarters here at Hogwarts. Why don’t you change your mind? Then I could stay with you every night and we’d both sleep better.”

Harry shook his head. “I can’t. I overheard some Board members talking just before the last Quidditch game there. Turns out I was right to worry about them. They’re not happy with me teaching there since we’re engaged. They’re wondering what actually goes on in my quarters.”

Ginny gasped. “Have they put some kind of alarm or something on your quarters? How would they know we’re not studying?”

“No, no alarms. It’s just speculation.”

“They should let you do what you want! After all, you saved them from Voldemort!”

He snorted, a derisive sound. “I guess not everyone is impressed with me being the hero of the wizarding world.”

“They should be! Shame on them!”

“That’s my warrior princess,” he said fondly. “I’ve offered to resign many times now, but Grandfather won’t accept my resignation. He thinks the students are benefiting a lot from my teaching, and he says it would be very difficult to find another Flying Instructor as qualified as I am. I guess he’s right, but I hate the burden the Board is putting on him—and me.”

“Why should the speculation of some stuffy old people keep us apart?”

“I don’t want to cause Grandfather any trouble. He’s having a hard time getting things back to normal there. I suppose those blokes on the Board blame me for so many students being killed or wounded during the war. Well, actually, they’d be right for blaming me for that.”

Ginny’s eyes flashed. “Harry Potter, stop that right now! Nobody fought who didn’t want to. You know that!”

Harry knew she’d be shaking her finger under his nose if they were together, which made him smile for a moment, but then he sighed. “I know, but still, I trained them. I led them.”

“And thinking that way, taking the blame for their deaths, is why you’re having nightmares. Stop it!”

A sad smile crossed Harry’s face. “If only it were that easy.”

Ginny’s eyes went from fiery to sympathetic in an instant. “Oh, Harry. I wish we were together. You need a hug!”

“That’s the truth.”

She gave him a flirtatious smile. “And a kiss or two, as well?”

“Yeah, I’ll take anything you offer me, sweet girl. I’d better let you get back to sleep. Thanks for the chat. I love you.”

“I love you too. Try to get some rest, Harry. You look awful.”

“And you look beautiful. Good night, Gin.”

“Night.”

Feeling a bit better, Harry climbed back into his bed and lay down. He shuddered at the memory of the dream, but reminded himself that Dennis, Fred and George were all very much alive. “It was just a dream. Just a truly horrible dream.” He swallowed hard, determined to clear his mind so he could get to sleep. Merlin nestled in next to him, continuing his lovely song. Harry yawned hugely. “Thanks for the help. Maybe I can get through the rest of the night now. G’night.”

Harry took off his glasses, stretched and yawned. With luck, he’d get a few hours of decent sleep. Merlin’s soothing song finally lulled him back to sleep.

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The next morning, Harry put a Glamour Charm on himself to hide the dark circles under his eyes and make his face look less emaciated. Fairly well satisfied with the results, he went down to breakfast.

"Good morning, Harry!" Hermione said brightly. "Did you sleep well? You look more rested than usual."

"I'm fine," he said, smiling at her. "How are you? And where's Ron?"

"He remembered something he wanted to add to an essay for class. He'll be down soon." She looked at him more closely. "Hang on. Your face was much thinner yesterday. What have you done? A Glamour Charm?"

He shrugged and tried to hide the guilty look he knew was in his eyes.

"Why are you using a glamour?" she insisted.

"Because I look like hell, and I'm tired of hearing people tell me that," he snapped.

She put a hand on his arm. "Oh, Harry. Are you having nightmares again?"

He slumped in defeat. She could see through him better than most people. "They never stopped. What about you and Ron? Are you still having nightmares?"

"Ours were never like yours, Harry. We're grieving over lost family, but we flew above the battles. You were down in the thick of them all the time. You suffered a lot more in the war than we did, and before the war, as well. I don't know how you've managed to stay sane, with the link you had to Voldemort and seeing all the horrors he did, and then the war and everything. I wish I knew how to help you, Harry. I'm still researching Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but haven't found anything I thought would be helpful."

He was touched, as always, by the depth of her friendship. "Thanks. I know you're busy. Don't waste a lot of time trying to sort out what's wrong with me. I'll get through it. And don't tell Ron, OK? I don't think he's noticed, and I don't want him to worry about me."

Hermione shook her head. "I think you should get some help, Harry."

"Yeah, in all my spare time, right?" He laughed, a dark sound with no humour in it.

"Maybe you should drop something, so you can rest."

Harry made a huge effort to answer her with patience, not the anger that had flared inside him at her suggestion. "I don't want to drop anything. If I try to rest, my mind does evil things to me. I'm much better off being busy."

She sighed. "All right. Well, if you're going to use a Glamour Charm, you should do something about how puffy your eyes are, too. You look like you haven't slept in ages."

He shrugged. "That's the truth, though." He held up a spoon and looked at his reflection. "Make my eyes less puffy, eh? OK." He did the spell and looked at her for approval.

She smiled "That's better. I just wish you didn't need that charm to look healthy."

"You and me both. You won't tell Ron, though, right?"

"If you insist."

"I insist. Thanks."



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 02

Harry was exhausted. He hadn't slept well after his nightmares despite both his and Merlin's best efforts. It seemed like forever since the last time he'd slept through the night and woke up feeling refreshed. As he flew now, he slid his glasses up, rubbed his eyes with one hand and yawned, then went back to looking for the Snitch.

There it is! He pushed his Firebolt Excalibur into a steep dive, following the swift golden ball toward the ground. He squinted as the wind tore at his robes, glad his glasses protected his eyes from at least some of the wind's pressure. He was flying so fast, he could hear the sound of his collar-length hair snapping in the wind.

Harry felt his brain go muzzy for an instant. It felt as if he were watching the front end of the Excalibur from a great distance. He shook his head, trying to force his brain to get back on track. When it finally snapped into focus again, he saw that he was much too close to the ground. He was going to crash! He hauled on the front of the broom as hard as he could, but then he heard a great crack as the broom handle hit the ground at tremendous speed. Harry felt his body flying through the air in what seemed like slow-motion. He could hear shouts from his team mates, but their voices were faint and he couldn't make sense of what they were saying. With a tremendous wham, his body hit the ground and everything went blessedly dark.

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Harry gradually became aware of a feeling of restraint. Something was holding his arms and shoulders still. His legs too. What was wrong with him? He had to work hard to open his eyes. Nothing wanted to move very well, and he hurt all over.

"He's awake!" Ron's familiar voice was a welcome sound, but he seemed to be shouting. Why?

"Ron?" Harry managed as he finally got his eyes to open. He squinted for a moment and closed them again. It hurt too much to see the light. He felt someone place his glasses on his face and opened his eyes again. The light was still painful, but at least he could see Ron's worried face above him now. "Thanks."

"No problem. How are you?" Ron said as he lowered himself into a chair by the bed. Hermione sat next to him, her face streaked with tears. She sniffled and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and gave Harry a watery smile.

Harry tried to return her smile, but his face wouldn't cooperate yet. He looked back at Ron. "What happened?"

"You ploughed yourself, mate," Ron said, sounding both impressed and offended. "It was a spectacular crash."

Harry grimaced, which made him wince in pain. "Huh?"

"You never plough yourself," Ron went on, his ginger brows drawn together in a frown. "Did something go wrong with your broom?"

"Dunno."

"What's wrong, Potter?" Bob Smithers, the team captain said. "You've been off form for weeks. Not that your performance in games has suffered, but you're not as sharp as you were a few months ago. What's going on?"

"I'm . . . fine. I just . . . misjudged the dive."

"You've never misjudged a dive in your life, Harry." Ron's face was serious.

"I just didn't . . . sleep well, that's all." Harry sighed. "I was tired." He didn't like waking up after being injured without Ginny nearby. He closed his eyes and sighed again. "Where . . .?"

"St. Mungo's," Ron replied. "Marcus is looking after you. He says you'll live, which surprised him after he heard what happened."

Harry opened his eyes again and stared at his best friend. "How bad?"

"Cracked skull, two broken arms, a broken collarbone, bruised organs. Nothing Marcus can't cure," Ron said. "Your broken bones are already healed. They have your arms strapped to your body so the tendons and stuff can heal properly. Apparently you tore a load of them too."

"Oh, Harry, you could've died!" Hermione sobbed when Ron finished.

Harry glanced at her and tried to smile again as he muttered, "But I didn't," then looked back at Ron. "Legs?"

"Broken but healed. Torn ligaments in your knees or something like that. You'll be fine. You just need to rest a while."

"How long?"

"Couple of days."



Harry nodded. Thank Merlin for magic and magical medicine! With such injuries in the Muggle world, he'd be in the hospital for ages.

"Potter," Smithers said now, "if you're ill, or too tired to fly safely, you may have to rethink this schedule you've set yourself. What do you want to continue doing, and what are you willing to give up? Think about it seriously, lad. We want you to be our Seeker, but we don't want you to kill yourself to keep the job."

Before Harry could answer, Ginny ran into the room, followed closely by Albus Dumbledore and Remus Lupin.

"Oh, Harry! You look awful!" Ginny said as she bent over the bed and gave him a gentle kiss.

"You look beautiful," he murmured, lifting his lips for another kiss. "I'm sorry about this."

"So am I."

"Harry, Mr. Smithers is right." Dumbledore had a worried frown on his face. "You're over-extended. I'm sorry, lad, I didn't mean to—"

"No!" Harry cried, struggling to sit up. He moaned and fell back on the bed, then lay there panting with pain.

"You have to rest, Harry," Ginny told him. "Just relax."

"No!" Harry fought the slings and bandages that restrained him, then gasped and lay still, panting with pain. "It . . . it isn't . . . the schedule."

"Then what is it?" Remus asked in a gentle voice.

Harry's eyes locked on his godfather's, desperate for Remus to understand. "I have nightmares—" He shuddered as his voice trailed off.

Dumbledore frowned and leaned toward him. "Nightmares? What are they about?"

"The war. I keep seeing my friends being . . . blown up." Harry looked at his grandfather, and saw a sad comprehension in his eyes. "Some things really happened," he glanced at Ginny, then back at his grandfather, who was nodding, "and others didn't. It's driving me mad. Merlin wakes me when they get too bad."

Hermione was distraught. "Why didn't you call for us? We're just across the hall!"

"You're married now. I didn't want to bother you."

"You prat!" Ron exploded. "You're trying to be a hero again, and nearly killed yourself because of it!"

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are," Ron insisted. "Hermione and I are helping each other through bad dreams. We would've helped you. When did they start?"

Harry didn't want Ron and Hermione to worry about him, but what was he going to do? He decided to answer honestly. "When Ginny went back to school."

Remus sat on the side of the bed very carefully. "What can we do to help you, Harry?"

Harry gave his godfather a serious look. "Make the dreams go away."

Before Remus could reply, a nurse came in the room and stood glowering at them with her hands on her hips. "There are too many people in here! This young man needs his rest!"

"We know," Ron snapped. "That's what we're working on!"

"Harry, let me know what you decide," Smithers said. "Your place will be held for you while you heal, but you need to get your strength and energy back before you ride an Excalibur again."

"Thanks for being patient with me. I want to stay on the team, Bob. Please don't give up on me."

"I'll talk to you later, lad. Get some rest." With that, Smithers left the room.

Harry looked around at the others in the room: Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Remus and his grandfather, all people who loved him, their faces showing how it hurt them to see him badly injured again. He didn't know what to do, how to fix his problem. He'd been just barely getting by for the last week or so. This crash was the inevitable result of his exhaustion.

"You're much too thin," his grandfather said. "Have you been eating?"

Harry knew then that his Glamour Charm had been broken. He tried to put on a brave front. "Yeah, of course!"

"Do your dreams make you ill?" Dumbledore said, leaning closer to his grandson.

With those blue eyes boring into his, Harry knew he couldn't lie. "Yes."

"How much weight have you lost?"

"I haven't weighed myself for a while."

"You didn't have any weight to spare, Harry. You simply must eat and keep the food down. I'll have a word with Marcus about this."

Harry slumped in the bed. All of his secrets were out now. He'd be kicked off the team, out of Auror School and probably lose his position at Hogwarts, as well. Then there'd be nothing to distract him from the horrific images in his mind.

"My dear boy," his grandfather said, rubbing a gentle hand over Harry's head in an affectionate gesture, "we'll get your problems sorted out. Don't worry. Just do your best to eat and follow the healer's directions, and you'll be fine before you know it."

Harry nodded, then glanced back at Remus, who'd just cleared his throat.

"Have you tried Dreamless Sleep Potion, Harry?" Remus said now.

"No."

"We aren't allowed to use potions unless we're injured. Quidditch League rules," Ron added.

"Well, while you're here, perhaps you could try it," Remus said. "And maybe Marcus can come up with something that's allowed by the League to help you. You haven't asked anyone for help with this, have you?"

"No. I thought I was just missing Ginny," he said, glancing up at her when she sighed.

"I miss you too," she said.

The nurse cleared her throat. "I must insist on more of you leaving. Mr. Potter needs to rest."

Remus got to his feet. "Tonks wanted to come, too, but she's so pregnant, she isn't travelling much anymore. She sends her love."

"How is she?" Ginny said.

"She's glowing," Remus said with pride. "She's never been more beautiful."

"Tell her I'll come and see her as soon as I can," Harry told his godfather. "I'm sorry I worried her."

"You get well, lad," Remus said. "Why don't you consider coming to stay with us on one of your free weekends? You could visit Ginny, or Ginny could come and stay with us too. It might be a nice break for you, and Tonks would love to have a chance to spoil you."

"Thanks. I'll do that."



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 03

A few days later, Harry was released from the hospital. Thanks to Marcus Pomfrey's excellent care, Harry felt more rested than he had in months, and he'd regained the weight he'd lost, as well. He'd also managed to catch up with his Auror School assignments with Ron's help. Harry looked and felt well now, a wonderful change from the way things had been recently.

When Harry and Ron entered the London Lions stadium, they went straight to their lockers and pulled out their practice robes.

"Bob said they'd have a new broom for you," Ron told Harry as they dressed.

"Great." Harry was looking forward to flying again.

"Harry! You're back!" his team mates called, gathering around him to pound him on the back and tease him for his lack of flying skill.

"Potter," Smithers called. "My office. Now, please."

"See you later, guys," Harry said with an easy smile as he walked toward the captain's office. This will be where he tells me they're taking the cost of that broom I smashed out of my pay. He sighed, grateful that money wasn't one of his problems.

"Sit down, Harry," Smithers invited. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Marcus said I can fly."

"How are you sleeping?"

"Much better. They gave me a draught that made me sleep right through for two days, then put me on something that isn't so strong. I used that last night and only had one nightmare. I was able to get back to sleep after it, so I'm much better."

"Good. I want you to do some PR work with Murphy for the next few days. The other lads have already done some of what you'll be doing. It's your turn."

Harry was confused. Oswald Murphy, the team manager, was a wonder at merchandising the team, finding numerous ways to create interest in England's newest professional Quidditch team. But what did that have to do with him?

Smithers saw Harry's confusion. "Just follow him around, Harry. He'll explain everything. None of it's strenuous, and what flying you'll be doing will be low and slow. We want you to be in top form before you fly at competition speeds again."

"But the healers cleared me to fly! Why can't I practice?"

"I spoke to your healer, and he said it would be a good idea to get you back up to speed gradually, so that's what we're doing."

Harry sighed. He knew better than to argue with the captain. Nobody got away with that. Smithers ran a friendly but well-disciplined team. Anyone who pushed him too far got suspended from the team for some period of time, and of course, there was always the danger of being sacked. Harry and Ron had witnessed a team-mate defying some direction of the captain's once too often, resulting in a week-long suspension without pay. The boys had vowed to never get in that position themselves. And here Harry was, on the verge of cheeking the man! He pressed his lips together, determined to be a good team member and not give anyone reason to sack him.

"This isn't punishment, Harry," Smithers added. "You might just find yourself enjoying it. Go on, Murphy's waiting for you."

"Should I change back to street clothes?"

"Yes. See you later."

"Right."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry stood in Diagon Alley in jeans, trainers and a red t-shirt that read, "Give Blood. Play the Lions!" on the front with the Lions logo and "Potter 7" on the back. The sun shining brightly on the stone buildings made the air feel almost summer-like, a rare thing in late October. It was so warm, Harry removed his cloak and carried it over his arm once they reached Diagon Alley. Next to Harry was Team Manager Oswald Murphy, a jovial man well-liked by everyone on the team.

"Come on, Harry. Our sponsors love meeting team members. It's good to bring you lads around to visit them every so often. This will be fun for you!"

Harry had his doubts. Meeting fans on the street or after a game still unnerved him, but he'd learned to hide it fairly well. He followed Murphy into shop after shop, shaking hands with the owners and chatting to them about the team's prospects. He faced frequent questions about the war as well, but Murphy usually managed to change the subject back to Quidditch without too many objections from anyone.

"I think you'll really enjoy this one," Murphy said as they entered another shop.

Harry hadn't been inside a wizarding photography studio before. The only wizard photographers he knew were his friend Colin Creevey and the Prophet's slimy photographer, Bozo, who had followed Rita Skeeter around until she ended up in Azkaban for life a few months ago.

Harry looked around with interest at the numerous moving photographs displayed on the walls. He was surprised to see some mosaic picture frames much like those he made as part of the display.

"Harry Potter! On my stars, how wonderful to meet you!" a very thin young man said, grasping Harry's hand in both of his with tremendous enthusiasm. "I am such a fan, I can't tell you!" By now, he'd noticed Harry standing near the mosaic frames. "Oh, you've seen them! When I read that you made mosaic picture frames, I had to contact Mr. Joyero and order some! Are you still making them?"

"I haven't had time for a while," Harry said. Mr. Joyero, the Hogsmeade jeweller who marketed Harry's picture frames, hadn't told him that some of the frames he'd sold had gone to another shop.

"I love these! I couldn't possibly sell them. I use them for display. However, if you ever decide to make more and want a London outlet for them, please think of me, all right?"

I guess that explains it. "Right." Harry began to relax a bit. The man was somewhat hyper but seemed good-hearted enough.

"Sorry, Harry, I haven't introduced you two properly," Murphy said. "This is Trent Baird. He's quite a famous photographer. Trent, Harry Potter."

"Who is quite famous in a great many ways!" Trent said, smiling broadly. "Everyone knows who you are, Mr. Potter!"

Harry was embarrassed, as usual, by the man's effusive greeting, but at least he didn't blush quite as often as he used to. "It's Harry. Just Harry."

"Oh, what an honour! Thank you, Harry! Do come in!" Trent led the way deeper into the shop.

"I don't remember seeing your shop before," Harry said as he leaned closer to study a lovely landscape photo with a herd of deer racing across a meadow.

"I'm new to Diagon Alley. I had premises in Coventry before, but I thought being based in London would improve my business. And so it has!"

Trent escorted Harry around the shop, showing him picture after picture. The man was obviously proud of his work, and justifiably so. Harry had never seen such beautiful wizarding photos. Colin was good but still had a way to go to reach this man's level.

"Your work is fantastic," Harry commented now.

Trent looked as if he might burst from excitement. "Oh, thank you! I can't tell you what it means to me to hear you say that!"

Harry smiled. The man reminded him of Dobby somehow, nearly falling over his own feet in his eagerness to please.

After a bit more conversation, Trent said, "Shall we get to it then?"

Harry frowned. "Get to what?"

Trent turned to Murphy in confusion. "Doesn't he know?"

"I haven't had a chance to tell him," Murphy said, looking a bit uncomfortable.

"To tell me what, Murphy?" Harry said. He could sense whatever it was he hadn't been told yet was something he wasn't going to be the least bit happy about.

"Well . . . the team is doing a calendar, Harry, for charity. It's a great way to get the team members' names and faces out there where people can get to know you lads," Murphy began. "Most of the others have done their photos. Since Smithers wanted you to do the rounds with me today, we thought it would be a good time to do your photo shoot."

Harry stared at the man. "My photo shoot?"

"Yes."

"But I'm not in my uniform."

"It's okay, Harry," Murphy replied. "That's what we want for this project. We have enough photos with you lads in uniform already. We want different shots of you as individuals to fill it out."

Harry sighed, then squared his shoulders. He'd agreed to participate in team publicity despite his dislike for such things. "All right, let's get it over with."

"Oh, wonderful!" Trent cried, nearly clapping his hands with glee. "Come with me."

Trent led the way to a room in the back of the shop where three cameras stood on tripods and various strange instruments were set up on tall metal staffs.

"What are those?" Harry said, nodding toward the things on the poles.

They provide lighting, all kinds of things to enhance the photographs,” Trent explained as he took Harry’s cloak and hung it on a hook near the door. He stood back and appraised Harry’s attire, his chin in his hand, his index finger tapping the side of his face. “Yes, that will do nicely, I think. It will need just a bit of adjustment.” He reached out and tugged at Harry’s shirt, pulling at the shoulder seams until they set squarely on Harry’s broad shoulders, then drawing the sides back until the shirt was quite tight across Harry’s chest.

Harry didn’t like the way this was going. “What are you doing?”

“Why do you wear such baggy clothes?” Trent said as he tried to tuck Harry’s shirt more tightly into his trousers.

“They’re comfortable. I can dress myself,” Harry said, pulling away from Trent’s busy hands. “I’m a grown man! Give over!”

The photographer looked abashed. “I’m sorry! You’ve been photographed so often, I thought you would be used to being prepped for photos.”

“Not like this, I haven’t. They usually just aim their cameras and take their pictures.”

“Oh, I see. Well, these are portraits, and we want them to have a certain style. How about this? I’ll put a spell on your clothes to make them fit properly. Will that be all right with you?”

Harry’s body stiffened as he restrained himself from a visible shudder. The man didn’t look or act like an enemy, but Harry wouldn’t just allow some stranger to hex him, either. “What kind of spell?”

“A Sizing Spell. It makes clothes fit better. I’ll cast it so it wears off in half an hour.”

Harry didn’t like the sound of this. “Show me on yourself or Murphy first.”

Trent looked surprised, but then his face fell. “Oh my stars, how thoughtless of me! You were in battle not that long ago. Your concern is completely understandable! After what you’ve been through, I’d be very hesitant to let someone cast a spell on me, too. I’ll be happy to do the spell on myself and Murphy both, if you wish.”

Harry watched the man warily. “Go on, then.”

Trent waved his wand at both himself and Murphy. A moment later, Trent’s clothes, which had fit him quite neatly before, became rather tight. Murphy’s robes lost their fullness and fit him as if tailored to his form.

Trent smiled at Harry. “See? My clothes fit well to start with, so now they’re too tight. Yours fit loosely, like Mr. Murphy’s robes, so this spell will simply make them fit you better.” With another wave of Trent’s wand, the spell was removed.

Harry still felt uneasy about the whole thing. “It looks OK, but I’d rather learn it and do it myself, if you don’t mind. Can you teach it to me?”

Trent beamed. “Of course!! I just want you to look your best for the photos. Oh my, I’m teaching the great Harry Potter a spell! What an honour!”

Harry grimaced and hoped the spell wouldn’t be too difficult to learn quickly.

“It’s just a flick and a double swish,” Trent said, demonstrating, “and the incantation is Magnitudo Accommodatus. If you want the robes to be tighter, you simply use faster wand movements. If you want them looser, you move your wand more slowly.”

“And how do you end the spell?” Harry said, practicing the wand movement slowly while aiming at a nearby tablecloth. The cloth grew bigger until nearly a foot of excess cloth lay puddled on the floor.

“Well done, Harry!” Trent said, clapping his hands in excitement. “You’re so quick! I thought you would be. Oh, and you end the spell with a Finite.”

Harry aimed at the tablecloth again and said, “Finite Incantatem.” The tablecloth returned to its normal size in an instant. He nodded approvingly. “Cool.” Then, turning to Murphy with a smirk, he raised his wand and said in a deadly voice, “Don’t move.”

Murphy blanched. He’d never expected to be on the receiving end of a spell cast by Harry Potter! “Er, Harry, uh, Mr. Potter, maybe now would be a good time for me to apologize for dragging you in here without warning and—”

After Harry cast the spell, Murphy’s robes fit him much more neatly. The older man nearly sagged in relief.

“Actually,” said Harry, “when I wasn’t pointing a wand at you would have been a better time for that apology.”

“You’re right,” Murphy said with a nervous smile. “I’ll do better in future.”

Harry thanked him, then removed the spell. “Your robes do look better when they aren’t so baggy, though.”

“I do like a nice draft around my, erm, legs,” Murphy said with a wink and a smile.

Harry returned his smile. He liked Murphy a lot, but he wasn’t at all happy about having this photo session sprung on him by surprise. He tried to shake off his resentment, and looked at Trent. “I think I have it now.” Harry aimed the spell at himself with a quick wand movement. A moment later, his shirt and trousers fit him snugly, nearly to the point of discomfort. Harry felt as if he were stuffed into his shirt and pants now.

Harry sighed. “Damn. That’s too tight.” He raised his wand to reverse the spell, but Trent put his hand on Harry’s wand arm.

“No, it’s perfect!” Trent said carefully. “Leave it like that, if you don’t mind.”

Harry couldn't believe it. His clothes felt like a second, not-flexible-enough skin, they were so tight. "But—"

"You will look wonderful in your photos now. That fit is perfect. Trust me."

Trent led Harry to the portrait area in front of his camera and tapped one of his instruments with his wand. A breeze issued from the instrument, making Harry's long hair flutter around his head. A tap of another instrument resulted in the background becoming a bright blue sky with a few wispy clouds scudding across it.

Harry looked at the sky backdrop in surprise. Magic still amazed him, even when the magic wasn't anything fancy. He wriggled his shoulders, annoyed with the tight fit of his shirt. To tell the truth, I'm just annoyed by this whole thing. Lost in his thoughts, he nearly jumped when the photographer's voice broke through his reverie.

"Look this way, Harry. That's it. Oh, my, that grim look is quite sexy! This calendar will sell fabulously!"

Harry went from feeling annoyed to feeling a bit ill-used, edging over into renewed anger rather quickly. Trent seemed to think every nuance of Harry's irritation was fascinating.

"Wonderful! Move around just a bit, these are moving pictures, after all! Yes, yes, that's it! Wonderful!"

Harry shifted his weight from foot to foot, wondering whether it would make a good picture if he bolted and ran. The thought almost made him smile, which sent Trent into raptures of excitement.

"Yes! Oh, that tease of a smile! Do it again! And that glint in your eye! You're very expressive! Have you thought about modelling?"

Harry almost snorted as the memory of billboards he'd seen in Muggle London showing young men in nothing but their briefs flashed through his mind. "No."

"You should, you know. But I know how busy you are, with Quidditch, Auror School and teaching at Hogwarts."

Harry scowled at the man, his temper simmering just below the surface now. "How do you know all that?"

"No, Harry, that's too much of a frown. Just a slight frown is sexy. This one is a bit too much."

"I asked—"

"I read the biographical information that will accompany the photo of each team member on the calendar," Trent said off-handedly. He straightened up and came toward Harry again. "Right! That's enough with the shirt. Take it off now, please." He held out his hand expectantly.

Open-mouthed with shock, Harry stared from Trent to Murphy and back again. He really thinks I'm going to just hand over my shirt? Murphy, at least, had the grace to look a bit uncomfortable. Harry's mouth snapped shut as his temper flared. He took a deep breath, tamping down his anger with an effort. "What?"

"Your shirt. Take it off," Trent said, wiggling the fingers of his outstretched hand.

"No!"

Murphy sighed. "Harry, everyone else has. It's for charity, remember?"

Harry turned to Murphy, disbelief and rage warring within him for dominance. The delicate instruments shivered on their long poles in response to his anger. "Did Ron agree to this? Does he know what you have planned?"

"Not yet," Murphy said with a shrug. "Everyone else is doing it, Harry. It will look odd if you don't. And you did agree in your contract to cooperate with our publicity programs."

"Publicity, yeah. Interviews when I have to, signing autographs after every game and whenever someone approaches me on the street or in shops. I agreed to that and I'm doing it. Nobody said anything about half-naked photos of me being part of the deal!" He looked from one man to the other. "They are only half-naked, right? You don't expect me to get my kit off entirely, do you?"

Trent looked a bit hopeful, then shook his head. "No, of course not. We just want a bit of muscle showing to please the ladies."

"I'm engaged," Harry said, trying to muster some patience. "I don't need to please any ladies but Ginny."

"We'll send her a calendar with our compliments," Murphy said quickly. "Please, Harry, it's not a big deal. Just take your shirt off and we'll be done in no time."

Harry took a step closer to Murphy. "I have scars, remember?"

"They barely show," Murphy replied. "I've seen you in the locker room. You look fine. Just cooperate, lad. It'll soon be over."

Nearly growling with frustration, Harry yanked his shirt out of his jeans and tugged it over his head, dislodging his glasses in the process. He straightened his glasses and tossed his shirt aside, then ran his fingers roughly through his hair and glared at Trent. "Let's get this over with."

Trent stood staring at Harry with his mouth hanging open. "Oh. My. Stars."

Harry was near the breaking point. “What now?”

“What kind of workout do you do, Harry? I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anyone in such excellent nick!”

“I fly.” Harry wasn’t about to tell him that his torso and arms were so developed because of his flying as a phoenix, raven or thestral when he was in Animagus form.

Trent swallowed hard, then held his wand up, adjusting the lights and the wind machine. He bent down and looked through his camera at Harry, who stood glaring at the camera with tremendous defiance.

“Dear Merlin’s ghost. If I were a Death Eater — and mind you, I’m not! — I’d simply surrender if you glared at me that way. You do know you’re scaring me, right?” He straightened up and looked at Harry directly. “But it’s a great look! Really!”

Harry sighed and did his best to stop scowling. “What do you want me to do?”

Trent walked up to Harry and moved around him, using his wand to adjust the lights from time to time. He stopped and gasped when he got behind Harry.

Harry looked over his shoulder at the photographer, who was standing totally silent, simply staring at Harry’s scars. After a long moment, the man cleared his throat roughly.

“I, um, I read about how you suffered during the war,” he murmured, looking uncomfortable now. “Your scars tell the tale.” He looked Harry in the eye, a much more respectful expression on his face. “I’m sorry to put you through this, Mr. Potter.”

The sudden change in the man’s attitude made Harry nearly smile. He’s only doing his job, and he’s trying to be nice. He sighed, then said, “What happened to ‘Harry’?”

Trent blushed. “Yes, well. Shall we get on with it then?”

“Yes, let’s.”

For about twenty minutes, Harry posed with his shirt off, trying not to blush too much when the photographer got silly with his comments again. Then Harry had to pose with a broom.

“But I don’t fly with my shirt off,” Harry protested.

“Perhaps you’ll start a new style,” Trent replied with a teasing grin.

Harry gave in, made the broom hover and mounted it, then posed in front of the sky backdrop again, this time reaching out as if to catch a flying Snitch. Then Trent handed him a Snitch, which Harry held in his fist as he pumped it overhead in a triumphant gesture, with as much of a winner’s grin on his face as he could manage.

Finally, it was over. Harry heaved a huge sigh of relief as he grabbed his shirt and dragged it over his head. He straightened his glasses, raked his fingers through his hair again and shoved the tail of his shirt roughly into the waistband of his trousers, giving Murphy occasional annoyed glances. We’re just going to visit some sponsors, he said. Right!

“Thank you for your cooperation, Harry. I hope my photos do you justice,” Trent said as he walked Harry and Murphy to the door. “Have a wonderful day.”

“Yeah, you too.”

As he and Murphy walked down Diagon Alley, Harry walked with his head bowed, lost in thought. He was angry that neither his team mates nor the team manager had warned him about the photo shoot. He drew his wand suddenly when a man burst out of a shop toward him.

“Don’t hex me, mate!” Fred Weasley said, laughing, but with his hands in the air. “I saw you coming and thought I’d say hello. George would be out here too, but he’s with a customer.”

Harry relaxed and pocketed his wand, glad it was a friend. “How are you, Fred?”

“Spiffing, simply spiffing! What are you doing on Diagon Alley? I thought you’d be at practice now.”

Murphy touched Harry’s arm briefly. “Harry, if you want to chat for a mo’, I’ll just pop into the pub here.”

Harry nodded, then turned to Fred and told him about the photo shoot that was sprung on him with no warning.

“Yeah, that would be a bit annoying,” Fred agreed, then lowered his voice when he continued. “About as annoying as those fans hovering just a few feet behind you.”

“What—”

“Don’t turn around now, mate, but there’s a whole gaggle of females behind you, wondering if that’s really you or just some bloke wearing a shirt with your name on,” Fred murmured.



Harry didn't have the patience to deal with fans right now. "Great." He blew out a hard breath. "What are they doing?" He didn't really want to turn around and encourage them. If he stayed turned away from them, maybe they'd just leave.

"They're sending scouts round to peep at you from the side." Fred smirked. "Want to hide in the shop?"

Harry sighed. "No. This is why I'm out here, to meet and greet and do publicity for the team." He'd no sooner finished speaking than one of the girls from the group whooped with delight.

"It is him! Look, it's Harry Potter! Right here in Diagon Alley!"

Harry made a face at Fred, who was chuckling, then pasted on a smile and turned to the girl who'd spoken. "Hello."

"Oh!" The girl seemed to be startled when he spoke directly to her. "Hi! I'm, um, so glad to meet you."

"Hi." Harry looked at the other women and girls now surrounding him. "Are you ladies here on holiday, or just shopping?"

"Both!" another girl said. "What are you doing here? Do you come here often?"

Harry didn't have a good answer for either question, but was spared having to think of one by the other girls, whose questions soon tumbled over each other. He finally held his hands up for quiet. "I can't answer so many questions at once, sorry. How about this?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of the team cards. "These will get you a ten percent discount on tickets to any of our home games. The schedule's on the back." He began passing them out.

The cards were snatched by eager hands and soon the girls were commenting excitedly over the picture of Harry on the front. While they were swarming around him, Harry felt a hand very definitely squeeze his arse. He spun around, but didn't catch whoever did it. Before he could say anything, the girl who'd talked to him first spoke up.

"Harry, will you sign this for me? Make it 'To Nancy with love.'"

Harry smiled and signed the card with only his name, then did the same for the others, keeping his back to Fred and hoping his friend would stay there to protect his backside. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Nancy react with disappointment to the signature on her card.

"Are you still seeing that redhead?" Nancy asked, her tone a bit aggressive, Harry thought.

"She's my fiancée." He kept signing cards, hoping the girl would back off.

"She isn't that pretty. You could do better," she said now, her tone snippy.

"Hey, that's my sister—" Fred began, his voice uncharacteristically harsh.

Harry stopped what he was doing and looked at the girl seriously, then spoke, interrupting Fred. "She's beautiful, and she's perfect for me. We're very happy together." He almost smiled when he heard Fred muttering something about "stupid fangirls" behind him.

The other girls elbowed the rude one roughly to the back of the group, some of them apologizing for her behaviour.

Harry finished signing their cards and turned to grin at Fred. "Thanks for watching my back, mate."

"No problem. Next time you think someone's going to squeeze your arse, though, call George and me. We might enjoy running interference for you under those circumstances!"

"You're welcome to it." Yeah, Fred and George would think it a laugh to have strange girls groping their bums. He wished he could pass the fan girls off to them. It would certainly make his life simpler.

Harry turned back to the girls, who were still standing as he'd left them, clutching their signed cards and staring at him in awe. Their devotion saddened him somehow. When they saw him looking at them, they surged forward again. Harry held his hands up and backed away, trying to smile at them while fighting his flaring temper.

"I have to go, ladies. I hope you enjoy the game when you come. See you later, Fred." Harry stalked off toward the pub. Before he reached the doorway, Murphy stepped out of the pub and joined him.

"Well done, lad. I was watching," Murphy said now.

"Why didn't you come and help me? They were swarming all over me!"

Murphy raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I thought you were doing fine."

"I didn't feel fine." Harry walked along silently for a bit as his temper continued to simmer. "Do we have more appointments?"

"Nothing's set up. We'll just visit shops as we come to them."

Harry stopped and turned toward Murphy. "Then I'd like a break."

"Why? You're doing so well—"

Harry glared at the man. "You don't understand how hard this is for me! I hate it!" he hissed, trying to avoid being heard by passers-by.

Murphy looked gobsmacked. "Why? You're so popular—"

Harry continued in a hoarse whisper. "I don't care! I just want to be left alone! People seem to think they own me or something. They treat me like an object, not a person. It's creepy." He blew out an impatient breath. "One of them squeezed my arse!" He shook his head, fighting back his indignation. "You took a break in the pub while I talked to them. I'd like a break as well."

Murphy smiled and held an arm toward the pub invitingly. "Shall we have a pint, then?"

"No. I'll be back in a while," he said, then Disapparated. When he reappeared, he was standing outside the forest behind Hogwarts. Harry glanced around, saw he was alone, and changed into a raven so he could fly onto the grounds. He soared over the familiar grounds, watching students walking and jogging to class with Hagrid or in the greenhouses or back at the castle.

A group leaving the greenhouses caught his eye. In the centre of the group was a very familiar mane of long red hair. He landed out of sight, changed back into himself and walked to meet them. When Ginny caught sight of him, her face glowed with joy. Harry felt better immediately.

"Hi." He reached out and took the heavy bag off her shoulder, nodding to her friends as he drew her away.

Ginny slipped her hand into his and fell into step with him. "You look so much better! What are you doing here? Not that I mind, of course!"

"I'm fine. I just needed to see you. I was having . . . well, I've had what might be called 'a day.'"

She studied his face, her eyes sympathetic. "That bad, huh?"

"Yeah. But it's better now." They'd reached a small copse of trees. Harry pulled her to him and kissed her thoroughly. "I missed you."

"Mmm, me too."

"Are you free now?" He raised his eyebrows hopefully.

"No, I have to go and work on a project for Transfiguration with Colin and Luna. This was the only time the three of us could get together today. I'm sorry."

"That's OK. I just needed to see you for a bit. You go on." He wished they had time for more than a few stolen kisses, but at least seeing her had calmed his temper.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Honest." Seeing her doubtful look, he grinned and tilted his head, acting as if he hadn't a care in the world. "I just missed you, that's all."

"I'll see you Tuesday, then, right? You have a game this weekend?"

"Yeah. See you next week. Have a good day. Good luck with your project."

"Thanks."

With a quick kiss goodbye, they parted, Ginny heading toward the castle, and Harry watching her go before changing back into a raven and leaving the grounds. He Disapparated and returned to Diagon Alley, where he found Murphy back in the pub.

"Ready to move on, then?" Murphy said with a genial smile.

Harry shrugged, resigned to doing publicity the rest of the day. "Yeah."



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 04

The Lions were down by a hundred and sixty points, thanks to Ron's being hit in the stomach by a Bludger early in the game. Despite being badly injured, he stayed in the game, but it was much more difficult for him to stop goals.

Now the opposing Seeker was right on top of the Snitch. Harry crashed his broom into the other Seeker's repeatedly, trying to keep the man from catching the small golden ball. The opposing Seeker was well-experienced and a good flyer. None of Harry's tactics put him off track for catching the ball! When the man nearly had his fingers around the Snitch, Harry hit the other Seeker's hand sideways with the back of his hand. As fast as his broom was going, Harry's hand simply flew into the Snitch without him even trying to catch it, his fingers closing around it out of habit. He cursed his stupidity and bad timing all the way to the ground. The Lions had lost by ten points, and it was all his fault. Harry was disgusted with himself.

"Buck up, boys, you played a great game!" their captain said. "Potter, stop blaming yourself. You were in a tough situation and did the best you could to stop the other Seeker from catching the Snitch. I think that Snitch was a bit slow today, don't you?"

Harry knew the captain was simply trying to buoy up his young Seeker's confidence. Harry didn't lack confidence, he'd just messed up. He sighed, then slapped a sickly smile on his face, doing his best to appreciate the kindness the other players were showing him, which he felt he didn't deserve.

The captain stopped in front of Harry when they reached the locker room. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Harry. That was a very unusual situation today, but it showed me a hole in our training. I'll come up with some drills so you can practice deflecting the other Seeker's catch." He clapped Harry on the shoulder. "You were brilliant out there, lad. There will be other games. Just do better next time."

"I will," Harry said.

"As for you other lads, the biggest thing we need to work on is defence." He sighed and looked at his two Beaters. "You two need to be on top of things more. Weasley getting that Bludger in the stomach cost us the game, and that wasn't his fault, but yours. We'll run some drills this next week to improve our defensive plays." He looked at Ron, who was still holding his stomach even after the team's medi-wizard had treated him. "All right there, Weasley?"

"Yeah," Ron muttered, stifling a groan as he shifted his weight on the bench.

"Good man! Right, then, lads, see you next week!"

When Smithers dismissed the team, Harry helped Ron change out of his team robes into his street clothes.

"You look a wreck, mate," Harry commented.

"I feel it too. I'm going home to take that potion the medi-wizard gave me. He said I'd be fine after a good sleep."

"Right."

As they left the locker room, they were met by Hermione, Arthur, Molly and the twins.

"Ron!" Molly cried, rushing to his side. "How are you, dear? A Bludger to the stomach! I can't believe it, I simply can't believe it!"

"I'm fine, Mum," he said, draping his arm around Hermione. "Hi, sweetie."

"You look a bit peaky," Molly continued.

"Are you OK?" Hermione said quietly.

"I need a nap, but I'll be fine," he assured her. He turned back to his mother, who was still fussing over him. "Mum, give over! The medi-wizard said I just need to sleep and that potion will fix me up straightaway."

Molly sighed. "You can come to the Burrow to recover if you want."

"Thanks, but I'll be fine at home."

Hermione nudged him. When he glanced down at her, she murmured, "We haven't visited them in a while."

"Oh." He looked back at his mum. "All right, we'll come over after I have a nap. Thanks for inviting us."

"You'll stay for dinner, won't you?" Molly was glowing with excitement.

Ron grinned. "You know I never turn down the offer of a free meal, especially one you cooked."

Molly beamed at him, then turned to Harry. "Will you join us?"

He grinned. "Sure, thanks."

“Harry, brilliant game!” George enthused. “Except for that premature catch, of course.”

“Could’ve happened to anybody, mate,” Fred added. “Too bad Ronnikins let those goals through.”

Ron turned to his brothers, his face already red with anger. “I’d like to see you stop a goal with four broken ribs and internal bleeding!” he hissed, leaning toward the twins so his mother wouldn’t hear how badly he’d been injured.

Fred frowned. “Are you all right now?” he murmured.

Ron kept his voice low, answering only after glancing at his mum to be certain she was still occupied talking to Harry. “Yeah, the medi-wizard healed my ribs and stopped the bleeding. The potion’s just for residual pain and to make certain everything finishes mending quickly.”

Seeing their mother looking at them oddly, George raised his eyebrows and held his hands up in mock surrender. “Fine! Fine! Have it your way! I just think you should use that handy Shield Charm Harry taught us in D.A. so you won’t get hit like that again.”

Ron gaped at his brother. “That’s not a bad idea!”

“It’s not legal,” Harry reminded him.

Ron deflated instantly. “Oh. Yeah. Damn.”

By now, they had reached the door out of the stadium. Harry and Ron were surprised to see a gaggle of fans waiting for autographs despite the team’s loss. They passed out cards and patiently signed whatever people handed them.

After a few minutes, Harry glanced over at Ron and saw that he was standing oddly, favouring the side where the Bludger had hit him. Harry decided they’d spent enough time with the fans for one day.

Harry handed back the last card he’d signed and gave an apologetic smile to those he was about to disappoint. “Sorry, you lot, I’ve got writer’s cramp. See you at the next game! Thanks for coming!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry and Ron sometimes spent their lunch hour wandering through the Muggle part of London. They enjoyed exploring the city, and Ron got a particular kick out of browsing the shops. They’d already picked out some things for Christmas and Arthur’s birthday, as well, in their wanderings.

The two young men were coming out of a shop on Piccadilly Circus when a tall man with long silvery-blond hair down over his shoulders and a long black coat passed them. Harry gasped and pulled his wand.

Ron shoved Harry’s arm down before he could cast a spell and pushed Harry into the wall, banging his head. “What do you think you’re doing? Lucius Malfoy’s dead!”

Harry shook his head, trying to clear it of the vision that had flashed into his mind, blocking out the real scene around him: Lucius in the Department of Mysteries battling Harry and his friends for the prophecy. “Dead?”

“Yes!” Ron leaned closer and continued speaking in a whisper. “You killed him outside the Shrieking Shack, remember?”

Harry finally relaxed and shoved his wand back into his pocket. “Oh. Yeah.” He looked up at Ron. “Thanks, mate. If you hadn’t been here—”

Ron shrugged. “No problem.”

They both looked toward the man with the long blond hair, who was now waiting to cross the street. They could see his face now. It wasn’t anything like the aristocratic, arrogant Malfoy. This man was barely out of his teens and still covered with spots.

Harry tried to smile. “If I’d seen his face first—”

Ron snorted. “Yeah, there’s no mistaking him for a Malfoy.”

Harry knew Ron sometimes had these flashes as well, but Ron’s were rare and very brief. He never lost touch with reality the way Harry sometimes did. Harry took a deep breath and clapped his friend on his back. “Lunch is on me. I owe you.”

A broad grin crossed Ron’s face. “You’re on!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Some weeks later, Harry was walking down the hall at Hogwarts, going back to his quarters after teaching a flying class. He grinned and lifted his hand to wave when he saw Ginny at the opposite end of the corridor. His heart sank when he saw a very Molly Weasley-like expression of fury on Ginny’s face as she stormed toward him.

“What’s wrong?” he said when she neared him.

“This!” She shook something under his nose that looked like a bundle of thick, glossy papers fastened together. “I can’t believe you did this! It isn’t like you!”

Harry was completely flummoxed. "What did I do?"

She dropped her bag with a resounding thud and opened the bundle, revealing a calendar designed very much like those used by Muggles. Harry had a mental flash of the ones Aunt Petunia favoured, with a different flower photo for each month, and the ones Aunt Marge used, with pictures of bulldogs wearing top hats, monocles and other attire, posed like people going to the opera or driving fancy cars. Then he saw the cover of the calendar in Ginny's hand. There was Harry in all his shirtless glory, his jeans so tight they left little to the imagination, his hair blowing in the wind from one of Trent's instruments. Harry realized with a start that the stern look on his face resembled the haughty, disapproving look often affected by professional models. But he'd been trying to hold his temper when that look crossed his face. He remembered it clearly.

He raised his eyes to Ginny's face and sighed. "It's the team calendar. I told you about it. If you don't like it, don't use it."

"It isn't the team calendar. That's this one," she said, kicking her bag over. Another calendar slid out of the bag, this one with the team posed together under the London Lions scoreboard. "This one's just you, Harry."

He gasped. "You're kidding."

"Do I look like I'm kidding?"

He tucked a stray hair behind her ear and rested his hand on her shoulder, hoping the gesture would calm her. "Why are you so angry?"

"You don't like fangirls, remember? What do you think is going to happen when they see this? It's already happening! Some of the girls saw this calendar when I got it in the post at breakfast today. You should've heard them. It was positively disgusting."

"Why are you angry with me?"

"I'm not! I'm just so frustrated! No matter what you do, somebody twists it to make life more difficult for you!"

Harry took the calendar from her and began flipping through it. He remembered every pose. Trent truly was a genius with a camera. The pictures were beautifully framed, lit and shot. Some people would probably consider them artistic. Harry noticed his scars showed clearly, but they weren't glaringly obvious the way he thought they might be.

"And the worst thing is," Ginny continued now, "it's beautiful. I'd love to hang it in my room, but—"

He looked up at her. "But what?"

She sighed, her shoulders slumping as the anger left her. "I don't know, Harry. It just feels like trouble brewing, you know? I can almost smell it coming."

"I expect they've done this for everyone," Harry said, hoping he was right. "They're doing everything they can to publicize the team, to let the public get to know us—"

Ginny laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "Yeah, after seeing these pictures, people are going to know you in ways only I should know you!"

Harry chuckled as he pulled her into his arms. "No one else will ever know me the way you do." He kissed the top of her head and breathed in the scent of her. Could he ever get enough of this woman? "It's been a while since I've seen you in 'warrior princess' mode. You're scary when you're like this!"

She leaned back against his arms and looked up at him. "I'm not there to protect you all the time, Harry. I worry about you."

"No fangirl is going to give me any trouble. When they try to, I remind them I'm very happily engaged and will be married to the love of my life soon. That usually shuts them up."

A worried frown crossed her face. "Just be careful, okay?"

"Always."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Harry arrived home that evening, he found Hermione poring over Ron's calendar. Ron's scars, which showed as bright red streaks on his fair skin, had been expertly painted out in the photos.

"He looks good, doesn't he?" Hermione said wistfully.

"Yeah, he does," Harry agreed. He looked at her more closely. "Are you crying?"

She rubbed her face impatiently. "No. Not really." She sniffled. "Well, maybe a bit." She looked up at him, her eyes dark and sad. "It just reminds me of how he was before . . . well, you know."

Harry nodded. He knew exactly what she meant. Back when Ron's leg was whole and he wasn't scarred like Harry.

His thoughts must have been plain on his face. Hermione gasped. "I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean—"

He waved his hand dismissively. "No problem. The photographer did a nice job on Ron's pictures. Do you like the calendar?"

"It's lovely. They did one of you, too, didn't they?"

He nodded.

"Has Ginny seen it?"

"Oh, yeah. She was livid." He went on to tell her about Ginny's reaction to half-naked pictures of her fiancé being spread all over the Wizarding World.

"She has a point," Hermione said, glancing down at the picture of Ron in her hands. "I suppose the fangirls aren't as aggressive with Ron because he's married." She looked up at him, her eyebrows drawn together in a worried frown. "But it's more likely because he isn't you. You may have a problem, Harry."

He snorted, trying to downplay the discomfort this whole situation gave him. "It wouldn't be the first time."





# Now And Forever

## Chapter 05

Two days after the calendars became available to the public, Ginny was startled to be surrounded by owls vying for her attention while she ate breakfast with her friends.

“What’s all this?” Colin said.

“I don’t know,” she replied, taking a letter from the nearest owl. When she opened it, she sighed. “Merlin’s beard.”

“What?” Dennis said from Colin’s other side.

Ginny shook her head before she began reading. “This one says, ‘What makes you think you’re good enough for Harry Potter?’ and goes on in that vein.” She crumpled it up and threw it over her shoulder, then looked up at Colin and Dennis. “You two can help open them, if you want. Just look out for the Howlers.” She’d just noticed red envelopes attached to some of the owls.

Some of the letters were rude, some angry, some complimentary, some funny. The three friends were joined by Luna, who helped them open the rest of the envelopes, reading the good ones aloud, tossing the rest on the floor, where Ginny vanished them from time to time.

As Ginny opened one of the last envelopes, powder burst from the parchment, covering her face and hands and rapidly changing into a slimy goo. She screamed in pain as huge purple blotches formed on her face, neck and hands.

“You look terrible,” Luna said calmly. “You’d better go to the Hospital Wing.”

Colin stood up and picked up Ginny’s bag, then held his hand out to her. “Come on, we’ll take you.” Dennis helped Colin get Ginny to her feet. Colin glanced at Luna as he, Dennis and Ginny started to walk away. “Luna, could you clean off that letter and see if it says who sent it?”

Luna held her wand over the letter, vacuuming up the dust, then peered at the scratchy writing on the parchment. “It says Ginny doesn’t deserve Harry, and that she’s going to lose him. It isn’t signed.”

“Just what I needed,” Ginny grumbled between sniffles. “A violent fangirl taking her insanity out on me.”

“If she sent this to you, I wonder what she sent Harry,” Luna said.

Ginny stared at her. “You’re right. I need to warn him.”

“Hospital wing first. You don’t want those spots to get any worse,” Colin said, steering her toward the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ginny was soon back in the classroom, with bandages swathing her face and hands. She couldn’t take notes, she couldn’t use her wand, she could barely speak, but she wasn’t ill enough to stay in the hospital wing. She sighed and slumped dejectedly in her seat at lunch, smiling wanly when various friends expressed their sympathy while Luna tried to feed her.

“Honestly, Luna, I’m not hungry,” Ginny insisted, turning away from the spoon Luna was circling around Ginny’s mouth. Luna kept making strange buzzing noises, as if the spoon were a bee that Ginny might like to catch in her mouth.

The Great Hall stilled when the doors slammed open. Everyone turned to see who had come in so noisily. Harry Potter was rushing toward the Gryffindor table, his eyes searching the seated students frantically until they found Ginny. He sped up, only slowing when he skidded to a stop beside her.

“Ginny!” His face twisted in anguish as he stared at the bandages covering her cheeks and nose. “I’m so sorry. Are you in pain?”

Ginny tried to smile. Her heart had lifted at the sight of him. The concern on his face made her love him even more than she already did, something she would never have believed possible. “I’m fine, really. It looks worse than it is.”

“Does Madam Pomfrey know what caused it?”

“Bulbadox Powder mixed with Blister Beetle Paste and Exploding Fluid and with some kind of hex on it,” she replied. She tried to make her voice light and casual. She didn’t want to add to Harry’s burdens by making him worry about her.

“Those are very caustic ingredients.”

She signed and nodded. “Madame Pomfrey said she’d never seen anything like it. It’s not terribly sophisticated, but it was effective.”

He reached for her hand, where purple splotches showed beyond the bandages, and ran his thumb gently over the splotches. When she flinched, he sighed. “You lied to me. You are in pain.” Harry had that stubborn look in his eyes. “Come with me.”

“Where?” She was already getting to her feet.

“To my quarters. I’ll try to speed up the healing,” he said quietly as he shouldered her bag and put his arm around her, careful to not bump her boil-

covered hands.

"Madam Pomfrey used essence of murtlap on the spots. They're a lot better already."

"I still want to try to see if I can do anything. What good's a healing talent if I can't use it on my girl?" He smiled at her, but his eyes showed how upset he was. "I'm sorry—"

"It wasn't your fault," she said, interrupting whatever guilt trip he was about to lay on himself.

"She isn't your fan, she's mine," he replied with obvious disgust. "That makes it my fault."

She shook her head and tried to smile at him. "In whose bizarre little world? You can't control those people. It just happened. I'll survive."

"You'd better," he said, trying unsuccessfully to be playful.

When they reached his quarters, Harry unwrapped her hands and removed the bandages from her face. The purple splotches were hot-looking and swollen to the point of bursting. His face twisted in sympathy. "It hurts to look at them."

"Yeah." She sighed dramatically, then pretended to swoon. She ended up leaning against his chest, her head cradled in his shoulder as she looked up at him. "Mmmm. I feel better already."

Harry shook his head and smiled at her, then held his hands over the spots on her face, trying to heal them. After a bit, their colour faded and they shrank in size, but nothing he did would remove them completely. "I wish—"

"They feel so much better," Ginny said quickly. "Thank you."

"They're still there, though. I couldn't get rid of them."

Ginny shrugged. "So you're not perfect. That's OK. Perfect people are boring." She smiled a bit, glad that it wasn't nearly as painful to smile as it had been before he worked on her. "I do feel better, Harry. Thanks."

"I'm an idiot," he said suddenly. He pushed away from her and stood up, then changed into a phoenix. Soon tears poured from the phoenix's eyes over Ginny's injuries, making them disappear at last. Satisfied, the phoenix hopped off the bed and stood on the floor, then changed back into Harry.

"I always forget I can do that," he said with a self-deprecating chuckle as he held her now spotless hand up to the light, examining it. "Better?"

"Yes! Thank you." Ginny scooted next to him, nestled her head in the crook of his shoulder again and sighed. "Just having you here makes me feel better. What are you doing here in the middle of the day anyway?"

"Healing you, silly. I came as soon as I could. We're on lunch break."

"That explains the smelly uniform," she teased, wrinkling her nose.

"Sorry to make you suffer so," he said, then kissed her forehead. "I need to get back. I just had to see how you were."

She tightened her arms around him, reluctant to let him leave. "I wish you could stay. It's nice to see you on a non-Tuesday."

He chuckled. "I wish I could stay too. And yeah, we'll have to try this 'non-Tuesday' thing more often." He stood up and helped her to her feet. "Don't open any more mail from people you don't know, OK? I've already sent Grandfather and McGonagall messages about it."

"OK." They left his quarters and began walking down the hall. They hadn't walked far before Harry stopped, turned and faced her, his hand held out between them.

"Give me the letter. Ron and I will research it and find whoever did this to you." She handed him the letter, which was now covered in cloth to protect her from any remaining dangers. Harry took the envelope cautiously and stowed it in a pocket. "It will be a good project for our Discovery and Research class. And then we can bring this idiot up on charges."

"I hope you catch her before she really hurts someone." She sighed, sad that he'd soon have to leave. "Too bad you have to go back to practice so soon."

Harry smoothed her hair away from her face and smiled. "I can think of a lot of things I'd rather do than go back to practice. Unfortunately, I have to go. You be careful, OK?"

"I will. I love you, Harry."

"I love you too." He kissed her, then raised his hand and said, "Merlin! Let's go!" A moment later, his phoenix flashed above his head. Harry grabbed the beautiful bird's tail and was gone in a flash.

"Bye, Harry," Ginny murmured to the space where he'd been just an instant before. She sighed, picked up her book bag and trudged down the corridor toward her next class.

\* \* \* \* \*

What an interesting problem, Harry," Vance Thurston, his Discovery and Research teacher, said when Harry talked to him about Ginny's letters after class that evening. "How many, um . . . shall we call them 'toxic letters,' since they include an actual danger rather than just a threat?"

Harry nodded.

"How many like this has she received?"

"Just the one so far, but several others were threatening. Shall I bring those in, as well?"

"Yes, bring anything that's threatening or actually dangerous. We'll make researching them a class project. May I keep this one so I can study it?"

"Yes, of course. Thanks a lot, Professor." Harry glanced at Ron, who was checking his watch. "We'd better go or we'll be late for our next class. Good night."

"Night, lads!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days later, Harry and Ron skidded into their desks just as the bell rang. Harry grinned at Ron and whispered, "Seems like old times."

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "First year at Hogwarts, getting lost on the way to Transfiguration—"

"If you lads are ready," their professor said, "we can begin."

"Sorry, Professor," Ron said, his cheeks flaming red.

"Yeah, sorry," Harry added.

This class was Disguise and Concealment, taught by Malcolm Deutsch, a serious-looking middle-aged man who showed a surprising sense of humour at times. He sometimes actually giggled at the often bizarre results of his students' efforts to change their appearance with unspoken spells. Ron's attempt to make his nose thick and hooked resulted in his nose becoming metallic and looking rather like a coat hook, which amused everyone but Ron. When Harry tried to make himself look like a Goblin, the ears got out of control, rising in points that flopped over and dangled sadly down past his chin once they finally stopped growing. Ron fell out of his chair laughing at Harry's ears. Harry laughed so hard, his stomach hurt. It was especially fun to play with those floppy ears, pulling on the tips so they stood out like a House Elf's. He tried to tie them in a knot on top of his head for Ron's further amusement, but a glance from their professor stopped him before he actually tied the knot. Their classmates experienced similar mishaps, which generated a lot of laughter.

Tonight's lesson was Miniaturization.

"Now that we've practiced the charm on teacups and mice, it's time to try it on yourselves. I want you to change some part of yourself to create a disguise," Professor Deutsch instructed as he strolled between the desks. He stopped in front of Harry's. "For instance, Mr. Potter could make several choices. He could change the size or shape of his glasses, or both the size and shape. He has large green eyes, which he could make small and piggish, and he could also muddy the colour or change it completely if he wished."

He turned to Ron. "Mr. Weasley's most obvious choice would be to change his hair colour, but since tonight's lesson is Miniaturization, I'd suggest he make his nose short and perhaps turned up on the end."

Ron's face turned beet red at the attention, which made his classmates chuckle and Harry grin at him.

"All right. Off you go," Deutsch said. "Let's see what you can do."

Harry and Ron were the youngest in the class, having gone to Auror School straight from Hogwarts. The others in the class had chosen to become Aurors after spending some years in the Magical Law Enforcement Squad or other areas of the Ministry.

Harry took his glasses off and squinted at them. From talking with his grandfather, he knew he could change the shape without interfering with the spells on the lenses. He still liked their round shape and the thin black frames, but to change his appearance. . . . Hmmm. How about— Harry tapped his glasses with his wand and smiled as they became smaller in height but still the same width, and silver rather than black. He put them on and looked at Ron.

"What do you think?"

Ron grinned. "Nice one, Harry. But you still look like you."

"I'm not finished yet. What are you going to do?"

"I thought about trying to make myself shorter, but then my robes wouldn't fit."

Harry snorted. "So shrink your robes."

"Yeah, I could do that." Ron was still thinking. "Maybe I'll do my nose again. I'm getting better at it." His expression brightened. "I could do my hair, as well. What do you think of this?" He tapped his head with his wand and his hair was suddenly as black as Harry's.

Harry laughed. "Erm, no. Your skin isn't the right colour for black hair. Try again."

“Hmn. Okay.” Ron changed his hair to a brown similar to Hermione’s.

“That’s better,” Harry said, then grinned again. “Don’t forget your brows and lashes.”

“Oh, yeah! Right!” Ron said as he looked at his reflection in one of the small hand mirrors the teacher had provided. “What else are you going to do?”

“Dunno. I guess I could give myself thick lips or something,” Harry said, wondering how it would feel to kiss Ginny with thick lips rather than his somewhat thin ones.

“That wouldn’t be miniaturization,” Ron reminded him.

“Oh, yeah.” Harry looked in the mirror, considering what to try.

“How’s this, Professor?” Larry Andrews called from his seat in the row ahead of Harry.

Harry stifled a laugh when he looked up. Andrews was an older man who’d decided a change in career would be interesting. Tall, thin and still vigorous in his late fifties, he had a dry wit that made their classes together a pleasure. Now he’d vanished his greying thatch of hair, leaving a shining bald dome in its wake.

“Well done, Mr. Andrews,” Professor Deutsch said, standing by a student in the row behind Harry. “What can you add to that look?”

“I thought, perhaps—”

Harry felt his stomach lurch in panic. He pulled his wand and captured Andrews instantly in a Sphere Shield Charm, then leaped to his feet and began shrinking the sphere. His spell was disrupted by Ron grabbing him from behind, pinning Harry’s arms to his sides.

“Gerroff!” Harry cried, fighting Ron’s restraining arms. He had to capture and kill the monster in front of him. Why wasn’t Ron helping him? I thought I killed him! How did he come back this time? He’s supposed to be dead!

“Harry! Stop!” Ron cried as he wrestled Harry’s wand arm, trying to keep him from killing their classmate.

Several Expelliarmus charms hit Harry and Ron, throwing them across the room. Ron grunted as he hit the wall and the weight of Harry’s body thudded into his. Somehow, Harry still had his wand, and was fighting Ron’s grip so he could aim it at Andrews, who was trying to vanish the sphere surrounding him.

“Harry! We’re safe! Nobody’s going to hurt you here!” Ron groaned in pain as Harry drove his elbow into Ron’s stomach, trying to break Ron’s grip on him.

Deutsch aimed his wand at Harry. “Petrificus Totalus!” Harry instantly stiffened in Ron’s arms.

Harry fought the spell with everything in him. Voldemort was alive! He, Harry, had to kill him! What were they doing, keeping him from finishing the fight! Voldemort would kill Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Remus, Dumbledore—everyone Harry cared about. He had to get free!

\* \* \* \* \*

Ron laid Harry gently on the floor and looked up at Andrews, who was still struggling with the Sphere Shield Charm, then waved his wand, ending Harry’s spell. “You okay?” he asked Andrews.

Andrews gasped for breath. “I was . . . running . . . out of air . . . in there. Thanks.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“What happened, Mr. Weasley?” Deutsch said, kneeling beside Harry’s body. Harry’s eyes looked terrified, frantic, but the spell held him still. “Why did he—”

“Look at him!” Ron made an angry gesture toward Andrews. “He looks like You-Know-Who!” He turned to face Andrews. “Why would you do that to him? Or to any of us?”

“I was trying to miniaturize my nose,” Andrews replied, restoring his rather bulbous nose to its normal size. “What did I do? What did it look like?”

“You vanished it,” Deutsch replied.

“You-Know-Who had no nose, just slits for nostrils,” Ron growled, bending over Harry with a worried expression.

“And no hair,” Deutsch added.

“It was an accident!” Andrews cried. “I didn’t mean—”

“Shut up!” Ron growled. He looked down at Harry, whose face was frozen in a horrified expression behind the strange silver glasses. Ron restored his normal appearance before getting in Harry’s line of sight.

“Harry? Harry, look at me,” Ron said, leaning over Harry now. “Can you see me, mate? It’s Ron. D’you recognize me?”

When Harry's eyes locked on his, Ron continued. "That's right, just concentrate on me. What you saw wasn't V-voldemort. It was just Andrews. He vanished his nose by mistake." Ron watched Harry's eyes until they relaxed a bit, then cast the counter-jinx, releasing Harry from the spell.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Ron released him from the spell, Harry shuddered, then pushed up his glasses and rubbed his eyes. After a long moment, he rolled slowly onto his side and sat up.

"You all right, mate?" Ron said, squatting in front of him.

"Yeah." Harry looked around the room and saw everyone staring at him. He dropped his eyes when he felt his cheeks flame with embarrassment, but glanced up again when he felt Ron's strong hand under his arm.

"Ready to get up?"

"Yeah. Thanks. Did I hurt you?"

Ron shook his head. "Nah."

Harry saw Ron wince in pain as he helped Harry to his feet. "I'm sorry, Ron. I don't know what came over me."

"I do. Look at Andrews," Ron said.

"Andrews?" Harry looked at the man, who still had no hair but had restored his nose. The memory suddenly flooded Harry's mind. "Oh. Are you all right? I didn't mean—"

"No worries, Harry," Andrews replied. "I'm sorry I upset you."

"Sit down, Mr. Potter," Professor Deutsch said. "You've just had a terrible shock. You're still suffering from the war, aren't you?"

Harry just shrugged. He hadn't told his teachers about his night terrors and the flashbacks that sometimes hit him during the day, such as the one he'd just experienced.

"It can take a long time to get your life back to normal," Deutsch went on. "Do you have flashbacks or nightmares?"

Harry looked up at him in surprise. "Yes."

"That's fairly common for those who've been in battle, lad. You'll learn how to live with the memories in time."

Harry felt a faint stirring of hope. "Do you know how to speed up that process?" he said with a faint smile.

"No. I had friends who went through similar experiences after the previous war. I think it helps if you talk about it or find a way to distract yourself if you feel it coming on, but I could be wrong."

Harry shook his head. "I didn't feel this coming on. It just . . . I just . . ." A shiver of remembered terror ran up his spine when he remembered Andrews looking so much like Voldemort. He shivered again when he realized how close he'd come to killing his classmate.

"Give yourself time. And if you ever want to talk about it, my office is always open to you."

"Thanks." He looked up at Larry Andrews again. "I'm sorry. I don't know how that happened."

The older man grinned. "No problem. And now I can say I've been hexed by Harry Potter and lived to tell the tale!"

Harry grimaced. "If you must."

The grin slid off Andrews's face. "I was teasing, Harry. I'm just glad you're all right."

And I'm glad Ron kept me from killing you. Harry gave Ron's arm a grateful squeeze as they sat down and got back to work.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 06

Harry walked into St. Mungo's and found the lobby full of reporters all looking toward the corridor that led to the healers' offices. "What's up?" he asked a passing nurse.

"They're waiting for a report on Old Crow."

Harry gasped. "Old Crow? The drummer for Toads in the Loo? I've met him! What happened?"

"He was hurt while setting up for a concert today," she replied.

"Is he going to be OK?"

"Yes, I believe so. Just cuts and bruises, I think. Some equipment fell over or something like that. You're all right, aren't you, Mr. Potter?" she added with a teasing grin. "Haven't ploughed yourself recently or anything?"

"I'm fine. I just wanted to see Healer Pomfrey for a few minutes."

"I'll let him know you're here."

"Thanks."

Harry waited quietly, leaning against the wall, hoping the reporters wouldn't notice him. Unfortunately, not all of the staff was as soft-spoken as the nurse he'd first encountered.

"Mr. Potter!" another nurse cried in greeting. "You look too healthy to be here. Are you all right?"

"Fine. I just wanted to see Marcus Pomfrey for a minute," he replied just as the reporters turned and swarmed around him.

"What's wrong?" "How did you get injured this time?" "Is it an old war wound?" "Were you injured in practice?"

Harry held his hands up, silently requesting quiet. When they stilled, he replied, "Healer Pomfrey is a friend of mine. I just came to say hello and bring him some tickets for a game."

The reporters' quills were flying, taking down every word. Some of them looked at Harry with some disappointment on their faces.

"Nobody's ill or injured then? You're not here to visit a friend?"

"Just Healer Pomfrey, and just to deliver tickets." Harry pulled some tickets from his pocket and held them up.

Marcus walked up just then. "Harry! You remembered! Thanks a lot. Come on, let's have some coffee." He took the tickets with a smile and waved at the reporters as he led Harry away. When they turned the corner and were out of sight of the nosy reporters, Marcus offered the tickets back to Harry.

"Nice diversion. Why are you really here?"

Harry shook his head. "I brought you tickets. They'll get you into the family box whenever you want to attend a game."

Marcus beamed. "Thanks! What a nice surprise."

Harry chuckled. "And a good cover, as you said. Do you have a few minutes? Sorry I didn't make an appointment, but—"

"You having an appointment would result in a crowd of reporters like that. I understand."

"Is Old Crow going to be okay?"

"Yes, he'll be discharged this afternoon, I believe. What can I do for you?" Marcus said as he led Harry into his office.

Harry told him about the continuing nightmares and the episode in class where he'd nearly injured a classmate. "If Ron hadn't stopped me—" He swallowed hard, unable to say anything more.

"You told me before that you don't have the nightmares when Ginny's with you."

"That's right."

Marcus smiled. "Then I'd say you two need to get married as soon as possible."

Harry was startled into a laugh. "Doctor's orders?"

"Sure, you can tell your in-laws that if you want. Seriously, though, if her being there helps you get the rest you need. . . ." Marcus's voice trailed off.

He tilted his head as he studied Harry's weary face. "You keep up appearances in public, don't you? You looked a lot better in the lobby."

"It's a disguise spell I've learned. Otherwise, I get too many questions."

"I see." Both men were silent for a few moments. Finally, Marcus cleared his throat. "Let me have a look at you, all right?"

"OK."

A short time later, Marcus sat down behind his desk and scribbled some notes on a parchment.

Harry's anxiety grew as he watched him write. "What did you find?"

"I found a very weary young man who is at the peak of fitness except for exhaustion and depression, both of which are natural given what you've been through. Most people would have taken some time to get past those experiences, but you threw yourself into activity right away. And not just one activity, mind you, but several, all of which require concentration, precision, good judgement. You're simply too tired to manage any of the things you're trying to do, Harry. I'm prescribing a week's worth of Cheering Charms and some Dreamless Sleep Potion. You'll have a break in practice soon for Christmas, won't you?"

"Yes. Auror School will be on holiday during the same period."

"As will Hogwarts, so Ginny will be with you, right?"

Harry smiled. "Yes."

"Good. Start the Cheering Charms now. They're only forbidden on game days, so you should have no trouble from the team. This note will explain things to your coach. The sleep potion can't be used while you're in training. Keep it in case you have bad dreams over your holiday, but I suspect if Ginny's there, you'll sleep well."

Harry felt that sweet lift in his heart that he always experienced when he knew he'd be seeing Ginny soon. "Yeah, I will."

"OK. This note is to your coach," Marcus said, handing over a bit of parchment. "This one's to the Weasleys, in case you need it."

Harry felt his eyebrows fly up behind his fringe. "What's it say?"

"That the wedding should be earlier for the sake of your health. I was serious about that. Use it if you need it, but they might take the news more easily if you and Ginny simply talk to them about it. In the meantime, if you can stay with friends somewhere other than your home, the change might help you."

"Remus and Tonks have invited me to stay with them."

"Then do that, Harry. I think it might help."

"OK." Harry stood up and held out his hand. "Thanks, Marcus."

Marcus shook hands with him and grinned. "My pleasure. And thanks for the tickets!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks for letting me stay with you," Harry told Remus, setting his suitcase on the bed in their guest room.

"I hope it helps, lad. We love having you around, anyway," Remus said, squeezing the younger man's shoulder affectionately.

"And we can practice our parenting skills on you!" Tonks added with a cheeky grin. Her hair was a cheerful bubblegum pink today, standing up all over her head in happy spikes.

Harry grinned. "You're going to be fabulous parents. You don't need to practice on me. How are you feeling?"

"I feel huge!" Tonks's baby was due very soon now.

"Are you sure it won't tire you too much to help Ron and me with our homework?" Harry said. Tonks had made the offer as soon as Harry had contacted them about staying with them.

"I told you, it will be fun!" She bounced a little in excitement as she spoke. "Reading baby magazines and decorating the nursery only takes so much time and energy. It will be good to use my brain again!"

"She's been helping me mark papers, but that hasn't held her interest for long," Remus added. "I expect she'll enjoy helping you two with your homework a lot more than reading first and second year Defence essays."

Tonks clapped her hands with glee. "I can't wait!"

"Great! Ron said he could come over after dinner," Harry replied.

\* \* \* \* \*



Tonks, you're a genius!" Ron gave her an admiring grin. "It would've taken me years to sort out that hex!"

Tonks waved her hand dismissively. "Once you get that kind of spell, you never forget it. Glad I could help!"

"You're brilliant, that's all," Harry added. Tonks not only found ways to help the boys with their homework, but she also made it fun for them. "You'd be a great teacher."

"Me, a teacher? Nah, I don't think so. I'll be a mum for a while, then I'll go back to work as an Auror."

Ron nodded toward Tonks's massive belly. "How much longer?"

Smiling fondly, she gave her belly a gentle pat. "Two weeks, so the midwife tells me." She jumped a bit and laughed. "And he thinks it's about time, too!" She took Harry's hand and placed on the side of her stomach. "He's kicking, right there. Feel it?"

Harry felt a sharp bump against his palm and laughed. "He's a strong little chap, isn't he?"

"Yeah, I think so." Tonks released Harry's hand and turned to Ron. "D'you want to feel him too? He's very active right now."

Ron's face flamed. "Erm, uh, well . . ."

"You don't have to, but if you want to—"

"Go on, Ron, how often do you get the chance?" Harry said.

Ron reached out a hesitant hand, which Tonks grabbed and laid on her side where Harry's hand had been. Ron's eyes widened. "I felt it! Right there! He's dancing or something!"

"Yeah, that's how it feels to me, too," Tonks agreed.

"Wow. That's amazing, Tonks. Thanks." Ron glanced at his watch, then gathered his books, stuffed them in his bag and looked up at Harry. "It's going to be weird for you to not be in the house."

"I expect you and Hermione will enjoy having the place to yourselves," Harry teased, laughing out loud when Ron's face turned beet red again. "Good night."

"G'night," Ron said, waving as he left the house.

Tonks yawned. "I'm off to bed myself. If you want a snack or anything, Harry, the kitchen's always open. Help yourself."

"Thanks. Good night."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry, Ron and a very pregnant Tonks were sitting at the kitchen table. Tonks was coaching the boys as they practiced new hexes amid a good deal of laughter. Suddenly, Remus ran into the room, wild-eyed, his hands trembling.

"They're just outside! Come on, Tonks," he said, pulling his wife to her feet and leading her away as fast as she could manage.

Ron and Harry stared at each other, aghast. "Not again. Not here," Harry said.

Ron nodded, his face white with fear.

The two young men pulled their wands and moved toward the front of the house, trying to avoid the windows as much as possible. Harry stilled near the door. He'd heard the scuff of a shoe against the stones on the garden path. He signalled to Ron that they should separate, then moved away, only lifting his head when he got to the far side of the window by the door. A huge group of Death Eaters was outside, the Dark Mark already in the sky over several other houses. Harry gulped, then aimed his wand at the door as it burst open, Death Eaters pouring in like a flood of evil intentions.

The battle was soon joined. Harry and Ron cast spells so fast, their wands were a blur. Remus joined them, blocking the way to the back of the house, where he'd left Tonks, with his own body. He was soon struck down. A screaming Tonks took his place, throwing hexes as fast as she could.

"Tonks! Get back!" Harry cried. "Let us handle it!"

"But Remus—" Tonks sobbed.

"He'd want you safe! Now go!" Harry said, throwing a Shield Charm in front of Tonks and pushing her back as he ran toward his godfather's still form. "Ron! Hold them off!" Harry threw several jinxes over his shoulder, then tried to Levitate Remus out of the line of fire. A flurry of spells came at him and he had to drop Remus back to the floor. His godfather landed with a resounding thump, but didn't react to it. Was he already dead?

He turned back to face the enemies filling the cottage. He blew two men to bits with powerful jinxes, and melted another to jelly with a well-placed Bone-Removing Curse.

Ron was casting spells as quickly as Harry, but there were so many Death Eaters, and only Harry and Ron to fight them. Ron screamed in agony. He'd been hit with a spell that blew off his one good leg. He lay bleeding copiously on the new carpet Tonks was so happy with.

Harry was alone now, fighting at least a dozen Death Eaters. He did his best to protect Ron and Remus and to keep them from going to the back of the house where Tonks was, but it was so hard to fight so many at once! He glanced at Ron and saw that his best friend was too still, too white—dead. Remus was dead too. They were dead! What was he going to do? He couldn't think about that now. He couldn't think about Hermione as a young widow, or Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys grieving over losing another son.

Harry shook his head, trying to clear it. He had to concentrate. He still had to protect Tonks. He couldn't give in to his grief now. He had to fight, he had to kill all these enemies, he had to win!

Harry was wounded now and barely able to keep fighting, but he had to fight, he had to protect Ginny and their baby! What was wrong with Remus? Why was he here in his, Harry's house? Where was Hermione, if Ron was here? Harry thought of his children in the bedrooms above and knew that he had to kill all of these men to protect his family. He hoped none of the children came down and saw the carnage.

Harry heard a scream that seemed to go on forever. Was Tonks injured? Was she in labour? Harry realized the scream was coming from his own throat. More and more Death Eaters poured through the door, and there was Voldemort, striding directly toward the nursery, where Harry could see Ginny, who had no wand, bent over a crib, trying to shield a dark-haired toddler with her own body. Harry threw himself at Voldemort, but felt a strong pressure holding him back. He fought to escape, fought the strong hands holding him down, fought—that calm voice in his ear was Remus's. But Remus was dead! Harry shook his head in confusion, then found himself enveloped in a dense fog. He felt lost, but he had to find Ginny, he had to! He struggled through the miasma that surrounded him, screaming Ginny's name over and over as he fought the restraints holding him still.

"Harry! Harry, wake up! It's a dream, just a dream! Ginny isn't here. Wake up!"

Finally, Remus's words began to make some kind of sense. Harry opened his eyes and looked up into the face of his godfather.

"You're alive!" Harry cried and wrapped his arms around Remus, holding on to him as tightly as he could for a moment before pulling back to stare at his godfather's face. "Where's Tonks? Is she OK? They killed Ron, Remus! They killed him! They blew off his leg and he bled to death!"

"We're all fine. Tonks and Ron are fine. Nothing happened, Harry. It was a dream. Just a dream, lad, that's all."

"A . . . a d-dream?" Harry shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to make sense of what he was hearing. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, lad, I'm sure." Remus pulled Harry back into his arms and rubbed his back comfortingly until the younger man finally relaxed. "It was a bad one, eh?"

Harry released his godfather and lay down, curled up on his side and scrubbed at his eyes. "Yeah."

Remus smoothed Harry's sweaty fringe off his forehead. "I wish I knew how to help you."

A shudder ran through Harry's body. "You woke me up. That's a help. Thanks."

Tonks came in carrying a bowl of water and a flannel. "Wotcher, Harry!" she said in a cheerful voice. "Good to see you awake."

Relief flooded through him at the sight of her. "You're all right, then?"

Tonks smiled and patted her baby-filled belly. "Yes, love, I am. So's the little one." She sat on the edge of the bed and opened his pyjama top. As she washed the sweat off of his face, neck and chest, she gave him a cheeky grin. "I'd be happy to wash the rest as well, but Remus might object, and I'm certain that Ginny would hex me if I enjoyed it too much—which I would, of course!"

Harry actually laughed, which startled him. "Thanks. I can do the rest myself."

"Feeling better?" Remus said, watching Harry closely.

Harry sighed. They both looked so tired, yet all their concern was for him. "Yeah. Sorry I woke you."

"That's what parents are for, and we're practicing our parenting on you, love," Tonks said, patting his shoulder.

Harry felt the warmth of their love wash over him. He blinked hard, and managed to produce a smile. "That's a lucky baby. You're going to be great parents."

Tonks fussed over Harry some more, then buttoned his pyjama top and tucked him in. She kissed him on the forehead and smoothed his untidy hair. "Sleep well, love."

"Thanks. You too."

"Call us if you need us," Remus added.

Harry nodded, then watched his godparents leave the room, both of them looking back and smiling at him once more before closing the door. Despite all the horrors in his life, through some kind of miracle, he'd ended up with a family. Holding tightly to this sweet thought, he drifted off to sleep.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 07

Harry was sleeping better since staying with Remus and Tonks, but he still had nightmares fairly often. His current pleasant dream became frightening, with the sound of a woman crying out somewhere nearby. Harry moaned in his sleep, trying desperately to recapture the cheerful dream he'd been enjoying, but the woman cried out again. He sat up, his eyes wide. That was no dream!

Harry grabbed his glasses and shoved them on as he ran for the door, his wand at the ready. He heard Tonks cry out again. Merlin zoomed over his head and flew into the open door of Remus and Tonks' room. "What's going on?" Harry cried as he rushed into the room.

"She's in labour," Remus said. "Oh, Merlin, I'm glad you're here! Could you get the midwife for us? The baby seems to be coming fast. I'm afraid to leave her."

Merlin flashed out of sight.

"Is there anything I can do?" Harry said, standing uncertainly just inside the door.

"Yes!" Tonks cried. "My back! Please, Harry, can you ease the pain for me?"

"Yeah, I'll try," Harry said, sitting on the edge of the bed. He tried to keep his eyes on Tonks' face. He wasn't certain he was ready to see a woman give birth, but he was here and she said she needed him, so he'd do what he could. He slid his hand under her back and used his healing gift to spread warmth and comfort through her taut muscles. "I don't feel any injury," he said hesitantly.

"I'm not injured, I'm just in—" she gasped and grunted, then continued, "—labour. It's hard work and makes your muscles ache." She moaned a bit more, then sighed. "You have wonderful hands, Harry. Thanks."

Harry smiled, amazed that Tonks could go from crying out in pain to giving him a tired but cheeky grin in a matter of moments. "What happens now?"

Tonks snorted. "The baby arrives at some point."

"Well, I knew that, but—" Harry was interrupted by the arrival of the midwife, who didn't seem to appreciate being transported via phoenix.

"Get off me, you bloody bird! What do you think—oh! Professor Lupin! And Tonks. So it's time, eh?" the woman said, bending to examine her patient. "You, boy, out! And you too, Professor!"

"They can stay—" Tonks began.

"No, they can't. If I need 'em, I'll call 'em," the old woman replied.

"I'm sorry," Tonks said as the two men left the room, followed by the bossy midwife.

"I'll be right here if you need me," Remus said just before the midwife slammed the door in his face.

"I thought husbands were with their wives when they had babies these days." Harry frowned at the door in confusion. "I can see why she'd throw me out, but why you?"

"Madam Ophelia is old, and old-fashioned, as well. She doesn't think much of men, and certainly not around pregnant women," Remus said, sighing heavily. "She wasn't our first choice of midwife. I suppose her daughter's busy with another delivery tonight or she'd be here. I'd hoped to be with Tonks for the birth."

Harry grabbed his godfather's arm and shook it. "Remus! It's your wife, your baby and your house! Go in there and stay!"

Remus looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. "You're right." He opened the door and was met with a tirade from the midwife. Remus turned and raised his eyebrows at Harry as he closed the door, making Harry chuckle.

Through the closed door, Harry could hear Remus's calm but determined voice, the midwife's shrewish tones, and Tonks's voice over all, demanding quiet and that Remus stay. Harry grinned. Tonks is in charge there. That's how it should be.

He sat down in the hallway, leaning against the wall, too excited to return to bed. Too worried, too, actually. Women sometimes died giving birth. What was he thinking, wanting Ginny to have loads of children? Why should she risk her life just because he wanted to be surrounded by a big, happy family? He listened anxiously to the sounds coming from the room, holding his breath when things were quiet, nearly jumping out of his skin when Tonks cried out again.

Harry got up and began pacing, wishing he'd managed to sleep through this whole experience. There was no possibility of sleep for him now. He knew he'd be straining to hear what was happening, and if he did get to sleep, he'd just have bad dreams about women in labour. Frustrated and anxious, Harry paced back and forth in the short hallway, only stopping when Remus finally opened the door, his face glowing with joy.

"It's a boy!" Remus said with laughter in his voice. "A boy! And he's beautiful!"

Harry grinned. He'd never seen Remus so happy. "Congratulations! How's Tonks?"

"She's fine! Come and see the baby," Remus said, opening the door wider.

When Harry entered the room, he saw the midwife still fussing around, but Tonks was beaming at the tiny bundle in her arms.

Harry stood and looked at her in wonder. She'd been in pain just minutes ago, yet now she looked positively radiant!

"Come on, Harry. Come and see your little brother," Remus said.

Harry felt gobsmacked. His mouth opened and closed a few times with no sound coming out before he managed to say, "My . . . my brother?"

"By the decree of your godmother, you and Matthew are brothers," Remus said, leading Harry to a chair by the bed, "and I have to say I think it's a grand idea."

"Here you go, Harry," Tonks said, offering him the baby. "Meet your brother, Matthew Remus Lupin. Matthew for your grandfather Potter who was always so kind to Remus, and Remus for his daddy."

"I thought about naming him James or Sirius, but I thought you might want to use those names for your sons when they're born," Remus added.

Harry felt his gut clench as he took the baby in his arms. He glanced up as Remus made certain the baby was settled properly, then sat down beside Tonks.

Harry swallowed hard as he gazed down into the tiny face. He was terrified to be holding a baby for the first time, and such a tiny one! Hesitantly, he touched the baby's soft cheek and laughed when Matthew wrapped Harry's finger in a tight grip.

"Hi, Matthew," Harry murmured. "It's nice to meet you. You're a lucky boy. You have the best parents in the world."

"And the best big brother in the world," Tonks said with a hint of her usual impishness.

Harry looked up at her and grinned. "The most surprised big brother in the world, I expect. I didn't know I was having a brother. Thank you, Tonks. I'm honoured."

"We expect you to teach him all that big brother stuff, like collecting chocolate frog cards and climbing trees," Tonks began.

"And flying," Remus added.

"No problem!"

"You lot need to leave her alone to rest now," Madam Ophelia said in a stern voice. "And let that baby rest, too. Handling him too much is bad for him."

Remus winked at Harry before standing to face the woman. "Thank you. I'll see you home."

"No, Remus, you stay with Tonks and the baby," Harry said, uncertain how to get up with a baby in his arms. Remus relieved him of the baby and Harry got to his feet. "If you'll just give me a moment to change, Madam Ophelia, I'll be happy to take you home."

"As long as there are no birds involved," the midwife sniffed, giving Merlin a wary look.

Merlin, who'd stayed perched on the curtain rod ever since bringing the midwife to the house, ruffled his feathers and looked disgusted, then took off for Harry's room.

Harry managed to hide his smirk. Merlin had said some rather rude things about the midwife, things only Harry could hear. "No, no birds this time." But I could change into a thestral and fly you that way. The thought of her reaction made him snort with laughter, a fact he did his best to disguise as a cough as he went to his room to change so he could take the woman home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry continued to have frequent nightmares. He offered to go back to Grimmauld Place so Remus and Tonks could get more sleep, since the baby was now waking them several times a night, but they wouldn't hear of it.

"We're your family and you need us right now," Tonks insisted. "You're staying here."

Harry squirmed uncomfortably in his chair at the breakfast table, wishing he could find some polite way to refuse his godparents' kind attention.

"No arguments," Remus added. "I know you think you're a bother, but you aren't. When you become one, I'll toss you out on your ear, how's that?"

That was enough to make Harry laugh.

"I have to get to school early today," Remus said, folding his napkin and standing up. "I'll wash the dishes before I leave."

"I don't have to leave for a while, Remus," Harry offered. "I'll clean up here."

Remus smiled, then bent to kiss his wife and baby. "See you later."

After Remus left, Tonks walked the floor with Matthew, who couldn't seem to stop crying, while Harry washed the dishes.

Harry watched her gently patting the baby's back as she paced back and forth, back and forth across the small kitchen. Matthew had cried quite a bit during the night. Tonks looked exhausted. Harry dried his hands and walked over to Tonks, holding his arms out for the baby.

"You look so tired. I can walk him for a while."

Tonks helped him get the baby settled in his arms, then sat down again. "I am tired. I never knew such a tiny child could make so much noise." She smiled wearily. "I think he's going to be a rock star, he's got such strong lungs."

Harry smiled at her small joke. He bounced the baby gently, rubbing his little back as he walked. Matthew gave a resounding belch, then sniffled and sighed. Harry chuckled. "I think he's tired too."

"He likes to be rocked," Tonks suggested.

Harry sat in the rocker and rearranged the baby in his arms, smiling down into the sweet little face. "You're growing so fast," he murmured.

"He is. And he's tired. Look at that yawn," Tonks said.

Harry sat rocking the baby, who seemed determined not to go to sleep. Every time his eyes closed, he'd jerk awake again.

"Am I doing something wrong? I thought he'd be asleep by now."

"Try singing to him. That usually works."

Harry bit his lip. "I don't know any lullabies, Tonks."

"That worthless aunt never sang to you, did she?"

He shook his head.

Tonks gave him a sympathetic look. "Sing anything you want, just sing it quietly. He'll enjoy it."

Harry racked his brain for something to sing, then finally began a slow, quiet version of the Hogwarts school song.

*"Hogwarts, Hogwarts,  
hoggy, warty Hogwarts,  
teach us something please—"*

"Starting his education early, are you?" Tonks teased. She stretched and yawned, relaxing in her chair as she watched Harry singing her son to sleep.

When Harry finished the song, he glanced up. Both Matthew and Tonks were asleep. He stood up and tiptoed over to the bassinet, then settled the baby in it. He draped a spare baby blanket over Tonks and quietly picked up his book bag. He had a little time to study before he had to leave for practice this morning. He sat at the kitchen table, his book open in front of him, but he couldn't concentrate. His eyes kept wandering to the bassinet, where the baby slept quietly, making soft sounds from time to time.

Harry had never been around babies before. He knew he wanted to have a big family, but he'd worried that he wouldn't be good with babies. But Matthew seemed to enjoy Harry's attention, which made Harry feel honoured somehow. He was amazed at the tender feelings that seemed to overwhelm him at times when he was holding his little brother. If Matthew makes me feel this way, I can't imagine how Remus and Tonks must feel about him. His thoughts turned to Ginny. He felt the familiar warmth fill him as he daydreamed about their lives together.

The baby sniffled in his sleep, startling Harry out of his reverie. He glanced at his watch, then packed his things away and stood up to leave.

Tonks sighed and stretched. "Oh, what a nice nap! And you got him to sleep! Thanks, Harry."

"My pleasure. Have a good day, Tonks."

She grinned and wiggled her fingers at him. "See ya, handsome!"



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 08

Tonks sat up in bed, listening hard, then poked Remus. “Wake up! Something’s wrong with Harry!” She got out of bed as she spoke and hurried toward the door.

Instantly awake, Remus got up and ran after her. Remus knocked on Harry’s door. “Harry? Are you OK?” No response. He opened the door. Harry lay on his side on the floor, thrashing about oddly. Remus crossed the room in three quick strides and knelt beside his godson.

Tonks flicked her wand, turning on the bedroom’s lamps, then knelt beside her husband, who was bent over Harry now.

Harry’s face was contorted, his mouth opening and closing as if he were shrieking in pain, but the only sound coming from him was an occasional agonized squeak. His face was blue.

“He’s choking!” Tonks said just as Remus cast the spell to remove an object from someone’s throat. Nothing happened.

Remus shook his head. “That should’ve worked!” He ran his hands over Harry’s neck. Just behind the ear, he stopped. “Bloody hell. He’s done his gill transformation in his sleep. *Finite Incantatem!*”

Remus checked to see if the gills had disappeared, but nothing had happened. Harry’s face was a darker blue than before. “I don’t know how to reverse this spell!” He shook Harry’s shoulder. “Harry! Wake up! I can’t reverse the spell!”

When Harry didn’t wake up, Remus turned to Tonks. “Fill the bathtub! Hurry! We only have minutes to save him! He needs to be submerged in water so he can breathe.” He ripped Harry’s pyjama top open and pulled it off, looking for wounds, but found nothing.

Tonks ran to the bathroom, turned on the tub’s taps and aimed her wand at the flowing water. “*Aguamente Maxima!*” The water in the tub tripled in depth instantly and the flow from the taps went from normal to a gush worthy of a burst water main. She turned off the water just as Remus entered the bathroom carrying Harry in his arms.

Remus placed his godson in the tub, then pressed on Harry’s shoulders to keep him submerged.

The gills fluttering motion instantly became a steady pattern. Harry’s colour improved and the strained look on his face relaxed.

“Harry? Wake up, lad,” Remus said. “You need to remove your gills. Harry? Harry?” He shook the young man’s shoulders and called more loudly, but Harry was still unresponsive.

“I have an idea,” Tonks said. “Lift his head out of the water for a second.”

When Remus had Harry’s head clear of the water, Tonks said, “Forgive me, luv,” and slapped him as hard as she could. “Wake up!” When he didn’t waken, she slapped him again.

Harry’s eyes fluttered open, then widened as he fought for breath.

Remus pushed Harry back underwater and held him there.

Harry’s eyes filled with alarm. He fought Remus’s grip, trying to get free.

Remus leaned over Harry so the young man could see him as clearly as possible. “You’re going to be all right, Harry. You’ve done your gill transformation and I can’t reverse it. That’s why I’m holding you underwater. Can you change back?”

Harry stared at his godfather a moment, looking confused, before he nodded.

“Right, then,” Remus said. “Let me get you clear of the water before you change. Hold your breath.”

Harry held his breath and Remus lifted his head and shoulders out of the water. An instant later, the gills were gone and he took a deep breath.

Remus helped him to a sitting position in the tub, while Tonks drained it. “Just rest a few minutes, lad,” Remus said. “You’ve been through an ordeal.”

Harry sat there panting. “Th-th-thanks.” He rubbed his cheek, which still bore a bright red handprint from Tonks slapping him. “What happened?”

“You tell us,” Tonks said. “You can wait until you catch your breath though, luv. And I’m sorry for slapping you, but you weren’t waking up and we couldn’t reverse the spell.”

“Is that why—?”

“Yeah, I whacked you a good one. Had to do it twice to wake you.”

The corners of his mouth twitched into a tiny smile. “Thanks. Guess I needed it.”



Remus helped the young man stand. "Careful, move slowly. You don't want to get dizzy and fall." Once Harry was out of the tub, Remus wrapped him in a towel and helped him dry off. Tonks left and came back with a set of dry pyjamas for Harry. Remus helped him dress and led him back to his room, where Tonks was waiting.

"Let's check your poor head for lumps," Tonks said when Harry was settled back in bed. "A thump is what woke me. That must've been you falling out of bed." As she spoke, she ran her fingers through his hair. "Uh-huh. There we are. That's the size of a goose egg. You probably hit the night table when you fell." She aimed her wand at the small table, scooting it a few feet away from his bed. "I'll go and get a cold cloth for you, sweets."

Remus checked the lump as well, then had Harry follow the movement of Remus's finger with his eyes and asked him several questions to check for concussion. Finally, he nodded. "I think it's just a bruise."

"So no hospital?" Harry said, a hopeful light in his eyes.

"Not this time. Good thing your head is so hard."

A grin flashed across Harry's face for a moment.

Tonks returned with a small vial of potion and a flannel wrapped around a piece of ice. "Here we go. Drink this headache potion, and I'll put this on the lump." As soon as Harry drank his potion, she put the ice-filled cloth against Harry's head and put a Temporary Sticking Charm on it to hold it in place.

"I think my heart may be almost back to normal," she said with a cheeky grin as he settled back in bed. "You scared me half to death! Don't do that!"

"Sorry." Harry looked truly chagrined.

"I'm teasing you, handsome," she said, kissing his forehead. "I'm just glad you're OK."

"Me too."

"What were you dreaming about, Harry? Do you remember?" Remus said.

Harry squinted, as if trying to see his dream in the distance. "Someone bound me up and threw me in the lake. I was drowning, so I did my gill transformation, but it didn't help."

"You ~~were~~ drowning," Remus said, "but you were drowning in air, the way a fish does. And somebody did attack you and throw you in the lake at Hogwarts, do you remember? They beat you up and put several badly cast spells on you. The merpeople saved you."

Harry shuddered. "Yeah, I do remember that." He swallowed hard, then looked at Remus again. "That's not a battle memory. Why would I dream about that?"

"That was another horrible experience you had," Remus replied. "It was nightmarish enough, I'm not that surprised that you dreamed about it."

"I hope I don't dream about it again."

"Me too!" Tonks said. "Go to sleep and dream pleasant things, OK?"

"I'll try."

Tonks grinned suddenly. She enjoyed trying her mothering skills out on Harry, and he soaked up the attention like the love-starved waif he'd been as a child. "Oh, I know what to do. Get comfy."

Harry smiled, then turned on his side so the ice pack wasn't against the pillow. He settled down in the bed a bit more and watched her expectantly.

"Are you as comfortable as you can be now?" Tonks said, smoothing her hand over his hair.

He blushed a bit at her attention, but gave her a warm smile. "Yeah. That feels good."

"Perfect! Close those gorgeous eyes of yours, luv. I'll have you asleep in no time."

Harry gave her a sceptical look.

"Trust me on this. I'm a mother. I know what I'm doing!"

Harry smiled at her. "OK. My fate is in your hands."

"Wise decision. Close your eyes and relax, OK?" She continued to stroke his hair and began singing softly.

*"Hush, little wizard, close your eyes,  
Mummy's going to sing you a lullaby—"*

Harry's eyes flew open and he lay staring at her.

Tonks gave him an aggrieved look. "My voice isn't that bad! Go to sleep!"

He grinned. "No, your voice is nice. I was just surprised."

*Because that awful aunt of yours never sang to you, your poor lamb. I'll give you all the mothering she didn't, luv, don't you worry!* She didn't want to say anything so serious and make him think about unpleasant things, so she put on an impish grin and teased him instead. "What did I tell you about those beautiful eyes of yours? Stop distracting me! I have work to do!"

Harry smiled at her silliness, then obediently closed his eyes and relaxed.

*Hush, little wizard, close your eyes.  
Mummy's going to sing you a lullaby.  
Cuddle up my darling, there's magic in the air  
Fly away to dreamland with nary a care.  
No need to worry, Mummy's staying near  
Watching o'er her precious little wizard dear."*

As Tonks sang to him, she stroked his hair all the while, soothing him just as she soothed Matthew. Finally, Harry was asleep. His right hand fell to the side and lay open with the branded phoenixes and griffins showing plainly against the pale skin of his palm. Tonks felt tears prick her eyes. He'd been through so many horrors. How were she and Remus supposed to help him heal? She bent over and kissed his temple and tucked him in a bit more.

"I love you, Harry, so much, you just don't know," she whispered as she kissed him again. "Sleep well." She smoothed his hair one last time, then stepped away from him. She felt an arm come around her shoulders and looked up at her husband, who gently wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Well done, Mum," Remus whispered in her ear before kissing her forehead, making her smile again.

Tonks slid her arm around her husband's waist and watched her godson sleep. Hoping his dreams would be pleasant, she turned with Remus and quietly left the room.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 09

After what seemed like a lifetime to Harry, the Christmas holidays were nearly upon them. Merlin flashed Harry from Remus's house to Grimmauld Place so Harry could make sure everything was ready for Ginny's arrival.

When they arrived in the entryway of the house, Harry let go of Merlin's tail and took off his cloak, being careful of the bouquet in his arms. He smiled, anticipating Ginny's expression when she saw the beautiful flowers in their bedroom. He'd seen them in a shop near Remus's house that morning and couldn't resist them. He'd have to put a Freshness Charm on them so they'd still be pretty when Ginny finally arrived in three days' time.

Hearing strange sounds from the living room, Harry stilled. His senses on alert, he set the flowers on a nearby table, drew his wand and approached the doorway as silently as possible. He gasped and jumped out of the way as Hermione, with a very un-Hermione-like squeal of laughter, raced through the door, followed closely by Ron. Harry goggled at his best friends, both of whom were completely naked. He blushed just as she noticed him.

"Harry!" Hermione squeaked. She attempted to cover herself with her hands as she blushed all over. "Oh!" She turned and raced up the stairs.

Ron stopped and swallowed hard, his skin as red as his hair. He hung his head and peeped at Harry through his fringe. "Uh, hi, Harry. I wasn't expecting you quite so soon."

Ron's expression hit Harry as very funny. He bit his lip, trying his best not to laugh. "Obviously. Shall I leave and come back later?"

Ron sighed and waved a negligent hand. "Nah. It's your house. I'm sorry you found us like this."

Harry was laughing out loud now. "I did tell you to enjoy the house."

Ron snorted. "Yeah! And blimey, have we! I could tell you—"

Harry shook his head before Ron could say any more. "No, thanks."

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione called down the stairs. "You're naked!"

As he and Ron both laughed, Harry glanced up and saw Hermione was now demurely wrapped in her bathrobe.

"I've seen him naked since we were eleven, Hermione," Harry said, chuckling at the blush suffusing her face again. "Now, you, on the other hand. . . ."

"Ooo, *men!*" she said, then turned on her bare heel and flounced off to her and Ron's room.

"Thanks for the entertainment!" Harry called after her. He looked at Ron and burst out laughing again. "I mean that. That's the best laugh I've had in ages."

Ron grinned. "Glad we could help out. Now try to get that image of my wife out of your mind, OK?"

"Why?" Harry teased. At Ron's expression, Harry relented. "OK, OK, fine, if that's how you want to be." He snorted, trying to stifle another bubble of laughter that was trying to escape.

Ron grinned at Harry and shrugged, then started up the stairs. Halfway up, he turned back to face Harry. "We'll clear out for the holidays, mate. You and Ginny should have the house to yourselves."

"You don't have to—"

"It's only fair. It's your house, and it will be Ginny's in a few months. You two should enjoy it. Hermione and I can stay at the Burrow. Mum will be over the moon about it, I'm sure. We need to do some stuff anyway."

Harry frowned in confusion. "Stuff?"

"Yeah. We'll leave this evening, OK?"

"If you really want to, but you don't have to."

Ron grinned. "I know, mate."

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days later, Harry flashed to the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts and found Ginny waiting for him beside her trunk. Hedwig's cage sat on top of the trunk and Ginny held Trouble, locked in his basket, in her arms.

"Hi!" He gave her a quick kiss, then pulled back to grin at her. "Ready to go?"

She beamed at him. “Yes!”

“Right.” Harry stuck his finger in Hedwig’s cage to say hello, then did the same with Trouble before tapping each cage and then her trunk with his wand, sending them to the house. Once they were gone, he changed into a phoenix and flew over Ginny. When she grabbed his tail, he flashed then to the entry hall of the house, then changed back into himself. “Here, let me take your cloak.”

Ginny looked around with interest as she released Hedwig and Trouble from their cages. Christmas baubles hung from the ceiling, and a huge bunch of mistletoe was tied over the doorway to the living room. “It looks wonderful. Dobby and Winky are decorating, I see.”

“Actually, the mistletoe was Ron’s contribution.” Harry laughed, remembering the scene he’d popped in on a few days’ earlier.

Ginny gave him an appraising look. “Do you have something to tell me?”

Harry snorted. “Yeah—” He was interrupted by Hermione running down the stairs to hug Ginny.

“Welcome home!” Hermione said.

Ginny returned Hermione’s hug gladly. “Thanks!”

“Yeah, good to see you,” Ron said as he came downstairs with a bulging bag slung over his shoulder. He looked at Harry. “Sorry to bother you, mate. We forgot a few things.”

Ginny frowned. “What’s going on?”

Ron grinned and gave her a one-armed hug. “We’re staying at the Burrow so you two can have the house to yourselves.”

“But . . . but I was looking forward to—” Ginny began.

“We’ll see you several times over the holiday,” Hermione replied, “but this is your house. And Harry’s. It’s your turn to enjoy it.” She leaned over and kissed Ginny’s cheek, then pulled Harry down to kiss him as well. “Don’t you dare tell her about the other day!” she whispered as she hugged Harry.

Harry snorted, then pulled back to grin at his best friend. “Why not? It’s funny!”

“What’s funny?” Ginny said.

“Harry . . .” Hermione’s voice held a warning tone.

Harry smiled at her, doing his best to look innocent.

Hermione sighed. “Fine. *Fine!* Do what you want.”

“Thanks!” Harry said brightly. “I’ll be nice about it.”

After Ron and Hermione left, Ginny turned to Harry. “What was Hermione on about?”

“I’ll be happy to explain,” Harry said with a snort of laughter as he took her hand. “Come with me, m’lady, and I’ll tell you all about a very funny thing that happened when I got home a few days ago.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You caught them *naked?*” Ginny fell on the bed in their room laughing. “I’ll bet they were embarrassed!”

“I didn’t know people could blush all over their bodies like that,” Harry agreed, still chuckling as he flopped on the bed next to her.

“Ron—”

“Hermione, actually. Ron and I have seen each other naked since our first year in Hogwarts, y’know. The boys’ showers aren’t private at all.”

Ginny giggled. “I can just imagine Hermione’s face.”

“She wasn’t terribly happy, no. And Ron told me to forget what she looked like.”

Ginny got up on one elbow and leaned over him, holding a pillow in her free hand. “And have you?”

“Why should I? I didn’t do anything wrong!” He laughed and wrestled the pillow away from her before she could bop him with it. “Hey, give over! I just looked! I wouldn’t be a red-blooded guy if I didn’t!”

“I’ll give you red blood,” she said, jumping astride his chest, snatching the pillow away from him and using it to pummel him playfully.

Harry grabbed the pillow and tossed it away, then wrapped his arms around her and flipped the two of them so she was on the bottom. “You were saying?”

Ginny slid her arms around his neck and tangled her fingers in his hair. "That's better. Stop thinking about Hermione. Think about me!"

"Who said I was thinking about Hermione?" He kissed her tenderly, then moved his lips to her neck, hovering over the ticklish spot under her ear. He blew the tiniest bit of warm breath on her neck and, as usual, she squirmed and giggled.

"You're so funny," he said straightening and looking down at her, happier than he could remember being for quite a while. "I just have to glance at that spot on your neck and you fall apart."

"I'm ticklish! You know that!"

"I know." He gave her a wicked grin. "And I simply have to take advantage of it." He bent over her and blew a resounding raspberry against her neck in her ticklish spot, making her shout with laughter. Just as Ginny tried to pull him closer, Harry got up and offered her his hand. "Come with me."

Looking puzzled, Ginny took his hand and got up. "Where are we going?"

"I have a remodelling project I want you to see."

She turned back toward the bed. "I'd rather—"

Harry wiggled his eyebrows and grinned. "You haven't seen my project yet."

Ginny shook her head and smiled at him. "When have you had time to do any remodelling?"

"You'd be surprised what you can do when you can't sleep and you have cooperative house elves. Come on."

"Does Hermione know you've been making the house elves remodel the house?" she asked as she followed him down the stairs.

"No. And you're not going to tell her. I found out that Dobby loves to do projects like this, so I told him what I wanted done and turned him loose. He's done a great job. And I helped a bit myself before I started staying with Remus and Tonks."

"Oh-ho, you did, did you? Trying to take some credit away from Dobby?" Ginny teased.

Harry acted wounded. "I had the idea, drew up the plans and helped with the work! What more do you want from me, woman?"

"You're being very silly today," Ginny said as they reached the ground floor. "Where's this project?"

"In the basement."

Ginny followed Harry to the basement door and down the stairs, then gasped when she reached the turn in the stairs where she could see the whole basement. "Oh, Harry! It's beautiful!"

The basement had been magically enlarged and a huge swimming pool installed. It was an attractively irregular shape and had real water lilies growing along one edge, as if it were a pond rather than a pool. A small waterfall bubbled at one end, flowing over rocks before splashing in the pool. Colourful fish could be seen flashing in the light that sparkled across the water.

Harry was enjoying watching her reaction. "The waterfall is the filtration system. I helped it along with a spell, too. The water's pure and will stay clean on its own. It's twenty feet deep, so we have a lot of room to play." He led Ginny the rest of the way down the stairs. "I've made a light that's like artificial sunlight so the lilies will grow well, and put some other plants in there so the fish will stay healthy. There are ledges along the sides every so many feet at various depths so we can sit and rest, or," he leered at her suggestively, "whatever."

Ginny was grinning broadly now. "I didn't bring a swimsuit. It's winter, after all."

"Who needs a suit?" With a grand flourish, Harry did a Transference Spell that removed their clothes and laid them neatly on a nearby chaise. He added his glasses and wand to the top of the stack. "M'lady? Would you like to swim?"

She shook her head in disbelief. "In December. In a basement in London. Brilliant!"

"Don't forget your gills. I intend to keep you down a while," he said as he pulled her to him and ran his hands down her back, savouring the silkiness of her skin. His breathing was already quicker, his body tingling wherever her skin touched his. He cleared his throat roughly. "Of course, if we keep this up, we'll never get into the water."

Ginny smiled up at him and pushed hard, shoving him into the pool. She jumped in after him, then surfaced, sputtering. "Oh! Forgot my gills! I need my wand."

"Silly girl." With a gentle touch to each side of her neck, Harry gave her the gills she needed and performed the transformation on himself, as well. Ginny moved into his arms and kissed him as they slid below the surface, grateful that their gills removed the need for them to surface.

Harry's hands glided down Ginny's body, lingering over her breasts and the sweet swell of her bum. His lips trailed a path down her neck and shoulder, kissing each spot tenderly, savouring each kiss, each touch, every hitch in her breath or tremble in her body. How could anyone love someone so much without exploding from the sheer joy of it?

He and Ginny sank through the depths, the light becoming green and dappled as they descended. Ginny's long hair floated above them like a

glorious sail, its colour changing rapidly in the eerie light.

Harry felt her fingers in his hair, holding his mouth to her breast. Kicking gently, he pulled her to one of the underwater ledges. He sat her on the ledge and ran his hands down her body, his lips following in their path. When he reached her toes, he nibbled on them, then nipped her ankle and the back of her knees as he worked his way back up. Ginny sat with her head thrown back, her eyes closed in ecstasy, her gills fluttering as her breath came in shallow gasps now. Harry kicked just enough so his body floated up above hers, his hands busy all the while. He leaned down to kiss her lips and laughed in delight as she wrapped her arms and legs around him, kissing him and rolling them off the ledge at the same time.

They fell through the water, spinning slowly round and round as their passion rose. Harry thought of all the times he'd made love to this woman. How could each time be more exciting than the previous one? But it was, every time, each act of love more spectacular, more exciting, more loving than the one before.

Their passion spent for the moment, they rested on the bottom of the pool wrapped in each other's arms, nowhere near ready to let go. Ginny nestled into Harry's side, kissing his chest gently before resting her head on his shoulder and relaxing.

*Could she be any more perfect?* Harry sighed, savouring the bright bubble of happiness filling his chest.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That was wonderful!" Ginny said as she towelled her hair.

"Glad you liked it," Harry said, taking the towel and wiping her back dry. "I built it for us."

She grinned at him over her shoulder. "And now we've broken it in properly, right?"

"Right in one!" Harry wrapped the towel around her from behind and began drying her front, which led to a lot of squirming on Ginny's part and laughter from both of them.

Harry stilled suddenly. "Shush."

Ginny turned to stare at him. "What?"

"Shush," Harry repeated, his voice a hoarse whisper. The hair on the back of his neck had stood up, always a warning sign. He grabbed his wand and glasses from his pile of clothes while Ginny dug madly through her clothes looking for her own wand.

Harry turned to Ginny. "Stay here!" he whispered, then rushed silently up the stairs.

"No way! What's wrong?" Ginny hissed as she ran lightly behind him, her wand at the ready.

"Someone's upstairs. Nobody should be here but the elves." They crept up the stairs and stopped by the door. "Where's an Extendable Ear when I need one?" he grumbled.

"Here." Ginny handed him an Extendable Ear and unravelled the flesh-coloured string of another for herself. She'd grabbed them from the pocket of her robes when she'd retrieved her wand.

Harry flashed her a brief smile and shoved the end of the Extendable Ear under the door.

"But where are they, Dobby? Ginny did return today, didn't she?" Molly Weasley was saying.

"Molly, I told you we should have owled them before dropping by," Arthur said patiently.

"But we weren't that far away—"

"Still, it's not polite to just drop in," Arthur said.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, their eyes wide. What were her parents doing here?

As they reeled in their Extendable Ears, Harry leaned toward Ginny and whispered, "I'll flash us upstairs." A moment later, he was in phoenix form. Once she grabbed his tail, they flashed away, reappearing in their bedroom.

Harry held his hand toward the bathroom. Instantly, the sound of a shower running filled the upstairs hallway. "I'll get dressed and go down. You can take your time. I'll stall them," Harry said, grabbing the first shirt he could find and yanking it over his head.

"Aren't you going to shower?" Ginny said as she wrapped up in Harry's bathrobe, since all of her things were still in her trunk. "Isn't that why you started it?"

Harry shook his head, grinned and winked at her as he pulled on a pair of jeans. "It's your turn. I'll send Winky up to put your things away while you shower," he added as he shoved his feet into his spare trainers and left the room.

Harry jogged downstairs and did his best impression of being startled when he saw the Weasleys. "Hello. I didn't know you were here."

"And Dobby didn't know you were here, either," Molly said, smiling up at him. "Where's Ginny?"

"In the shower washing the dust out of her hair. We were just poking around in the attic, trying to decide what we can use of Sirius's old stuff," Harry

lied, creating as he went along. "It was a dirty business."

"Yes, it can be," Arthur agreed. "How are you, Harry?"

"Just fine. I suppose you came to visit Ginny?"

"We were in town doing Christmas shopping, and thought we could fit in some wedding shopping as well," Molly said eagerly.

"It would've been nice if you'd let us know you were coming. Then we wouldn't have kept you waiting like this," Harry said, trying to politely set some ground rules before the elder Weasleys got too comfortable in his home. He wanted his time with Ginny to be private, not interrupted constantly by visits from her family. If they wanted to visit, fine, but they'd have to work out a time with Harry and Ginny first.

"Yes, I agree," Arthur said. "We'll send an owl the next time we plan to come to town. I finished a project early today and Molly joined me in town so we could do some shopping. Then Molly thought we could do some wedding shopping at the same time, and, well, here we are."

Harry glanced down at Dobby, who was wringing his hands miserably. "Dobby, it's okay. I'm sorry I didn't tell you where we were. Would you send Winky to put Ginny's things away while she's showering?"

The elf relaxed at Harry's kind words. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir."

Harry looked up at his guests. "Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"No, thanks," Arthur replied.

"We're fine," Molly added.

"So you're Christmas shopping?" Harry said as the three of them sat down in the living room. "What wedding things do you want to shop for today?"

"I thought we could get a start on finding the right robes for everyone," Molly began with a smile, "although I know we still have a good bit of time before the wedding. But with Ginny at school—"

"Um, I need to talk to you about that, actually," Harry said, wishing Ginny was with him. Just as he thought that, he heard her on the stairs. "Oh, here's Ginny."

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Ginny said, giving each of her parents a kiss on the cheek before sitting down with Harry.

"I know how dirty attics can be," Molly said. "I don't blame you for wanting to shower. Did you find anything good?"

"No, not really," Harry said quickly. "I thought I remembered some furniture that wasn't too shabby, but it was in worse shape than I remembered."

"And it will be more fun to pick out things we like anyway," Ginny added now that she understood the story Harry had told to cover for their absence. "Why are you here?"

Molly explained about her idea of shopping for the wedding since she, Arthur, Ron and Hermione were all on Diagon Alley. "And what was it you wanted to talk to us about, Harry? You started to say something earlier."

"Oh! Yeah, erm, about the wedding date. We need to move it up."

Molly gasped and looked at Ginny in alarm. "You're not—"

"No!" Ginny sounded a bit exasperated.

"It's my fault," Harry said quickly. He got up and grabbed his school bag from under his desk and dug out a piece of parchment, which he handed to Arthur. "I have healer's orders to get married sooner, actually. I haven't been sleeping well, and it's causing me all kinds of problems."

"But I thought you were staying with Remus because of that," Molly said, frowning in confusion.

"I have been, but I still have nightmares and lose a lot of sleep. I only sleep well when Ginny's with me." He blushed as he said this, but it was the truth and needed to be said.

Molly squirmed uncomfortably, then lifted her chin with a resolute expression. "So when do you want to get married?"

Harry laughed, hoping to ease the tension in the room. "Today works for me, but I think it will be best if we get married just before the Easter break at Hogwarts. I've talked with Grandfather already, and it isn't a problem for him. I thought we could have it at Hogwarts—"

"And avoid the press that way! And the fangirls," Ginny said, giving Harry a teasing glance. "They'll all be distraught over you getting married."

"Avoiding the press is a real bonus to having it at Hogwarts," Harry said. "And the house elves can do the food. That just leaves us with the decorating, I think."

"And the cake. And the band." Molly sighed. "I don't think the band I booked can do an earlier date. I was lucky to get them for the original date."

Harry looked from Molly to Ginny, then smiled. Neither of them had been fond of the band Molly had chosen anyway. "I might have a solution to that



problem.”

“Really?” Molly looked hopeful for the first time since the beginning of the wedding discussion.

“Yeah. Hang on, let me send a message to someone. He may be able to meet me when we go shopping today to talk about it.” Harry got up, found some parchment on his desk and started writing a note.

“Who?” Ginny said.

“Dan Jacobs.” Dan and Harry had become friends, having lunch together whenever they ran into each other on Diagon Alley. Dan’s group, Toads in the Loo, was Harry and Ginny’s favourite band.

Ginny bounced in her seat in excitement. “Oh, they’d be perfect! I hope they’re free then!”

Harry grinned at her enthusiasm, relieved, as well, that the Weasleys had taken the change in plans so well. “Me too.”



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 10

Harry, Ginny, Arthur and Molly met Ron and Hermione at Madame Malkin's robe shop.

"I don't see why Harry and I can't wear the dress robes from our wedding," Ron grumbled to Hermione.

Hermione squeezed his hand and smiled at her reluctant shopper. "Ginny may want you in different colours than what you wore for our wedding. She's only going to do this once, you know, so she'll want it to be perfect."

"Honestly, I think Harry's the one who's more interested in it being perfect," Ron said, nudging Hermione and nodding toward Harry and Ginny, who were browsing the men's dress robes a bit ahead of them. Harry was pulling out various robes and holding them against himself to see Ginny's reaction to them. He seemed to be enjoying himself quite a bit.

"That's understandable," Hermione said, watching Harry with a fond smile on her face. "He grew up with nothing 'normal' at all. I think he's trying to begin a normal life, and part of a normal life, in his experience, is a nice wedding. Think about it. Every wedding he's been to has been a very pretty one, with beautiful clothes and flowers and decorations and good food. Why should he want anything less for himself and Ginny?"

Ron shrugged. "Well, when you put it that way . . ."

"Why don't you boys look for robes together, and I'll help Ginny. That's what matrons of honour are supposed to do."

Ron looked at her with a puzzled frown. "Why are you a 'matron' instead of a 'maid,' anyway? It makes you sound old."

Hermione stood on tiptoes and pulled on his shoulders so he'd bend down, then kissed him lightly. "Because we're married, silly."

"Oh!" Ron watched her move away, fully aware that he had a sappy grin on his face. She had him well and truly wrapped around her dainty little finger, and he didn't mind one bit.

\* \* \* \* \*

As he and Ron looked for new dress robes for the wedding, Harry murmured, "How's it going at the Burrow?"

Ron grimaced. "It's a nightmare, really."

Harry felt awful. He turned to face Ron. "Then come back to my place. You know you're welcome there."

"No, it's your and Ginny's turn to have the house to yourself. And it's only for a little while. Once Ginny goes back to Hogwarts, we'll be back."

Harry frowned, wondering how to convince Ron to move back, but not wanting to be pushy about it. "If you're sure—"

Ron nodded. "It'll be fine. Mum's over the moon that we're there. She and Hermione are getting along better than I expected. And Hermione and I aren't there that much anyway."

"Why not?" Harry put the robes he'd been looking at back on the rack. He scratched his head as he tried to find something that pleased him.

"We're working in her parents' house, getting it ready to sell."

Startled, Harry turned to stare at Ron. "That has to be hard on both of you, mate. How's Hermione handling it?"

"Better than I expected, but still, she's having a rough time. Being at the Burrow is good, actually. Mum's doing a good job of helping ,Mione get through it."

"D'you need help at the house?"

"Nah. ,Mione has to choose what to keep and what to sell, so it's all down to her, really. I'm just there to do the heavy lifting and hug her sometimes." Ron sighed. "Or provide a shoulder for her to make soggy."

"Sorry, mate. That can't be much fun." Thinking Ron might prefer to act normally rather than being the object of too much sympathy, Harry went back to shopping.

"It isn't any fun at all, really. Well, I do enjoy seeing the photos of her when she was little, but even those upset her. She's determined to get it finished during the holidays, though."

"Why?"

"She wants to move on, and that house—well, it just hurts her to know that it's empty now."

Harry nodded. He understood how painful it was when a house reminded you of someone you loved. Number 12 Grimmauld Place still held haunting memories of Sirius despite the redecorating he and his friends had done since the house had become Harry's. He changed the subject

back to dress robes and a few minutes later was Ron laughing, his gloomy mood gone for the moment. That's what best friends are for, after all.

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After Ron and Harry dug through all the appropriate robes, they still hadn't made a decision. Harry was torn between black and deep blue, both of which were similar to those he already had.

"Let me see," Ginny said, watching as Harry held up first the black robes, then the blue against his body for her approval. "Hmm, no. Neither of those is right." She started digging through the robes on the rack and pulled out a set of emerald green robes. "How about these?"

"You don't him want to look like a Slytherin, do you?" Ron said just before Hermione grabbed his arm and gave him a quelling look.

"No, but I know what colour I want Hermione to wear, and your robes and Harry's should go with that colour," Ginny said as she held the green robes up to Harry's chest.

"Hermione's wearing green?" Ron said, looking at her speculatively.

"No, peach," Ginny replied absent-mindedly. She looked from Harry's face to the robes and back at his face, then smiled. "These match your eyes exactly. I thought they would."

"Your first dress robes were green, Harry," Molly added. "I bought them because I thought they'd look nice with your eyes."

"And they did," Ginny said. "I remember how handsome you looked at that first Yule Ball."

Harry took the robes from her and turned to face a mirror, holding the robes in front of him. "Oh, she's right!" the mirror said. "They do match your eyes! Lovely!"

"Cheeky mirror," Ron grumbled. "I'll look like a Christmas tree in green robes."

"No you won't," Ginny said, handing him a set of robes that matched Harry's but in a darker shade of green. "Try these on."

A few minutes later, both Harry and Ron were dressed in the green robes. Ginny gave Harry an approving nod. "I like them."

"Whatever you want, sweet girl," Harry said. He looked at himself in the mirror. The colour looked nice with his dark hair and green eyes. "If this is what you want, they're fine with me."

"But I look like a bloody Christmas tree," Ron grumbled.

Hermione stood on tiptoes and kissed him. "You look so handsome. You should wear green more often."

Ron frowned at her, then looked in the mirror. He considered his reflection a bit, turning this way and that.

"Oh, Ron," Molly said with a sigh, "I should have made your sweaters green instead of maroon. That colour is wonderful on you."

Ron stared at her. "Really?" Feeling a bit better about it, he turned to Harry. "What do you think?"

Harry took his time looking Ron over. "I think you look fine," he said at last.

"Then it's decided!" Ginny said. "I love these. Do you want some embroidery on them? I imagine you could have a design on them if you want."

Harry looked at his robes, which were plain but quite elegant. "No, I like them as they are. Ron can have embroidery if he wants, though. We don't have to match."

"No, plain is good," Ron said. He shared a look with Harry, then both of them grinned. "Are we finished?"

"Yes, I think so," Hermione said, straightening the collar of his robes. She stood on tiptoe and tugged on his shoulders so he bent down a bit. "You look yummy," she whispered in his ear, filling the last word with a whole world of meaning.

Ron straightened in surprise, a blush on his face. "Oh! Well. Um." Hermione just laughed. "What do you think, Dad?"

Arthur had kept his opinions to himself so far. Now he raised an eyebrow as he answered his son. "I think you'd do well to go along with what the ladies choose."

Ron grinned. "Right."

Harry looked at his watch. "I need to leave. It's time for me to meet Dan." He unbuttoned his robes as he spoke.

"I'll go with you," Ron said, eager to get away from the robe shop.

"But—" Hermione said as Ron stepped out of his robes, having only opened the top three buttons.

Ron picked up the robes from the floor and hung them up, then turned around and took both of Hermione's hands in his. "Sweetie, I'll be happy to look at what you chose when we get back, but if you want a Christmas present, you're going to have to let me do some shopping." He raised his eyebrows, his eyes teasing her.

“Oh! Okay, then. You boys have fun,” she said, shooing them out of the door. “Harry isn’t supposed to see Ginny in her wedding robes before the ceremony anyway.”

Harry kissed Ginny and grinned at Hermione. “I can take a hint.” He and Ron waved as they left the shop and walked down the street toward the Leaky Cauldron.

“It’s such a nice day, isn’t it?” Harry said, looking up at the sparkling icicles hanging from the eaves of the buildings around them.

Ron looked at him in surprise. “It’s bloody freezing! What are you on about?”

Harry smiled at his friend. “You have no idea how brilliant it is for me to be shopping with my own family, or soon to be my family, anyway. And Ginny and I will be married in a few months.” He shook his head, amazed at the wonderful feelings that threatened to overwhelm him. “No Dursleys. No Voldemort. And Ginny’s with me. This will be the best Christmas ever.”

Ron grinned. “I’m glad you’re happy, Harry.”

“Me, too.”

Ron stopped off in a shop to look for Hermione’s Christmas present while Harry met Dan Jacobs in the Leaky Cauldron. When Harry entered the pub, he had to blink a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dark interior.

“Harry! Over here,” a man’s voice called.

“Dan! Thanks for meeting me,” Harry said, shaking hands with his friend.

“My pleasure.” Dan Jacobs was nearly as tall as Harry, with thick brown hair that insisted on falling into his face and bright blue eyes. He and Harry had become friends after Dan’s band, Toads in the Loo, played for the Yule Ball at Hogwarts the previous year. “What can I do for you?” Dan asked now.

Harry pulled off his cloak and settled into the booth across from his friend. “You know Ginny and I are getting married, right?”

“Yes, you lucky dog! She’s a beauty! When is it?”

“March 26, the Friday before Easter break at Hogwarts,” Harry replied. “We’ll be married in the Great Hall, with all the students there and some guests, as well. We’d like your band to play for the reception—for the wedding too, if you know any wedding music.”

“I’d be honoured to play at your wedding, Harry, and I know the lads will be, too. Yes, we can do some wedding music. You mean like a wedding march for when Ginny comes in and that kind of thing, right?”

Harry couldn’t believe his luck. Ginny would be ecstatic about her favourite band playing the wedding march as well as the dance music at their wedding! He crossed his fingers under the table, hoping everything would work out. “Yeah, that’s it. Are you free then?”

Dan pulled out his wand and tapped his watch. A small roll of parchment scrolled out of the band near the watch face. He tapped it again, and more parchment rolled out, showing the calendar for March. “We have a gig just after Easter, but we’re clear for a few weeks before then.”

“Great! What do you charge?”

“Tell you what. I’ll do this for you if you’ll do something for me,” Dan said, a teasing gleam in his eye.

Harry laughed. “You do know I can’t sing, right? Nor play an instrument?”

“That isn’t what I want you to do.”

“Then what is it?”

“I know you don’t like to trade on your fame, but for once, would you mind being ‘the famous Harry Potter’?”

Harry frowned. Dan knew him well enough to understand how uncomfortable it made Harry to be treated like “the famous Harry Potter.” He shifted uneasily in his seat and studied his friend’s honest face. Dan was comfortable with his celebrity, but then again, he’d chosen to be in the public eye. Harry’s fame had been forced on him. He decided to trust that Dan was a good enough friend to not put him in an unpleasant situation. “What do you want me to do?”

“If ‘the famous Harry Potter’ wrote a glowing review of our new album, your influence could help it be a chart-topper.” When Harry shook his head and started to say something, Dan went on. “I know you like our music, and I also know that you have a huge fan following, even bigger than before, thanks to your success with the Lions so far. What do you think?”

Harry couldn’t believe what Dan was asking. Why would anyone care if Harry Potter liked an album? “You really think my comments about your music will make a difference?”

“Yes. And that’s all the payment I’ll ask for playing at your wedding.”

Harry snorted. “I think I’d rather pay you. And when you read my writing, you might agree.”

Just keep it simple. You and I have talked about music enough when we've run into each other here at lunch time that I know how you feel about my music, and how you express yourself. I think you'll do a wonderful job."

"If that's what you want, then that's what you'll get," Harry said, "and if you don't like the way I write it, you can edit it however you want."

"I don't want to be accused of putting words in your mouth," Dan countered. "I'd like you to send the review directly to the Daily Prophet just after we release the album."

"Okay."

"Thanks, Harry, I mean that. I know it's an imposition—"

Harry laughed. "When Ginny hears that you've agreed to play at our wedding, the reward she'll give me will more than pay me for suffering a bit of publicity."

"Then I'll have to find more ways to impose on you," Dan teased.

Laughing even harder, Harry snapped back, "You're on!"

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After Harry and Dan parted, Harry found Ron finishing his purchase in a shop. He shared his news with Ron, who turned to Harry, shaking his head in amazement.

"That is so cool! Toads in the Loo playing at your wedding. Wicked!"

Harry just grinned. He couldn't wait to tell Ginny and see her reaction.

He and Ron were nearly back at the robe shop when they heard a commotion behind them.

"Harry! Oh look! It's Harry!" a young woman called. "Harry! Over here! And Ron's with him!"

"Yeah, but Ron's married," another woman said, sounding a bit dour.

"Harry isn't!" That comment elicited a round of giggles. The sound of excited girls chattering grew louder as the group neared Harry and Ron.

Harry looked at Ron and sighed. "This is the worst part of the job, as far as I'm concerned," he murmured. "I'd rather be in the hospital than dealing with fangirls."

"Yeah, it can be a real pain," Ron agreed. "It'll be better for you once you and Ginny are married, though. They're not nearly as pushy and rude to me as they were before, Mione and I got married."

Harry sighed. "I hope you're right." He and Ron pasted smiles on their faces and turned to face the onslaught of fans.

"Sign this for me, Harry!" "What are you doing here?" "Where are you going? Can we come?" The questions poured out of the girls, who clustered around them eagerly.

Harry recognized them as regulars at the Lions' games, most of them old enough to have finished Hogwarts a few years before him. "Now, ladies, you all have plenty of autographs by now!" He smiled as he spoke, trying to be pleasant but also planning to get away from them as soon as possible. "We're doing some holiday shopping with our family."

"You don't have any family!" one of the younger girls said. "You're an orphan!"

"I'll be your family, Harry!" a young woman at least several years older than him said, sidling up to Harry and touching his arm while batting her eyelashes and smiling at him.

Harry removed the woman's hand from his arm gently and sighed. "Yes, I'm an orphan, but I'm marrying into a huge family, and we're out shopping today. Have a nice holiday, ladies. See you at the games." He backed away as he spoke, then turned with Ron to continue toward the robe shop.

"Who's he marrying?" one of the group said plaintively.

"Where've you been?" another snapped. "He's still engaged to that redheaded cow he was with at Hogwarts."

Harry and Ron heard every word. Harry's back stiffened and he pressed his lips together, trying to restrain the ugly retort building inside him. We have to maintain good relations with the public, damn it. He huffed out an impatient breath, then glanced at Ron, who looked furious.

"That's not on, mate, not on at all. When we get out of sight, let's hex them."

That startled Harry into a laugh. "Good idea. I wish we could do that."

Ron sighed. "Yeah, me too."

Harry could feel the presence of the group still following them, but at a distance now. He sighed again as they turned into the robe shop. As they moved through the shop, the fitting area in the back came into sight. Ginny was standing in front of a mirror in beautiful ivory dress robes with some

sparkling design worked into the fabric. Her hair spilled down her back in brilliant contrast to the delicate colour of the robes.

Harry felt a flutter inside as all his worries and burdens just flew away. Had she ever looked more beautiful? How did I ever get so lucky? "Wow" was all he could manage to say.

Ginny was startled to see him there. Her eyes found his in the mirror. "You're not supposed to see me!"

A mischievous grin crossed Harry's face. "It isn't our wedding day yet, pretty lady." He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her lightly, then stepped back to admire her. "Is this the one? You look fantastic!"

"I like this one a lot, but I still have a few more to try on," she said, spreading the skirt so he could admire the beautifully embroidered decorations on it. "I think Mum likes this one best so far, don't you, Mum?"

Molly was wiping her eyes and sniffing. "You just look so beautiful, Ginny. I'm just . . ." She waved a hand ineffectually in front of her face, then pulled out a hanky and blew her nose. "I'll be fine. It isn't every day we take our only daughter out to buy wedding robes."

"Did you find something, Mione?" Ron asked, slipping an arm around his wife's shoulders and rubbing a gentle thumb on her cheek.

"Oh, yes, and it's beautiful! Look at this," she said, beaming as she led him to a rack to show him gorgeous robes in a soft shade of peach with a delicate gold pattern on the skirt. Parvati Patil knelt in front of it, doing something to the hem.

"Parvati! What are you doing here?" Ron said.

"I'm apprenticed to Madam Malkin," Parvati explained. "I'll work here a few more months, then go to Paris for more training."

"You've always had the best eye for fashion of any of us," Hermione said. "You'll be a brilliant robe designer."

"This is one of Parvati's designs," Ginny said, spinning around so the skirts of her robes billowed around her. "I love it."

Parvati smiled and Madam Malkin beamed. "She's a good worker, and you're right," Madam Malkin said. "She does have a gift for design."

The chime on the door rang as someone else came in.

"I'm sorry, but I'm completely tied up with a wedding party," Madam Malkin called without glancing toward her new customer. "Could you please come back later?"

Harry and his friends all jumped when they heard someone cry, "Incendio Maxima!" The back of Ginny's robes erupted in flames.

"Aguamentel!" Harry and Hermione cried at the same time. When the water from their wands hit the flames, they sputtered, went out for a moment, then rekindled.

While Hermione, Ron, Molly and Arthur poured water on the still-burning robes, Harry shouted, "Finite Incantatem!" After what seemed like a lifetime, but in truth was only a matter of seconds, the fire was extinguished.

Ginny was screaming in pain and fear. Harry did a Transference Spell on the smouldering robes. They landed on the floor away from Ginny just as Ron ran toward the door saying, "I'll go after her. You stay and take care of Ginny."

"Right." Harry whipped off his cloak and wrapped Ginny in it, being careful to not put any pressure on her burns. He held her against him and let her sob on his shoulder while he tried to sense how badly she was injured. He didn't even glance up when Hermione ran past him to follow Ron.

When Ginny's crying abated a bit, he kissed the top of her head and said, "Gin? Sweetie? I need to see your burns so I can heal them. I can't sense them well enough this way."

Molly and Arthur were hovering behind them. "How are you, dear? Where does it hurt? Let Mummy see, darling," Molly crooned.

"It hurts, it hurts," Ginny moaned.

Harry glanced up when Arthur conjured a bed right there in the middle of the shop. Harry helped Ginny lie on her stomach on the bed so he could work on her burns.

"We should take her to St. Mungo's," Molly said, trying to look at Ginny past Harry's broad shoulder.

"I can do this, Mrs. Weasley. Just give me a minute." Harry slid Ginny's scorched hair aside, trying not to cringe at the smell. "It's not too bad, sweet girl. Just a few minor burns. I'll have you fixed up in no time."

"Good thing those robes had so much fabric at the back," Arthur said.

"Yes, or she would've been burned much worse," Molly agreed.

Ginny realized she was more frightened than hurt. She quieted, relieved that Harry's spells were easing her pain. "Are they going to leave scars?"

"No, love, your skin is as beautiful where it was burned as anywhere else," he assured her.

His words comforted her almost as much as the healing of her burns. She relaxed and sighed, grateful that he was gifted with a healing talent as

well as his other skills.

"Turn your head the other way so I can check that side of your neck," Harry said, lifting her hair as she moved so she wouldn't have to shake her head to toss it to the other side.

When Ginny turned her head, she saw the pile of scorched cloth on the floor, all that remained of what had been beautiful robes. Parvati knelt beside the ruined garment, looking a bit stunned.

"Parvati, I'm sorry," Ginny said.

Parvati looked up at Ginny, her beautiful eyes glistening with unshed tears. "It isn't your fault. You're the victim here."

"But it was your design."

"Yeah." Parvati sniffled, then shook her head and sighed. "My first design, actually. I drew these years ago." She sighed again. "It's okay. I can make more."

"Who was that?" Madam Malkin said, looking toward the door. "Why would anyone want to set those robes on fire?"

"It was probably a fangirl," Harry growled, doing his best to control his temper. "There was a group of them outside when we came in."

"But why—" Madam Malkin said.

"Because they want Harry for themselves," Ginny snapped. "They think I'm a cow."

"They'd say that about anyone I was with, you know that," Harry said quietly. "They're a bunch of nutters, that's all, just mad."

"Yeah, mad about you," Ginny snarled. "I can't fault their taste in men, but they're all mad as hatters."

"Too right," Harry said. He bent closer to her back, moving his hands slowly above her to check for more injuries. "I think that's all of them." When Ginny started to move, he touched her shoulder. "Rest a minute. You've just been through quite a shock."

Ginny rolled onto her side and slid her hand along her back. "It doesn't hurt anymore! Thanks."

"I'm glad I could help." He looked up at Madam Malkin. "Do you have underwear? Her things are a bit scorched."

"Of course. Let me bring her something." The shopkeeper left to rummage in her stock for things in Ginny's size.

When she returned, Harry said, "How much do I owe you for those robes?"

The woman straightened up and stared at him in surprise. "You don't have to do that, Mr. Potter. It wasn't your fault."

Harry got a stubborn glint in his eyes. "I'll pay for them. You and Parvati shouldn't have to suffer a loss because of some stupid fangirl."

The woman's face flushed with pleasure. "Thank you, Mr. Potter! That's very generous indeed."

"Thanks, Harry," Parvati added, gathering up the ruined robes and getting to her feet. "You're so sweet."

"Yeah, that's why the fangirls are mad about him," Ginny said, wrapping his cloak around herself again so she could sit up.

"How are you feeling?" Molly said, sitting down beside her daughter.

"I'm okay now, Mum. Don't worry."

"It's my job to worry about you, you know," Molly said, smoothing Ginny's hair away from her face. Molly shuddered as burnt ends broke off and fluttered to the floor. It could so easily have been Ginny herself that was so badly scorched.

Ginny finally noticed her hair. "Oh no. It looks awful! And smells worse. What am I going to do?"

"Trim it," Harry said, not understanding the problem.

Ginny stared at him. "You don't understand. I'll have to cut off a lot!" She looked at her mother. "How bad is it?"

Molly sighed and put her hand on Ginny's back near her shoulder blades. "We'll have to cut it to here, I think. Or maybe shorter."

Ginny's hair had been past her waist. She shook her head and looked up at Harry, her eyes misty. "I was growing it out for the wedding. I know how you love my hair long."

Harry sat next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "I'm in love with you, not your hair. I'm just glad you're all right."

"Fine, then I'll just cut it off short like Tonks's hair and wear it in spikes," Ginny said, trying to be funny. Her quivering lip gave her away, though.

Harry kissed her, then tucked her head into his shoulder and just held her until her trembling stopped.



Just then, Ron and Hermione returned.

"Did you catch her?" Harry said.

"Blood damned useless leg!" Ron growled, pounding his fist against his gimpy leg. "I lost her. I just can't run that fast."

"And he wouldn't let me go after her." Hermione seemed quite indignant about it.

"I don't want you to get hurt!" Ron said. "I'm the one in training to be an Auror, not you."

Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Who fought in a war right beside you? Me! I'm capable of chasing down a stupid fangirl!"

"Mione," Ron said, scowling at her, "I have training you haven't had."

"My training was good enough for the war!"

"Hey!" Harry cried. "Stop it, you two. Bloody hell, you'd think we were back in school." When they subsided, he went on. "Did either of you get a good look at her?"

Ron sighed. "About five foot four, long brown hair—straight, not curly or wavy—a dark cloak and shoes, nothing else distinguishing that I can think of. Her hair's darker than Hermione's."

"That's a start then," Harry replied.

"We ran into a couple of Aurors while we were chasing her. They continued the chase," Ron said. "Maybe they'll catch her."

"If she doesn't just Disapparate," Arthur sighed. "It's a wonder she stayed in front of you two so long."

"We didn't give her time to Disapparate," Ron said. "We weren't that far behind her. She kept dodging through the crowd, or I would've hexed her to stop her."

"Well done, lad! And you too, Hermione," Arthur said approvingly.

"The Aurors will come here to take statements from us when they catch her," Ron continued.

"Well, that's it, then, isn't it? That's all we can do for now," Harry said. "Thanks."

"No problem," Ron replied.

Hermione had sat down behind Ginny and Harry. "How are you?" she asked Ginny.

"Harry healed me. I'm a little sore, that's all. But my hair is ruined."

Hermione lifted Ginny's hair and looked at it. "What do you mean, ruined?"

"Mum says it has to be cut off to here," Ginny said, indicating the spot on her back.

"Have you considered layering it?" Hermione said.

Ginny looked thoughtful. "Layering it? No."

"I don't know how to layer hair," Molly added.

"But Parvati does," Hermione said with a smile. "Shall we have her look at it?"

Ginny brightened instantly. "Yes! What a good idea, Hermione!"

"Should I even bother to ask for an explanation?" Harry said, glad to see Ginny looking happier, "or just leave you girls to it?"

"Just leave us to it," Hermione replied. "Ginny will look fine."

"She'd look fine even if she were bald," Harry said, leaning over and kissing the tip of Ginny's nose. "Are you okay? Do you want to go home and rest, or shower, perhaps?"

Ginny sat and thought for a long moment, then straightened her shoulders, her eyes bright and determined. "That's very tempting, but I came to buy wedding robes, and I'm going to keep trying them on until I find the right ones."

Harry grinned. "That's my warrior princess."

Hermione and Parvati took Ginny into the back of the shop to do something with her hair and let her change her underwear. While they were gone, two weary-looking men entered the shop.

"Wotcher, Harry, Ron," the first man said. "We lost her. She Disapparated when she got far enough ahead of us. The crowds of shoppers in the streets were no help at all."

“Did you get a good look at her?” Harry said. “Oh, these are Ron’s parents, Arthur and Molly Weasley.”

“Hello, Arthur,” the second man said. “I’ve seen you around the Ministry. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Weasley. I’m Tom Powell, and this is Mike McQueen. We’re instructors at the Aurors School. That’s where we met the lads.”

“Thank you for your help today,” Molly said as she shook their hands.

“I wish we could’ve caught her,” McQueen said, shaking his head. “Did she leave any evidence at all?”

“Would the robes she burned have some trace of a magical signature on them?” Harry said.

“They might. Where are they?” Powell said.

“I’ll get them,” Madam Malkin offered. “Pavarti took them into the workroom.”

Soon the two Aurors left with Powell carrying the ruined robes in a bag.

“We should guard the door so this kind of thing doesn’t happen again,” Harry told Ron. “Tell the girls we’ll be outside, all right?” he told Arthur and Molly as he and Ron walked toward the front of the shop.

“You boys be careful,” Molly warned.

“We will, Mum, don’t worry,” Ron replied.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 11

A couple of hours later, Ginny and Hermione came out of the shop and looked around, jumping in surprise when they saw two strange men, both of medium height, one with dark blond hair, the other with reddish-brown hair, lounging by the door.

"Oh, sorry," Hermione said, glancing at the strangers before looking up and down the street for her husband.

"Where could they be? They said they'd be here." Ginny said, lifting her hand to shade her eyes.

"We've been here for a while, miss," the dark-haired man said. "Who ya looking for? Maybe we saw them."

His voice was deep and a bit rough-sounding. Ginny looked at him uncertainly, then glanced at Hermione and slipped her hand into the pocket where she kept her wand.

"We're looking for my husband and her fiancé," Hermione said in a businesslike tone, but she, too, had her hand on the wand in her pocket. She looked from one man to the other, both of whom were watching her with interest. "You would recognize them if you saw them. Ron Weasley? Harry Potter? Have you seen either of them?"

"Nah," the blond man said in a deep voice. He had brown eyes and a short, turned up nose. "I hear those poor sods have girls chasing them all over London. Are you really attached to them, or are you just fans hoping to get lucky?"

The other man snorted but said nothing. Hermione looked up at him, then stood on tiptoe to see him better.

"Something I can do for you, miss?" the man said in a gruff voice. He had a thin, pointy nose, a weak chin, and hazel eyes behind ancient-looking square silver glasses. His posture straightened and he scowled, which changed his demeanour from relaxed to somewhat frightening in an instant.

Hermione backed down, looking uncertain. "Erm, no, I suppose not. Have . . . have either of you seen a tall, redheaded man around?"

"Walks with a limp, right? Poor lame bastard," the blond man said, shaking his head.

Hermione took a step closer to him and glared at him as she shook her finger under his nose. "He doesn't need pity, nor does he appreciate it!" She jumped when she heard Ginny laugh. "What?" she asked her friend.

"It's them. They're having us on!" Ginny said, walking closer to the dark-haired man. "It is you, isn't it, Harry?"

Hermione turned to stare at the blond man again. "Ron?"

Both young men laughed in their normal voices. "What gave us away?" Harry said.

"Your eyes softened when you looked at me. A stranger wouldn't look at me with love in his eyes," Ginny said. "What great disguises!"

"And now that you've announced who we are out here in the street, we can't use them again," Ron said, sighing dramatically. He wiggled his eyebrows so Hermione knew he was teasing.

"So did you decide on something?" Harry said, smiling at Ginny.

"If you'd smiled, I would've known you right away. Nobody else has that smile," she said. "And yes, we both found what we wanted. Mum and Dad even found something for themselves. You'll need to send Remus and Tonks in to get their 'parents of the groom' outfits."

"Great! Now what? Are we finished here?" Harry said. He tilted his head and looked at Ginny again. "Wait a minute. Turn around."

"Why?"

"Just turn around." As she spun, he smiled. "Parvati did a great job on your hair, Ginny. It looks beautiful!"

She looked at him uncertainly. "Do you like it better than the other way?"

"I said I thought you'd be beautiful if you were bald, but this is gorgeous. And I like the other way just as well."

She smiled then, and spun around again. "Thanks! It feels so light compared to my hair when it's longer. And it does look nice, doesn't it?" Her hair now hung about halfway down her back, but was cut in layers so it looked fuller, fluffier somehow, and had curls in unexpected places. It was a very pretty effect.

Harry caught her in his arms as she finished her spin. "You look beautiful. Now, are we finished here? Can we go home, or do you have more shopping to do?"

"I think we're finished for today, aren't we, Mum?" she said, turning to her parents who were just leaving the shop.

"Yes," Molly said before she noticed the two strange men with the girls. She and Arthur looked from one man to the other, obviously startled to see

the girls being so friendly with them. "Erm, who . . .?" Molly began uncertainly.

"It's us, Mum," Ron said in his normal voice. "We're in disguise."

"Ron?" She turned to the other stranger. "Harry?"

He grinned. "Yes."

"Wonderful disguises, lads!" Arthur enthused.

"And good practice for class," Ron agreed.

"If we're finished, we'll head home," Ginny said.

"Wait, I need to pay for the damaged robes," Harry said.

"And change your appearance so people don't think I'm out with some strange man," Ginny added.

He laughed. "Yeah, that too." They went back into the shop, Ron and Hermione following them. After Ron and Harry reverted to their normal appearance, Harry went to the counter, his money bag in hand.

"What do I owe you for those robes that were burned?" he asked Madam Malkin.

Harry knew wedding robes were expensive, but the figure Madam Malkin named made him swallow hard before he shook the money out of his bag and paid her. "Did the Weasleys pay Parvati for fixing Ginny's hair?"

"They offered, but she turned them down," Madam Malkin said.

"Then give her this from me, will you?" Harry said, pressing several Galleons into her hand. "Thanks."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter!"



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 12

Remus opened the door and let them in. Harry and Ginny were spending Christmas Eve with Remus and Tonks, Christmas Day with the Weasleys.

"Come in, come in!" Remus said, leading them into the house and taking the overnight bag Harry was carrying. "Let me take your cloaks. We're so glad you could come!"

"Thanks for having us," Ginny said as she handed the bag of presents to Remus, then unwrapped the scarf from around her neck.

"If Matthew was older, we would have been happy to accept your mother's invitation to spend Christmas there," Remus said as he hung up their cloaks, "but he's so young, Tonks doesn't want to take him out in this cold weather very often, or around very many people."

"That's probably wise," Ginny said. "Fred and George would spoil him silly, and he might catch a cold or something. I can't wait to see him! Harry can't stop talking about him."

"Really?" Remus chuckled and gave Harry a teasing look. "I would imagine Harry had other things than Matthew on his mind when he's around you."

"Too right!" Harry grinned at his godfather as he draped his arm around Ginny's shoulders, then followed Remus into the kitchen to visit with Tonks and Matthew.

"If you'll excuse me for a few minutes, I'm nearly finished marking essays," Remus said. "I'd like to finish while they're fresh in my mind." He disappeared into the small room he used as his office, leaving the others to visit.

After greetings and hugs were exchanged, Tonks took Harry and Ginny over to Matthew's cot in the living room. The baby waved his arms madly when Harry came into view.

"He's glad to see you, Harry," Tonks said, standing back and smiling as Harry leaned over her child. "He missed you."

"He's so young, how can he know Harry well enough to miss him?" Ginny said.

"Harry spends a lot of time with Matthew." Tonks smiled as Harry picked up the child with the expertise of frequent practice. "Matthew adores his big brother. Harry's already started explaining Quidditch to him."

Ginny laughed. "That doesn't surprise me."

After playing with the baby for a few minutes, Harry offered him to Ginny. "Do you want to hold him?"

"I don't know how. I've never been around babies. I've always been the youngest."

"Sit in the rocker and I'll hand him to you. That's the easiest way to learn," Harry said.

Ginny sat down as instructed and put her elbows on the chair arms, bracing herself to hold the baby.

Harry laughed. "If you're that tense, you'll make him cry. Relax. You'll be fine."

Ginny gave him a nervous smile, but shook her hands out and tried to relax.

"That's better." Harry kissed the baby's forehead and looked at Matthew very seriously. "This is my fiancée, Ginny. Don't flirt with her too much or I'll have to hex you. She's taken."

Ginny and Tonks laughed.

Looking quite pleased that he'd amused them, Harry placed the baby gently in Ginny's arms. "Be sure you support his head," he instructed, getting her arms arranged just so.

"He's so tiny!" Ginny said, smiling down at the baby. "Look at that. His fingernails are so small." She, Tonks and Harry talked in quiet tones while the baby stared at Ginny, apparently fascinated by her red hair.

"He likes redheads too," Harry said, nodding his approval. "Wise man."

Ginny held the baby happily until he began crying. "Oh no! What did I do?"

Tonks had returned to the kitchen to oversee dinner, and Remus was still working, so Harry took the child from Ginny. "His nappy needs changing, that's all. Come on, Matthew, let's get you dry."

"Do you need some help, Harry?" Tonks called from the kitchen.

"No, we're fine."

"I thought you would be," she replied.

Ginny followed Harry into the nursery, where he changed the baby's nappy as if he'd done it all his life. "You amaze me," she told Harry.

He looked at her in surprise. "Why?"

"You're so comfortable with him. I thought you'd be scared to take care of a baby, but here you are, even changing his nappy!"

"It was necessary." Harry wrinkled his nose he tossed the soiled nappy into a bin, which belched as it swallowed the nappy, then coughed a couple of times before settling down.

"The bin doesn't seem too happy," Ginny said.

He shrugged, then picked up the baby and held Matthew against his shoulder. "It wasn't always a nappy bin. I don't think it likes its change in station." Harry rubbed Matthew's back affectionately as he headed for the door.

"That baby can't be your brother. He doesn't look like you at all," the mirror said as Harry passed it.

"Shows what you know," Harry said mildly, shaking his head at the judgemental nature of the mirror.

"Does the mirror know you're not really his brother?" Ginny said as they left the nursery.

"I don't know. Doesn't matter. He's as much of a brother as I'll ever have." Harry leaned his cheek against the baby's downy head and breathed deeply. "I didn't know babies smelled so good until he came along."

Ginny grinned. "Except when their nappies need to be changed."

"Well, yeah."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good dinner, Tonks!" Harry said, carrying the last of the dishes to the sink.

"Thanks, luv!" Tonks said, tapping the sink and smiling in approval as the dishes began to wash themselves. "And Ginny, you were a great help with the potatoes. I was sure I'd ruined them."

Ginny smiled and hung up the dishcloth she'd used to wipe off the table. "No problem!"

Tonks bent over the baby in his portable cot. He seemed to be happy watching the toy Snitch Harry had given him for Christmas, which was flying in different patterns over his bed. Tonks adjusted his blanket, touched his cheek, then sat on the couch beside Remus, stretched and yawned. "Oh, sorry. I'm tired all the time these days. We miss you, Harry."

"Or at least you miss me picking Matthew up in the middle of the night," Harry teased.

"Yeah, there is that," she agreed.

The baby began crying. "I'll get him," Harry said, rising from the chair he'd been sharing with Ginny and crossing the room to pick up the baby. "Nappy's dry. You just fed him a little while ago. What do you think he needs?"

Tonks sighed. "I don't know. Bless him, he's such a dear, but he often fights going to sleep. He should be tired. He was awake a long time today."

"Maybe having company is too stimulating for him," Harry said as he carried the baby to the rocker.

Tonks nodded. "He was so excited to see you, Harry, and he likes Ginny, as well. I guess he just doesn't want to miss anything." She grinned. "I can't blame him for that. I'm the same way."

"Too right," Remus said, wrapping an arm around his wife and pulling her close.

Harry chuckled at their comments, then sat in the rocker with the baby in his arms. "You need to let your parents get some sleep, you know?" He started rocking and began telling Matthew about various Quidditch moves in a soft voice.

Remus smiled. "If that child isn't mad for Quidditch, it will be a miracle."

Harry glanced up and raised an eyebrow at his godfather. "And your problem with that is?"

"Not a thing. He'll be Gryffindor's next well-known Quidditch player, and he can say he was trained by the great Seeker, Harry Potter."

Ginny watched Harry holding the baby, having a long, involved but one-sided conversation with him, having switched from the subject of Quidditch to girls. She blinked back the tears that pricked her eyes. She'd never seen Harry like this. Yes, he was silly, tender, gentle and loving with her, but for him to be so sweet with a baby, especially considering the horrors he'd faced in his life . . . well, it was just another sign of the tremendous amount of love in his heart.

Harry glanced up at her just then. "You okay?"

"Yes. You just make such a picture, holding him." She got up and stood beside the rocker, rubbing his shoulders and watching the baby. Someday this will be us with our own baby. She smiled at the thought.



\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, Harry and Ginny flashed to the Burrow, sacks full of presents in hand.

“Happy Christmas!” Molly said, pulling each of them into a hug. “I’m so glad you came!”

“We wouldn’t miss Christmas, Mum!” Ginny said, putting her bag down to take off her cloak.

They were soon engulfed in the usual Christmas morning mayhem at the Burrow. Through an unspoken agreement, no mention was made of Bill, Percy or Hermione’s parents. They’d all grieved enough over those terrible losses. It was time to enjoy being with the family they had. Presents were handed out over breakfast.

“Here you go, Ron, Hermione,” Molly said, passing out presents. “Charlie, this red one’s for you. Fred, George, these are—no, wait, they go the other way round.” She laughed and swapped presents between the twins. “Harry, dear, this one’s yours. And Ginny.” Molly stopped behind her daughter and hugged her tightly. “This is yours. And Arthur.” Molly sat down and watched her family open their presents. As usual, they all had newly knitted jumpers. Harry’s had a pattern of brooms and Snitches all over, with the Lions logo knitted in on the outside of each shoulder.

“Thanks, Mrs. Weasley,” he said, admiring the jumper. “It’s beautiful.” He pulled off the jumper he was wearing and tugged the new one over his head. It fitted him quite well, and his shoulder muscles filled out the lions’ heads on the sleeves.

“Wow, Mum, that’s really nice,” Ginny said, admiring Harry’s jumper.

“I found a new knitting book that helped me improve my pattern work,” Molly said, beaming at the praise.

“Nice, Mum,” Ron said as he looked at his jumper. His had the Lions logo on the shoulders like Harry’s, but there were goal hoops on his jumper where Harry’s had Snitches.

Fred and George sat with stunned expressions on their faces. “Mum? How did you do this?” George said. Fred’s jumper was blue, George’s green, but both had moving patterns of fireworks splashed across them, with some of the fireworks forming the triple-W logo of their joke shop.

Molly smiled. “That book included a spell to animate the pattern. I’ve tried to do animated patterns in the past, but I just never got them right. I think the new knitting needles I bought with the book helped a good deal, too.”

Charlie’s jumper was blue with a green and gold dragon on the front. Small puffs of smoke came from its nostrils every so often. “Nice job, Mum. Thanks.”

Arthur opened his present, and managed to smile when he saw one of Molly’s usual designs on his brown jumper. A big “A” adorned the front in gold. The jumper was as lumpy as any she’d made in the past.

“Sorry, dear. I made yours before I got that new book,” Molly said, patting him on the arm. “I’ll make you a new one soon.”

“This is lovely, dear, just lovely. Thank you.” Arthur leaned over to kiss her.

Everyone exchanged presents after that. Hermione was pleased with the new Never-Splotch Parchment Harry and Ginny gave her, and did her best to smile tolerantly at the twins when she opened their present to find a box labelled “Marriage Enhancing Daydreams.”

“Erm, thanks,” she said in a small voice.

“Latest product!” Fred said, leaning back in his chair and grinning. “We think it will be a huge seller. Let us know what you think of it.”

Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance, their cheeks flaming with embarrassment before Ron said, “I don’t think we need this, actually.”

“Aw, have a go with it anyway,” George said. “You never know.”

Ron shrugged and eyed the box warily. “What’ll it do?”

“Just follow the instructions. Then give us a full report. You’re our test subjects.”

Laughing, Ron shook his head. “Gee, thanks.”

Charlie was trying to stifle his laughter and not succeeding very well. “What’s the matter, Fred? Don’t you two know any other married people?”

“Not that we can impose on this way, no,” Fred said with a show of dignity.

“Besides,” George added, “it should be fun to see their faces after they’ve used it.”

Harry and Ginny eyed their presents from the twins warily. “You didn’t give us one of those, did you?” Ginny demanded, giving her brothers a look worthy of Molly.

“No! You’re not married yet,” Fred said, looking a bit indignant.

“And we owe too much to Harry—” George added, equally annoyed.

And we don't ever want to ruin either of you!" Fred finished with obvious sincerity.

Harry grinned at them. "Cheers!"

Ron shoved a present across the table to the twins. "Here ya go."

"Aw, Ronnie, you shouldn't have!" Fred chortled as he and George attacked the large box with glee. Inside the box was an urn-shaped vase with wide handles on each side. The twins frowned at it, then at Ron.

"Go on, then," Ron urged, a grin tickling the corners of his mouth.

The twins looked at each other and shrugged, then each grabbed a handle and lifted it out of the package.

"Looks like something for Mum, Ron," George said, but no sound came out of his mouth. He looked at Fred in shock, because his words had come out of his twin!

"What the bloody hell?" Fred said, but, although his mouth was moving, the sound came out of George's mouth.

"Language, George!" Molly said absently as she dished up some more food for Arthur.

Acting wounded, George said, "It was Fred!" but the sound came out of Fred's mouth, which made everyone laugh but Molly, who merely looked puzzled.

The twins looked at each other, wide grins on their faces. "Wicked!" they said together, then turned to Ron. "How does it work?" George said in Fred's voice.

Ron was laughing too hard to answer for a while. When he caught his breath, he replied, "Some kind of charm, I guess. Try something else. One of you eat something. It's supposed to work in a lot of different ways."

George picked up a piece of bacon and put it in his mouth, chewing slowly.

Fred gasped. "I taste bacon!" he said, but the sound came out of George.

"Your turn," George said, his voice coming out of his twin.

Fred picked up a piece of toast, spread it with a thick layer of marmalade and took a huge bite, then nearly choked when George's voice came through his body. "Tasty! I do so love marmalade!"

Everyone was laughing hard now.

"How does that work?" Arthur said. "It's marvellous!"

"Two people have to touch it at the same time for the charm to work," Ron explained.

"Where did you find it?" Charlie said, laughing as George turned his back to Fred and bit into a lemon he'd Summoned from a bowl on the counter, which made Fred's face crumple in reaction to the sour taste.

"I saw it advertised in a book," Ron said.

"A comic book, no doubt!" Fred said, his voice emerging from George whose mouth was now full of jam.

Ron shrugged. "Yeah."

"Are you still reading those Mad Muggle comic books?" Charlie said.

An aggressive look came into Ron's eyes. "Yeah. So what?"

"I think they're funny," Hermione said loyally.

"This is great," Fred's voice said.

Ginny leaned across the table toward George. "Can I borrow that?"

George shoved the urn across the table, careful to remove his hand before Ginny touched it.

"Look out, Harry, she has plans for you!" George's voice said while both twins grinned madly.

Harry turned to look at Ginny. "What are you up to?"

"I think it looks like fun. Let's try it!"

Harry frowned, thinking of the sometimes-awkward consequences of spells he didn't understand. "I think we should find out how to end the spell before we use it."

Excellent point!" Fred's voice said. "Ron, how do you end it?"

Ron nodded toward the open box in front of the twins. "There should be instructions in there."

George turned the box over. No parchment fell out. He rummaged around inside the box and gave Ron a dirty look. "C'mon, where are the instructions?"

Ron frowned in confusion. "It's supposed to be in the box!" He pulled the box toward him and dug in it himself. Then he tore off the wrapping paper and dug through that. "Oh no! They're not here!"

"Were they with the urn when you got it?" Molly said.

"I only glanced inside to make certain it wasn't broken. I didn't look for the instructions," Ron admitted.

"It can't be that hard to end," Hermione said, practical as ever. She pointed her wand at Fred. "Finite Incantatem." Once she lowered her wand, she said, "That should take care of it."

Fred and George looked at each other. "Do you feel any different?" Fred's voice said, coming out of George's mouth.

"It didn't work!" George's voice said. "And I didn't feel any different before—did you?"

"Nah."

"If a Finite won't work, what will?" Charlie said, scratching his head.

Soon the whole family was casting spells on the twins trying to end the enchantment, but nothing worked.

"Harry, you haven't tried yet," Hermione said. "Have a go."

Harry had watched in amusement at first, then with a bit of worry. If it came down to him using his Refiner's Fire power to end this spell, he was afraid he might hurt the twins. He'd hoped someone else could manage the reversal, but now it was down to him.

"Erm . . . What haven't you tried? Seems to me you've tried every reversal spell I know of," he said.

"Make one up," Molly suggested. "You can do it, Harry."

Fred and George stared at Harry, looking more alarmed by the moment. "Uh, I think we'd rather live with this until it wears off than be hexed by Harry," Fred said.

"Yeah, what he—no, I—no, he said. Whatever," George agreed.

Harry grinned. "And I don't want to hex you."

"Can you sense what kind of spell it is?" Ginny asked Harry.

Harry pulled out his wand and passed it above and around the urn. "I can tell it's some form of Transference Spell," he replied. "We learned those in Auror School this term," he explained to Charlie, Arthur and Molly. He and Ron usually told the twins about the spells they were learning at school as they learned them, since they saw the twins so often at lunch time. "But Ron's already tried the reversal spell we know for it."

"Go on, Harry," Ron said. "You try it. Maybe I was laughing too hard for it to work."

Harry pointed his wand at George. "I'll be careful, mate, don't worry."

"Thanks!" George's voice said from Fred's worried face.

Harry cast the reversal spell and waited for the twins to react.

"Thanks, Harry!" Fred's voice said. His face fell when he realized his voice was still coming from his twin.

"Damn," Harry muttered. "Okay, I'll use more power this time."

"No!" Ginny cried, pushing his wand arm down. She reached across the table and hit George on the shoulder with her wand three times as she cried, "Stop! Stop! Stop!"

"What are—" George began, then beamed as the words came out of his own mouth. "Ginny! You're brilliant!"

"Did it work for me, too?" Fred said, then grinned. "You're one powerful little witch," he told his sister. "We've always said so." George nodded.

"How did you think of that?" Hermione said, leaning around Harry and Ron to look at Ginny.

Ginny shrugged. "I knew Harry didn't want to hurt them, and if he used more power, he might've done. This was the only thing I could think of. I thought it would have to be something simple, since it's a joke product."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, and we were trying more and more complex spells. We should've kept it simple. How silly of me! I should've thought of

that.”

“At least we know how to reverse it now,” Fred said.

Harry wrapped his arm around Ginny’s shoulders and hugged her. “Well done.”

Ginny leaned over and whispered, “I wanted things to move along more quickly so we could try it,” then giggled.

Harry raised his eyebrows and chuckled. Trust Ginny to have her priorities straight. He enfolded her in his arms, pulling her head into the hollow of his neck, then leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Did you take the instructions out of that box?”

She snorted, answer enough to suit Harry. He grinned and murmured against her hair, “Just had to torment them, didn’t you?”

She lifted her head to kiss him. “Just a small repayment for years of tricks and teasing.”

“No snogging at the table!” Charlie said, throwing a piece of toast at Harry’s head.

Harry’s Seeker reflexes kicked in and he caught the toast with barely a glance at it. “Thanks, Charlie. I needed more toast.”

As everyone laughed, a loud crash announced an owl hitting the kitchen window.

“Oh dear. There was such a cold wind earlier, I closed the window. I do hope the poor thing isn’t hurt,” Molly said. She opened the window and the bird flew straight to Ginny.

“Another present?” George teased. “Do you have a secret admirer?”

“Only Harry,” Ginny replied, untying the package from the owl’s legs, “and this isn’t from him. Wonder who sent it?”

Harry looked at the messily-wrapped package. “Isn’t there a tag?”

“No. I expect it’s from Luna,” Ginny said as she started to undo the ribbon holding the paper together. “This wrapping job looks like her style.”

The wrappings were newspaper clippings glued together. Harry frowned as he studied them, then pushed Ginny’s hands away. “Stop. It isn’t from Luna.”

Ginny looked at him in surprise. “What? But these wrappings—”

“Are from the Quibbler, yeah, but look what they say,” he insisted. Everyone leaned toward the package trying to make out the type. Harry glanced up at Ginny. “It’s from that nutter, see? The words are cut out to make new sentences.”

The rest of the family leaned toward Harry and Ginny to get a better look at the package.

“This one says, ‘Wedding cancelled,’” George read.

“This one’s about a funeral,” Charlie said, looking at his sister with worried eyes.

“And the others are equally bad,” Harry said, pushing his chair back carefully and getting to his feet. “Everyone just stay still. I’ll take it outside and dispose of it.”

Fred and George exchanged a look, then got up and began to move around the table toward Harry. “Do you think it’s explosive?”

“Possibly. You lot need to stay back.”

“I’ll go and unload it while you explain,” Fred told George, then Disapparated.

“Wait for us, Harry. We have a blast-containing box. It’ll be safer if you use it when you dispose of it,” George said, Disapparating as soon as he finished speaking.

“Harry, be careful!” Ginny cried, frightened both by the package itself and by the determined look on her fiancé’s face.

Harry was concentrating so hard on Levitating the box outside without jarring it in any way that he didn’t hear her.

“Don’t worry. We’ve been trained for this kind of thing,” Ron called over his shoulder as he followed Harry outside.

Molly turned to Arthur, wringing her hands anxiously. “But they’re still in their first year of Auror School.”

Arthur sighed, wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood up. “I know, dear. I’ll go and see if there’s anything I can do to help them.”

“Be careful, Arthur!”

Charlie, Hermione, Ginny and Molly started to follow the others out to the back garden. Harry sensed their movement and turned to face them. “Stay back! We don’t know what this will do!”

“Let the Aurors take care of it, Harry!” Ginny said. “You can send for them. Mum has an owl here.”

Harry blew out a nervous breath as he looked at her. He didn't want to be hurt, nor did he want any of these people he loved so much be injured, either. "I don't think there's time to wait for them. It's ticking."

Fred and George returned just then, carrying a large crystal box between them. "Here you go, Harry."

"How strong is it?" Harry said, eyeing the box warily.

"Top of the line. We use it to test new products," Fred said, setting it down near the back garden fence.

"Worth a try, mate," Ron muttered.

"Yeah. You get the box, I'll do the package."

"Right."

While Ron Levitated the box, Harry used a Locomotor spell to move the package under the box's open bottom. Ron lowered the crystal box gently over the package.

"Wait," Fred said. He pulled out his wand and cast a spell on the box.

"What's that?" Harry said.

"A Containment Spell. It activates the box to hold in whatever happens inside it," George explained as Fred finished the spell.

"It's ready, Harry. You can blow it up now, or whatever you're going to do to it," Fred added.

"I just want to open it for now. Once we know what's inside, I'll send it to the Aurors to try to track down who sent it." Harry took a deep breath and blew it out, steadying his nerves. He pointed his wand at the package and cast a spell that opened it as gently as possible.

When the lid of the box was lifted, a gasp went through the family as absolutely nothing happened.

Ginny laughed nervously and started to approach Harry. "I guess she fooled us, huh?"

"Stay there," Harry said in a voice that stopped her cold.

"What—"

"I'm going to see what's inside it. Just stay there." Harry kept his wand pointed at the box and muttered another incantation. A moment later, something long, thin and pale floated above the box. Something else small and round, with a length of something red attached, followed. Then a red envelope emerged. Harry pointed his wand at the red envelope, a Howler, and winced as a voice shrieked, "Die, Ginny Weasley, die! You don't deserve him! You can't have him! DIE!"

An ugly green cloud of some kind flowed out of the Howler and filled the crystal box. Harry created a Sphere Shield Charm around the box as he asked, "Is your box gas-proof too?"

Fred and George looked worried now. "No, it's for explosives," Fred said.

"Good one, Harry, getting that sphere around it so quickly," George added.

Ron walked to the edge of the sphere and looked at the things now lying on the ground inside the crystal box. "It's a doll. A doll with long red hair. Her head's been pulled off."

Harry looked at Ron. "We need to send a message—" Harry would do it, but he had to hold the sphere until the Aurors came to take possession of the crystal box and the evidence inside it.

"Onto it," Ron replied as a silvery Adfero message spell left his wand.

"Did you warn them about the gas?" Harry said.

"Yeah."

"Good." Harry saw Molly holding Ginny in a tight embrace, fear plain on both of their faces. "It's okay now," he told them. "It won't hurt anyone. The Aurors will bring the right equipment to contain the threat."

"Why haven't they caught this girl yet?" Molly cried.

"She's been careful to leave as little evidence as possible," Harry said. "This time, we may have her, though."

"I hope so," Ginny said, her face very pale. "But Harry, if this is my stalker, and she wants you, wouldn't she know you'd be with me when I got that package and that the gas might hurt you as well?"

"Probably."

Ginny frowned, trying to puzzle things out. "So why would she want to hurt you, then?"

Harry shrugged. "Dunno. We'll know more when the gas is analyzed."



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 13

The Aurors came and took the package away, promising to send a report as soon as possible. The family settled around the kitchen table again and sat in stunned silence for a time.

"Well, that was more excitement than necessary on Christmas," Fred said after a few minutes, rocking his chair onto its back legs and balancing there.

"Too right. Harry, you draw a weird crowd," George added, mirroring his brother's action.

"Most of them are very nice," Harry said. "There are only a few nutters."

"It only takes one," Ron said darkly.

Harry sighed. "I know."

Ginny noticed her mum wringing her hands nervously as she listened to the boys talking. "You have the wedding invitations now, right?"

Ginny's comment startled Molly. "What? Oh. Yes, dear, we have them."

"Then let's start addressing them. Hermione, will you help? You have such pretty handwriting," Ginny said as she pushed her chair back and stood up.

"I can help you with those," Harry offered, pushing his chair back as well, "if you don't mind my handwriting, that is," he added with a self-deprecating grin. "I know it looks like a five-year-old's."

Ginny leaned over and kissed him. "That's OK, sweetie. Mum, Hermione and I can handle it. But thanks for offering."

A few minutes later, Charlie and Arthur moved to easy chairs in the living room, talking about their jobs. Fred and George pulled out a chessboard from the shelves by the fireplace and stretched their lanky forms out on the rug there, teasing each other about how wimpy their pawns were.

Harry and Ron stayed at the table in companionable silence, watching the girls. The dark circles under Hermione's eyes looked worse than they had in quite a while. Harry turned to Ron. "How are things going on getting her parents' house ready to sell?"

"Slow. Taking today off from it is nice."

"Is she OK?"

"Hanging in. She's better today. Except for that package of Ginny's, this has been a fun day for both of us."

Harry smiled. The timing seemed right to put in action a plan he'd been working on for a while. "What are you and Hermione doing the day after tomorrow?"

Ron nearly groaned. He dropped his face into his hands and rubbed his eyes, the gesture full of weariness. "Back to the grind. There isn't that much left to do, but it's so hard on her, and things that are hard on her are hard on me."

"Can you afford to take a day off?"

Ron looked up at Harry. "We took today off."

"I know." Harry sighed. "I meant another day—never mind. I guess the timing isn't right after all."

"Right for what?"

"I thought it would be fun for us to have a day in the country. Ginny hasn't seen you two very much, and I miss you too."

Ron brightened. "A day in the country? What would we do?"

"Just hang out. Explore a village. Have lunch together. Nothing fancy."

"Hogsmeade?"

"Nah. I thought we'd go someplace new."

"Where?"

Harry grinned at him. "It's a surprise."

"A surprise for us or for Ginny?"



“Yes,” Harry said with his best enigmatic smile.

Ron laughed. “Sounds good to me, mate. When and where?”

“Our house, around nine or so. Will that work for you?”

“Yeah! Sounds great.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When Ginny and Harry got home that evening, Ginny gave Harry a teasing smile. “Are you ready?”

Completely flummoxed, Harry frowned. “Ready? For what?”

She pulled out the joke gift Ron had given the twins. “For this.”

A slow smile crossed Harry’s face. “Ah, I see. And what did you have in mind?”

“Something fun, I think.” She took his hand and led him upstairs. Once they were in their room, she turned to face him. “Clothes off, Potter.”

He chuckled, but obeyed, pulling off his jumper and unbuttoning his shirt as he spoke. “Bossy little witch, aren’t you?” He kicked off his trainers and laughed when she started working on his belt and zipper. “In a hurry, are we?”

“I only have your best interests in mind. And mine, as well, of course.” Once his jeans were off, she pulled off her jumper, then moved into his arms, her hands softly stroking the planes of his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her and smiled down at her. “Oh, so I’m the one who has to be naked? How fair is that?”

“I expect you to remedy that situation eventually,” Ginny said, sliding her arms around his neck and kissing him. She pulled back and looked at the urn on the table. She’d been careful while carrying it home to not let it touch Harry, so he hadn’t touched it at all yet. “It’s time for us to touch it together.”

“What do you think will happen?” Harry said, extending his arm toward the urn just as Ginny was doing.

“It could be a lot of fun for us—or it could be nothing. We’ll just have to see!”

“On three, then,” Harry said. “One, two, three!” As they each grabbed a handle, Harry was uncomfortably reminded of the Tri-Wizard Tournament when he and Cedric Diggory had each grabbed a handle of the Tri-Wizard Cup, which was a Portkey that took them to Voldemort and Cedric to his death. At least we know this one can’t be a Portkey since the twins have already touched it. Harry blew out a relieved breath when he realized he’d felt nothing when they’d touched the urn together.

“Feel anything?” Ginny said, still holding the urn’s handle. She grinned. Her voice had come out of Harry!

“Not yet.” Harry laughed to hear his voice come from Ginny. He let go of the handle and slid his fingers into her hair, tilting her head for a kiss. “That’s weird.” With his hand still in her hair, he moved his free hand over his own hair. “Feels like you’ve got your hand in my hair.”

“Yeah, I can feel it in my hands!”

Harry lowered his face to hers, grinning madly. “This should be interesting.” He couldn’t believe how odd it felt not to feel her lips with his, not to feel her tongue with his, not to feel the shape of her teeth as he explored her mouth. Instead, he was feeling his own teeth with her tongue. As usual, she spent some time playing with the chipped tooth in the side of his mouth, the result of one of Dudley’s punches in their childhood. When they pulled apart, they were both gasping and wide-eyed.

“Does it really feel like that for you?” she said, although her voice was coming from him.

“Yeah. Weird, huh?”

“Absolutely. Let’s try it again!”

“I have more interesting ideas,” Harry’s voice said. He kissed her again and started unbuttoning her blouse, amazed at the strange feeling of cool air on his chest when her blouse opened, and at the stranger sensations from her body as her passion rose within her. He kissed the side of her neck, licked her collarbone and worked his way down to her breast, which he’d just freed from the constraining bra he’d felt was too tight around his own chest.

“Do you like it?” Ginny’s voice said, breathless now.

“It’s strange, but yeah, it’s amazing.”

“Shall we go on, or go back to normal?”

“Whatever you want, sweet girl.”

“Let’s go on, then.” She arched her back, pressing her breast against his lips, but grunted in apparent frustration.

Harry straightened up. "Wait. This isn't working. Let me try something." He grabbed his wand and tapped Ginny's shoulder. "Stop."

"What are you doing?"

"If saying 'stop' three times turns it off, then maybe saying 'stop' once or twice should cut the spell down enough that we can feel our own feelings as well as each other's."

Ginny beamed at him. "You're a genius."

He nibbled on her neck. "If it works, I am."

"Oh, that feels good!"

"On your neck or your lips?"

Ginny stepped back and looked at him in surprise. "Both! But still more lips than neck."

"Okay." He grabbed his wand and tapped her again. "Stop. Stop."

"But that makes three," Ginny said.

"We don't know if it's three total or three in a row that make it stop. Let's test it." He bent and kissed her again. He laughed against her lips. "Oh, that's better!"

"Yeah."

Now Harry could feel his own feelings as well as hers, which was both amazing and nearly overwhelming. He did a Transference Charm to remove the rest of her clothes quickly, picked her up and tossed her on the bed, plopping down beside her and covering her mouth with his. Every sensation, every touch, every feeling Ginny felt blasted through Harry like wildfire, but the strange sensations didn't distract him now the way they had before, because he could feel his own reactions as well. And such lovely, wonderful, powerful sensations they were on both sides. He thought he might very well die of pleasure and not be the least bit sorry about it.

Later, as he lay gasping for breath next to her, Harry's voice said, "Is it really like that for you?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah. Amazing." He rested his head on her shoulder, then couldn't resist licking the ticklish spot on her neck.

She laughed and squirmed, pushing him away. "Harry! Enough!"

The touch was a ticklish but sensual feeling on Harry's neck, making him squirm nearly as much as Ginny.

"I see what you mean," he gasped, still chuckling. "I reckon I shouldn't lick your neck anymore. It's a bit overwhelming."

Ginny sat up and leaned over him a steely glint in her eyes. "You stop licking my neck and I'll hex you!"

"Well, if you put it that way."

"I do."

"I'm getting confused with our voices coming out of each other," he said, flipping her on her back and giving the end of her nose a dainty lick.

She wrapped her arms around his neck tightly and nibbled on the dimple in his chin before releasing him. "Me too. Ready to end the spell?"

"Yeah." He sat up and grabbed his wand, tapping her and saying, "Stop. Stop. Stop." He put his wand back on the night stand, then lay on his back, his arm open in invitation. Ginny snuggled in next to him, her head on his shoulder, twining her fingers in the wispy curls on his chest.

"Let's not tell anyone about this," Ginny said.

"Oh, our little secret, eh?" Harry chuckled. "If you say so."

"Let them find out on their own!"

Harry laughed, then turned and kissed her on the nose. "If they dare!"



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 14

“Hello, Dobby,” Hermione said as she and Ron entered Number 12 Grimmauld Place. “Did you and Winky have a nice Christmas?”

The tiny elf nearly vibrated with excitement. “Oh yes! Harry Potter, sir, gave Dobby new tools! And Miss Ginny gave Winky beautiful earrings!”

“Tools? What for?” Ron said, handing his cloak to the elf.

Dobby’s ears drooped a bit. “Erm . . . for repairs.”

Ron frowned. “I thought this place was in pretty good shape now.”

Hermione patted Ron on the arm. “Tools are a lovely gift for a house elf, Ron. Something he can use, right, Dobby?”

Dobby’s expression brightened again. “Yes! Harry Potter, sir, will be right down.” He led them into the living room and offered them drinks, which they refused politely.

“Hey! Are you ready for a day in the country?” Harry said as he bounded into the room. He’d awakened feeling absolutely fantastic, as he’d done every morning since Ginny came home.

“You look well,” Ron commented, a wry grin on his face.

Harry grinned, refusing to rise to Ron’s teasing. “A good night’s sleep does wonders for me.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Ginny said as she joined them.

“What do you have Dobby working on?” Ron said. “He said you gave him tools for Christmas.”

Evading the actual question, Harry shrugged. “He likes to work on things. I got him a set of tools that are small enough for his hands.”

“So what are our plans for today?” Hermione said. “You told us to wear warm clothes. Are we going to be outside?”

“Yeah, for a while, anyway,” Harry replied. “At least it’s a fairly warm day today, and sunny. We should be okay.”

“Where are we going, though?” Hermione persisted. Harry just grinned at her.

“He won’t tell me either,” Ginny said, shaking her head in mock disapproval. “Says it’s a surprise.”

“If you’re ready, then—” Harry said, standing up. He was both excited and nervous about what he’d planned. He rarely pulled surprises on his friends. He hoped they’d like this one.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Where are we?” Ginny said when Harry transformed back to himself after flashing her to the country. Once Ron and Hermione were steady on their feet and released Merlin’s tail, the phoenix soared to a tall oak tree nearby and settled there, singing one liquid note that sounded quite satisfied.

“He seems happy,” Ron said, watching the magnificent bird.

“He is. He loves it here,” Harry replied. He turned to Ginny. “As for your question, sweet girl—” He turned and swept his outstretched arm in a half-circle encompassing the beautiful valley surrounding them. “Welcome to Godric’s Hollow.”

“Godric’s Hollow?” Hermione said. “I thought that was a village!”

“It is. It’s about three miles that way,” Harry said, nodding toward the east, “but this is the actual hollow. The town didn’t grow here because this was Godric Gryffindor’s land.”

“Wicked!” Ron said, glancing around. “Is there anything left of his home?”

“That was over a thousand years ago, Ron,” Hermione reminded him. “Anything left would be a ruin.”

“And so it is,” Harry said, pointing toward a stand of ancient oak trees at the edge of the valley. “His home was over there. There are still ruins to be seen.”

“So we’re exploring ruins today?” Hermione said, her face brightening. “That sounds like fun! It’s a beautiful day for it.”

“We’re not exploring those ruins today, no,” Harry said, grinning now. “I have other things in mind.”

“Like what?” Ginny said, picking up his infectious good humour.

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out, then looked seriously at Ginny. "You may hate this idea. If you do, that's OK. We'll do something else. But it's something I've been thinking about for a while, and I decided it was time to tell you about it." He chewed his lip for a moment, then took Ginny's hand and led her a few paces away. "D'you see this stuff?" He stood before a widespread pile of rubble. Parts of three walls still stood where there had once been a dwelling. "This is the remains of my parents' home."

Hermione gasped. "Why did you bring us here?"

Ginny shivered, but not from the cold air. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry."

Harry wrapped his arm around Ginny's shoulders. "I'm OK with it, really, I am. That's all past history. I may have this cleared out and made into flowerbeds. I think Mum and Dad would like that. But we can decide what to do with it later."

Ginny looked up at him. "Huh?"

Harry took a deep breath. "If you like it here, if this seems OK to you, we can live here. I own this land."

"Blimey, mate! It's in the middle of nowhere," Ron said, looking around.

"And so's the Burrow!" Ginny reminded him.

"Yeah, you're right. But Harry's always lived in town," Ron replied, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"That's true, but living in London now is a nightmare with all the fangirls and paparazzi and reporters everywhere. I want to live where it's quiet, where our children can run and play and yell without anyone complaining. I want room for Ginny and me to fly, and to teach our kids to fly." Filled with his visions of the future, Harry pointed at a wide flat area in the distance. "We'll put a regulation-sized Quidditch pitch there." Moving his hand to a low spot in the rolling land, he continued. "I thought we could put a pond there. A place to swim and row boats, y'know? With fish and lilies and frogs. The kids will love it."

A fond smile crossed Hermione's face. "You already have so many plans for your family."

"Yeah. But everything's open to change." He put his hands on Ginny's shoulders and gazed into her eyes, hoping she'd like his plans, but unwilling to force her into anything. "We don't have to do this right away, or ever, if you don't like it."

Without a moment's hesitation, Ginny replied, "When we talked about living in Godric's Hollow, I thought you meant the village. This is so much better! I love it! It's beautiful here, and you're right, the privacy will be wonderful!"

Harry had been nervous about Ginny's reaction, but the smile on her face was genuine. All the worries he'd had about this idea vanished. Now he felt like flying! "You really like it? You're not just saying that?"

She cupped his cheek in her hand and looked at him tenderly. "I think we'll be very happy here, Harry."

Harry picked her up and whirled around with her in his arms, then kissed her soundly. He set her back on her feet and stood grinning at her for a moment before he remembered the other things he had to tell her.

"I've talked to Grandfather about putting the same protections here as are on Grimmauld Place and Hogwarts." Harry led her away from the ruins of his parents' home to the top of a small rise nearby, and then turned back toward the ruins, which were near the dirt track that was the only road through the valley. "I thought we could put a tall hedge across the front, with a gate in it. We can set up a spell that will show us who's at the gate, kind of like a Foe Glass."

Ginny nodded. "I'd like that."

Harry grinned. "I knew there was some good reason I loved you."

She laughed. "Because I like the idea of hedges and a Foe Glass at the gate?"

He pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. "Among other things."

"This will be very nice," Hermione said, wandering around the area near the rise.

"Yeah, it will." Harry grinned at her. "I'll bet you're wondering why I invited you two along, aren't you?"

"Well, the thought did cross my mind," Hermione admitted.

"A regulation Quidditch pitch?" Ron said, his mind still on Harry's plans.

Harry grinned. "Yeah, mate. Full size."

"Wicked!" He looked up at Harry, who still stood on top of the little rise with Ginny. "Erm, you are going to let our kids play there too, right?"

Harry laughed. "That's why I brought you two with us today. I don't want us to be completely isolated. I happen to know that the land next to us is for sale, and the price isn't bad."

"Really?" Ron said.

Define 'not bad,'" Hermione, ever the practical one, said.

"The price will depend on how much land you want," Harry replied. "I'm sure terms can be worked out."

"How much land will you and Ginny have?" Ron said, looking around.

"I thought we'd start with twenty-five to thirty acres," he said, looking down at Ginny, still enfolded in his arms. "That should be enough room for your horses."

Ginny gasped. "Horses?"

Harry chuckled. "That spot right there—see the little yellow marker? I thought we could put the stable there, but you'll need to design it. I have no idea what horses need."

"Horses?" Ginny repeated. "I can have a horse?"

"You can have as many horses as you want, love," Harry said, delighted to see her pleasure.

"Oh, Harry! I love you!" She stood on tiptoe and pulled on his shoulders so he'd bend down, then kissed him before running down to the yellow marker. She spun around on the spot. "A stable! For my horses! I don't believe it!"

Ron and Hermione laughed at Ginny's antics. "What's that other marker for, mate?" Ron said.

"My workshop. I'd like to do more mosaics, and there's bound to be a lot of stuff to do on a farm, don't you think? I'll need loads of tools and room to work in."

"You look so happy, Harry," Hermione said softly. "You've been dreaming about this for a long time, haven't you?"

Harry blushed. "Yeah, I have." He looked up at her, then at Ron. "You could have as little as an acre or as much as thirty if you want. You just have to decide what will work for you."

"Up to thirty acres? What would we do with all that land?" Ron said.

"I've always lived in a city, except for our time at Hogwarts," Hermione added. "I wouldn't know what to do with a farm."

"You could raise horses, hippogriffs, whatever," Harry said. "Or you could just have a small garden, if that's what you want to do. You could leave the land natural for the wildlife to enjoy. It's up to you. And I won't pressure you to live out here, but nothing would please me more than having you two living next door. I want our children to know you two well, and hopefully you'll have some kids for ours to play with."

Hermione blushed. "We haven't even thought about children yet."

Harry laughed. "There's no rush, Hermione." His smile softened, as did his voice. "I'm planning for the future here. I never had one to plan for before. Now I do."

"It would be cool to be your neighbour, Harry," Ron said. "We'll talk about it."

"That's fine. No pressure. I knew you were getting ready to sell Hermione's parents' house, and I heard you talking about a flat on Diagon Alley. I just wanted you two to know this option is available if and when you want it."

A crooked smile crossed Ron's face and he punched Harry lightly in the shoulder. "Thanks, mate."

"Is anyone else going to live here?" Hermione said.

"I invited Remus and Tonks, but they like living in Hogsmeade for now. I thought about Neville, but he's on a research vessel in the Mediterranean. He's enjoying that, so I don't think he'll be interested in a place in the country for a while. Fred and George like living over their shop, and Charlie's happy with the dragons in Wales, so I guess it will just be us."

"Somebody else might buy some of this land and build on it, though," Hermione said, looking around. "It's so beautiful here, and more people are building houses in the country all the time. And what's to keep Muggles from buying land in here, as well?"

Harry shook his head. "This entire valley has ancient wards on it that keep Muggles out, so that isn't a worry. And the rest of the land isn't for sale, nor will it be."

"How can you be so sure?" Hermione said.

Ginny had returned to Harry's side and looked up at him now. "That's a good question."

He shrugged. "Because I own it."

Ginny raised an eyebrow and grinned at him. "I suspected that."

"How much of it, mate?" Ron said, looking around. "This valley is huge."

"All of it." At their shocked looks, he went on. "I inherited this bit where my parents lived. The house was in my dad's family for generations. I got

Gringotts to work things out so I could buy the rest.”

“Who owned it before?” Ron said.

“The Ministry of Magic. Somewhere along the way, they took possession of all the unclaimed land near certain magical villages or residences.”

Hermione sighed. “You two never did pay attention in History of Magic, did you?”

Both Ron and Harry shook their heads, slightly guilty expressions on their faces.

“Professor Binns talked about it. Oh well, it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Blimey, Hermione,” Ron gasped, his hands on his hips, a look of disbelief on his face, “I never thought I’d hear you say that about a school subject!”

“Well, history’s important. We need to learn from it or we’ll repeat the bad bits. But since Harry’s bought the land, there’s no reason to dwell on the Ministry confiscating land that didn’t belong to them.”

Ron turned to Harry. “If they just stole the land . . .” He frowned, trying to work something out. “I mean, it should be yours. You should’ve inherited it, you and Dumbledore, right?”

“I suppose. But they didn’t give me much trouble about it. Killing Voldemort has given me a bit of pull with the Ministry.” He grinned. In truth, the Gringotts goblins had pulled quite a few strings of their own and then added the fact that the wizarding world owed a tremendous debt to Harry Potter to their arguments with the Ministry.

He turned to Ginny. “I have something else to show you.” He led her down the hill a bit, then pulled a piece of parchment out of his pocket and spread it on the ground, revealing a diagram or drawing of some kind. “Watch.” When he tapped it with his wand, a lumpy, roiling blob of blue light emerged from it. Harry sent it to the very top of the rise, then spread his arms wide, which opened up the light into a recognizable shape.

“That’s a house!” Ginny cried.

“It’s huge!” Hermione said, gazing up at it in awe.

Harry laughed. “Yeah, it kind of grew as I worked on it.” Sitting grandly atop the rise was a shimmering blue line drawing of a two-story house with big windows, window boxes with scribbled-looking shapes that resembled flowers, and a tall, wide door. There were chimney pots on each end of the house, and the roof looked as if it might be slate. The house was at least three times bigger than the Dursleys’ house on Privet Drive.

“What kind of spell is this?” Hermione said, taking a few steps toward the house.

Harry shrugged. “I made it up.”

She turned to gape at him. “How in the world did you make up a spell that complex?”

Harry fought the grin that tickled the corners of his mouth. “Thanks so much for your confidence in my skills!”

Hermione’s cheeks turned a very fetching shade of pink. “I, uh . . . Oh, Harry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean—”

Harry laughed. “Y’know, it’s quite fun to take the mickey out of you sometimes. You blush so prettily.”

“Flirting with my wife again, are you?” Ron said mildly.

Harry shrugged. “Sometimes.” He reacted with a huge “Oof!” when Ginny elbowed him in the ribs. “You Weasleys are a rowdy lot,” he whined, acting horribly wounded but giving her a crooked grin.

“Don’t flirt with your almost-sister-in-law,” Ginny said, rubbing the spot where she’d elbowed him as he continued to wince as if in terrible pain. “Did I really hurt you? I didn’t think I hit you that hard.”

“I have at least three broken ribs,” Harry lied, then straightened up and laughed.

“You are in entirely too good a mood!” Ginny said, laughing with him.

“Yeah, I am.” He turned back to Hermione. “To answer your rather impertinent question, I saw something like this on the telly one time, part of a program on how computers are used to design things. I just made it work with magic instead of a computer.” Harry knew it was an impressive spell, and it had taken him a long time to work out. Every line of the house was a glittering line of blue light that sparkled in the sunlight as if it were embedded with crystals.

“You haven’t seen inside the house,” he added, walking toward the front door.

Hermione didn’t move an inch. “But it’s just an image . . . isn’t it?”

Harry grinned at her over his shoulder. “It’s a three-dimensional image, Hermione. That means we can go inside it. C’mon, it won’t hurt you.”

“Have you done this before?” Ginny said, watching as he opened the door with a wave of his wand.

“Gone inside? Yes, once, as an experiment. I pulled up a small version of one room and opened it in my room at Remus’s house. It worked fine.

Come on, I want to show you the house.”

Harry led his amazed friends through the house, showing them the living room, library, kitchen and the absolutely gigantic dining room.

A startled laugh escaped Ron when he saw the size of the dining room. “You could feed an army in here!”

“Have you noticed how many people are in your family?” Harry said reasonably. “Once everyone’s married and has kids, it will be an army!”

“What a good idea!” Ginny said, then wandered into the kitchen. “I love the view from the window.”

Harry walked up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. “I thought you would.” The window faced the spot marked for the stable and an area next to it that looked like a pasture that only needed fences. “Gin, if you want anything changed, it’s easy to do.” He raised his wand and pointed it at the dining room, shortening its length by several feet with a small gesture. “See? You can change where the rooms are, their shapes and sizes, add or subtract rooms, all with the flick of a wand. Easy.”

“Wicked!” Ron said, having overheard Harry’s statement.

“What’s through there, Harry?” Hermione said, pointing at a small door off the kitchen.

“That’s Dobby and Winky’s quarters.” He led them through the door, which opened into a miniature apartment. “It has a sitting room, a dining area, two bathrooms, and two bedrooms for their kids when they have them. It’ll be easy to add more rooms if they have more children than this flat can hold.”

Hermione beamed. “Oh, Harry, it’s wonderful! They’ll be so happy here!”

“They think so too. I’ve talked with Dobby about this project several times. That’s why I bought him the tools. He’s going to help me build some things, like fences, the front gate, workshop and stable, I think. He’s quite excited about it.”

Ron was looking out of the window. “What’s that wing over there for?”

“That’s a suite for Grandfather when he retires from Hogwarts,” Harry said. “Ginny and I told him we want him to live with us whenever he decides to leave the school.”

“You’ve really planned this out!” Hermione said. “When did you have time, with going to school and playing Quidditch?”

Harry gave her a rueful grin. “I haven’t slept well in months, remember? When I get past the nightmares, sometimes I can’t fall asleep for a long time. That’s when I think about this. By the time I worked out how to do the spell, the plans were pretty much finished.” He walked toward a door at the far end of the flat. “Let’s go outside and I’ll lower the first floor so you can see that.”

Once outside, the four friends turned to face the house. Harry pointed his wand at the edge of the house’s roof, then pulled down with his wand, stopping with the first floor was sitting squarely on the ground and the ground floor merely an extra-bright line around the bottom edge of the house. “This is a balcony. We can go in through that door.”

Once inside, Ginny stood in the centre of the room and turned around slowly. “What room is this? It’s enormous!”

“Our bedroom. There’s a bathroom through that door, and the hall is through that other door,” Harry said, nodding toward each door as he mentioned it.

“This room is as big as our whole dormitory at Hogwarts,” Hermione said, amazed.

Harry turned to face her. He wasn’t certain how to explain why he’d made everything so big. It just felt right to him when he did it. She was his best friend. If he just told the simple truth, she’d understand . . . he hoped.

“I, erm . . . I lived in a cupboard under the stairs until I was eleven years old. Then I had a small bedroom that wasn’t much more than a closet. The times I feel most free are when I’m flying, with the open sky around me. I want to feel that way in my home, Hermione. I don’t ever want to feel confined again.”

Hermione’s eyes were wide by the time he finished. “Oh,” she said in a small voice.

“Don’t blame you a bit, mate,” Ron said bracingly. “I like the feel of these rooms. We’ve always been crowded at the Burrow too.” He looked hopefully at Hermione. “Maybe we’ll build a big house too, yeah?”

A hesitant smile crossed Hermione’s face. “Maybe so.”

Harry led them down the hall, pointing out the two bathrooms and the vast, empty space that would become bedrooms for however many children they had.

“I thought you were planning to have seven kids. Why not a room for each one?” Ron said.

“I know my parents said we’d have a whole Quidditch team of children, but I don’t want to jinx it by building seven bedrooms to start with,” Harry replied. “And some of them may want to share. This is just the basic layout. Bedrooms can be added without a lot of trouble, either by dividing this space or adding on to the house. I can even add more bathrooms if we need them. And if we do have seven kids, the more bathrooms, the better.”



Hermione gave him an amused glance. "You already have your family planned, don't you?"

Harry hesitated before answering. When he spoke again, his voice was so soft, they had to almost strain to hear it.

"All I've ever wanted was a family of my own." He looked at Ginny and felt the happy bubble rising in his chest that appeared whenever they were together. "We want a big family."

"And all of them are going to have black hair and green eyes," Ginny said, giving him a quick hug.

"Some of them could be redheads!" he protested.

Ron held his hand out to Hermione. "C'mon. I think they need a bit of snogging time in their house." Hermione grinned and took his hand, then followed him through a window and back onto the grounds outside.

"Do we need snogging time?" Harry said, smoothing a stray hair away from Ginny's face and enjoying how she fit so perfectly in his arms.

"Always." They kissed, then held each other in a warm embrace.

"Are you happy with this? Really?" Harry said.

Her brown eyes sparkling, she grinned, her smile warm and sincere. "It's fabulous! I love it! Imagine this house and garden full of children playing."

"Yeah," Harry said, his mind full of happy images. "Imagine that."



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 15

Harry and Ginny walked hand-in-hand across the meadow behind their house site, looking for Ron and Hermione.

“There they are,” Ginny said. Her brother and sister-in-law were walking toward them, deep in conversation.

Harry was nervous. He wanted them to live next door, but he wanted them to do what made them happy, as well. He just hoped living in Godric’s Hollow would make them happy. “What d’you suppose they decided?”

Just then, Hermione noticed them. A bright smile crossed her face and she waved.

“They’re going to live here,” Ginny said. “I’m so glad.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “Me too.”

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“We probably won’t build right away,” Hermione said. The four friends had spent the last half hour talking about land boundaries, where Ron and Hermione’s house might sit and other aspects of the project. “Since we’re both still at school, it might be easier to just stay in a flat on Diagon Alley.”

“You know you’re welcome at Grimmauld Place,” Harry said.

Hermione giggled. “And we also know what it’s like to be newlyweds with someone else in the house.” Seeing Ron’s blush made her laugh even harder.

“It’s your house, mate. You and Ginny should have time to yourselves there.” Ron’s voice was gruff, but his eyes were sincere.

“I have to admit,” Harry said, “we’re enjoying having it to ourselves right now, but we can work things out.”

“No, we’ve already discussed this,” Hermione said. “We can afford a flat, and it will be fun for us to decorate it and have parties there and all. But thank you, Harry. It’s such a generous offer.”

“No problem. If you change your minds, let me know. You’ll be welcome.” He glanced down at Ginny who was shivering a bit. “Let’s go to the village and get something hot to drink.”

“And maybe some lunch!” Ron added.

Hermione arched a brow at her husband. “Do you ever stop eating?”

Ron looked offended. “I’m hungry!”

“I was teasing you, silly,” she said, sliding her arm through his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Merlin set Hermione and Ron down just at the edge of the wizarding side of town in a small copse of trees hidden from the eyes of people moving from shop to shop.

“I hope there’s a pub nearby,” Ron said, rubbing his cold hands together. “I could do with some coffee.”

“Me, too,” Ginny said, hugging herself as she waited for Harry to change back to a man from his phoenix form.

“Welcome to the village of Godric’s Hollow,” Harry said when he was back in human form.

“Where’s the Muggle section? Or are they mixed?” Hermione asked. They all knew that Hogsmeade was the only purely wizarding town in Britain.

“This is the wizarding section,” Harry explained. “There’s a Muggle section on the far side of those shops across the street. They have separate governments and everything, so they don’t really need to talk to each other unless there’s an emergency, kind of like the Ministry of Magic and the Muggle government in England. Grandfather told me the wizarding side is hidden from the Muggles by various spells, but I’ve never asked him what they are. I don’t think we’ll have any problem visiting either side of the village, though. The Muggle side has restaurants, shops and even a cinema, so it will be fun to visit there too. Where do you want to go for lunch?”

“The wizarding side,” Ginny said with no hesitation.

“Are we agreed?” Harry said brightly. Hermione and Ron both nodded. “C’mon, then!” He took Ginny’s hand and led the way to the street which was lined with small cottages, attached homes and a variety of shops.

“Have you been here before, Harry?” Hermione said.

"Twice, both times as a raven, just flying over the village." He looked around him eagerly. This would've been his home. He would've bought books in that little bookshop across the street. His mum might've bought him sweets at the shop they were currently passing. Pain mingled with joy in his heart. He'd missed so much, not being able to grow up in this village with his parents and their friends around him, but now Ginny had agreed to live here and Ron and Hermione would be their neighbours. It would be a good life.

It was an attractive village, with well-kept shops and homes. People glanced up and smiled as they passed, and some even said hello, but none of them bothered Harry or his friends, which was a relief after dealing with crowds of fans in London.

"Look at that!" Ron said. He and Hermione were a few paces behind Harry and Ginny.

"It's Dumbledore!" Hermione said.

Harry turned to look at them. "Where?"

Hermione shook her head and smiled at him. "Not Dumbledore in person, Harry. It's a statue of him."

"Let's go and see it," Harry said.

They crossed the street and found themselves in the village square, which had a beautiful gazebo in the centre and tall bronze statues all around the perimeter. The one in front of them was Albus Dumbledore, complete with his half-moon glasses. Harry thought he could almost see the twinkle in his grandfather's eyes.

"That's beautiful! I wonder why he never told me about it?" Harry said.

"Maybe he doesn't know about it," Ron suggested. "I mean, how often does he come here?"

Harry shrugged. "No idea." He and Ginny walked around the sculpture, which was about eight feet tall and showed Dumbledore with his head tilted slightly and smiling down at the viewer with an amused expression.

"Whoever did this certainly captured him," Hermione said.

"I wonder who the other people are," Ginny said, looking at the other statues in the park.

Harry smiled down at her. "Let's find out." He and Ginny moved to the next statue which showed a tall man holding a sword and wearing very old-fashioned robes. "This one's Godric Gryffindor."

Ron and Hermione had gone on to the next sculpture while Harry studied the sculpture of Gryffindor's sword.

"This one's Agatha Crumholtz, who invented butterbeer!" Ron called.

"Hooray for Agatha, then," Harry said, laughing. He and Ginny glanced at Agatha's statue, then moved on. "Here's Bowman Wright, the bloke who invented the Snitch."

"Cool." Ron stood in front of Wright's statue with them. "Good work, Mr. Wright!"

"Look at that Snitch." Harry grinned. "Looks like the design's been improved a good bit since he invented it." The Snitch, while walnut-sized like modern ones, didn't have the small, elegant wings of a modern Snitch, but much heavier, more awkward-looking ones.

"Well, he invented it in the 1300s. There are bound to be improvements on things over that much time," Ron said. "I'll bet this one wasn't as fast as the new ones."

"Probably not," Harry agreed.

"I wonder if these are all famous people from Godric's Hollow?" Hermione said, glancing around. "Oh, there's a sign." When she was in front of it, she read it out for the others. "Welcome to the Godric's Hollow Walk of Fame. These sculptures represent Godric's Hollow natives or residents who left a significant mark on the wizarding world. We are proud of their achievements and honour them for their contributions to our society." She glanced around. "There should be . . . yes, there is."

"What?" Harry said.

Hermione nodded at a sculpture of a tall, broad-shouldered man across the square. Even from the back, it was recognizably Harry Potter, messy hair and all.

Harry sighed. "Oh no. They didn't."

"Come on, let's see if they got it right!" Ginny said, pulling on his hand and leading him toward it.

The four friends crossed the square and turned to look at the sculpture. Sure enough, there on a four-foot high pedestal was a larger-than-life statue of Harry with his messy, windblown hair, round glasses and lightning-bolt scar, wand in hand and a determined look on his face. He was wearing Muggle clothes that were too big for him.

"It's a good likeness," Ginny said, "but I don't think your lips are that thin."

You haven't seen him glare at you that way, have you?" Ron said, chuckling.

Ginny smiled. "Not often, no."

Harry listened to his friends' banter while staring up at the statue. Is that what I look like to people? Funny how it doesn't look the way I see myself in the mirror. "I wish they hadn't put me in Dudley's clothes."

"Yeah, I wonder why they did that?" Hermione said. "You were buying your own clothes by seventh year."

"It's symbolic," a voice said from behind them. They turned and saw a portly middle-aged woman with blond hair that seemed determined not to stay the way she'd styled it. She had an excited, eager look on her face, but was blushing as well. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help myself. You're Harry Potter, aren't you?"

Harry saw no reason to deny it. The statue looked just like him. "Yes."

The woman blushed when Harry addressed her, but went on bravely despite her red face. "I'm so pleased to meet you! Welcome to Godric's Hollow!"

"Thanks."

"Um . . . what do you think of the statue?" She looked nervous as she waited for his reply.

Harry turned around to look at it again. He had no idea what to say. He felt Ginny squeeze his hand, urging him to say something. "Erm . . . it's nice." The woman beamed.

"You said him wearing those clothes was symbolic," Hermione said. "What did you mean?"

The woman moved toward the statue, looking up at Harry shyly when she passed him. "The plaque explains it," she said, pointing at a large bronze plaque at the base of the statue. It read, "Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived" with dozens of lines of text after that.

"I couldn't think how to condense your story any better," the woman added. "None of the others have such extensive stories attached to the statues."

"You said you couldn't think how to condense it," Hermione said. "Did you help with this project?"

The woman's blush deepened. "I'm the sculptor. Cindy Allen. It's so nice to meet all of you! I've read all about you in the papers."

"You do beautiful work," Hermione said kindly. "Did you do others in the park?"

"Oh yes, several. You'll see. All the ones from Dumbledore's era on. But Mr. Potter's was the one I most enjoyed doing." She looked at Harry again, studying his face this time. "I captured you fairly well, but I think your cheekbones are a bit more pronounced than I made them." She pulled out her wand. "I can revise it. If you'd be willing to sit for me, I could get it perfect."

Harry did his best not to squirm visibly. "Erm, no, that's all right. Thanks anyway."

She smiled and blushed, a bit shy again as she put her wand away. "Well, I had to ask."

Ron was reading the plaque on the base of the sculpture. "It says your clothes symbolize the ten years of torture you suffered when you lived with your Muggle relatives. It says a load of other stuff, too." He moved around the sculpture and studied the sculpted reliefs on the other sides of the base. "Look, here's Dobby!"

Harry stepped away from the sculptor, glad of an excuse to move away from her probing eyes. "Dobby?" Sure enough, at the top of the next plaque was a relief that looked remarkably like a very happy Dobby holding a sock.

"Yeah, it says you freed Dobby and that you're in favour of freeing all house elves," Ron said, looking up from the plaque.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Hermione said, reading further down the plaque. "It mentions your membership of S.P.E.W.!"

Harry turned back to the sculptor, his eyebrows raised in surprise. "How did you know about that?"

"I do a great deal of research before starting a project, and this piece was so important, I wanted to include everything I could," she explained.

"Fortunately for me, the press has covered your life quite well, so I had a lot of material to work with, which is a rare gift for me. Many of the people I sculpt were famous for something but that was the only thing that ever got their names in the papers, so there isn't much information on them. That certainly isn't true of you!" She beamed at him again. "We only just unveiled this piece last week. One of the relief plaques was damaged when we mounted it. I had it repaired and just remounted it a few minutes ago. That's why I'm here. What luck that I was here when you arrived!"

Harry smiled. While he might not be thrilled to have a statue of him in the square, at least it was well-done. The woman obviously cared a great deal about her work. Being nice to her wouldn't kill him. He wanted to live here, after all—it wouldn't hurt to start making friends among the residents.

"Thank you for doing such a nice job on me."

Ginny, Ron and Hermione were examining the plaques on the other sides of the base. "This one's about you playing Quidditch," Ron said, pointing to the plaque on the back of the statue's base, "both at school and with the Lions."

"And this one's about the D.A.," Ginny said from the other side of the sculpture.

Nothing about Voldemort?" Hermione said, following Ginny and Ron.

"That's on the front one, the one with so many words," Ron said.

"It has our names on here," Ginny said, "in the Dumbledore's Army stuff."

"Cool," Ron said, leaning closer to study it in detail. He laughed. "Look, there we are, 'Mione! And there's Ginny!"

Harry gave the sculptor an apologetic smile and excused himself, then moved around the sculpture to look at the plaque about the D.A. At the top was a relief of Harry standing with his wand raised in a pose similar to the one on the statue, fighting an unseen enemy. D.A. members in the air to the right of the plaque dropped bombs on people in the distance. To the left of the plaque, Ginny knelt by an injured person wrapping a bandage around his arm. Hovering in the air above Harry were Ron and Hermione. The words on the plaque told a brief history of the D.A. and their significant battles, ending with a list of the members, with gold stars by those who'd died and Order of Merlin symbols by those who'd won that award. Seeing those names, some of whom were good friends, tugged at Harry's heart. He bit his lip, then blew out a calming breath. It was right that they were honoured this way. They deserved it. He tried not to think of all the times these scenes showed up in his nightmares. Looking across the square at the sculpture of Dumbledore calmed him somehow. He didn't look at that plaque again.

The sculptor moved into his line of sight as she found a spot where she could watch their reactions to her work. Harry looked at her expectant, hopeful face. What did she want from him? He glanced back at the plaque for a heartbeat, then knew what to say.

"Thanks for remembering everyone—not just me."

"After what I learned from reading about you, I knew that's how you'd want it," Cindy said. "I wanted this sculpture to please you, if you ever saw it."

"It does."

The woman beamed, still studying Harry's face with such focus that it made Harry uncomfortable. Finally, she shook her head. "Harry Potter," she murmured, "right here in Godric's Hollow." She took a deep breath and straightened up, all business again. "I'm so glad I met you. I'll leave you to enjoy yourselves now. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"I'm glad I could thank you in person for this," Harry said, nodding toward the D.A. plaque.

"My pleasure. Well, I'd better go. I hope to see you in town again sometime."

After she left, Hermione looked at Harry. "You handled that better than I expected."

Harry was relieved that he'd managed to get past the grief the plaque caused. Determined to get back to the playful mood he'd been in when they discovered the square, he shook his head. "You have no faith in me, do you?" he teased.

Hermione stayed determinedly serious. "I know you really well, Harry. I know this statue makes you uncomfortable, but you were very kind to her."

Ginny bristled. "Harry's a very kind person!"

Hermione sighed. "I know, but—"

"Let's see what else is here," Harry said before the bickering could begin.

The two couples separated, going different ways around the square to look at the other statues. Harry and Ginny were looking at a statue honouring the witch who invented Spellotape when they heard Hermione gasp.

"What is it?" Harry said. A couple of large trees obscured his view. "You two all right?" He and Ginny started toward the sound of Ron and Hermione's voices.

Ron sounded unusually serious. "I think you'll want to see this, mate."

"I don't know," Hermione said, sounding a bit nervous. "He might—"

Harry frowned when he heard Ron say, "If he's going to live here, 'Mione, he needs to know about it."

"What is it?" Worried now, Harry and Ginny hurried toward them. They passed the back of a statue and saw Ron and Hermione staring at it, transfixed. Harry turned to look at it, too. It showed a family . . . Harry gasped. It was his family. There stood his father with his face so similar to Harry's, and his hair sticking up at the back exactly like Harry's. His mother's hair fell past her shoulders. She was nearly as tall as James, thin and pretty. Both of them were smiling at the unscarred baby Harry, held in his mother's arms.

Harry didn't remember walking toward it, but when Ginny laced her fingers in his and rested her head on his arm, it startled him out of his trance-like state. He realized he was standing at the base of the statue, his free hand on his father's foot, looking up at his parents with hungry eyes. He glanced down at Ginny, then at his surroundings, and wondered how he got there. Harry swallowed hard, then went back to staring into the faces of his parents, who looked so happy, with no idea that soon they would soon die trying to save Harry.

He'd known there would be reminders of them, at least for him, but he hadn't realized the town had created a memorial to them. After seeing the other statues here, I should've expected this . . . but I didn't. He realized the huge old trees around the statue would've hidden the figures from his raven's-eye view when he'd scouted the town before. He wished he'd seen it when he was alone. He wished he'd known about it, so he could have sat in a tree and grieved with no witnesses.

Harry swallowed hard and blew out a breath, then licked his lips nervously, trying to master himself, but to no avail. A tear slid down his cheek, quickly followed by others. He felt arms around his waist, around his shoulders, and one hand gripping his arm tightly. Tearing his eyes away from the statue at last, he saw it was Ginny whose arms were tight around his waist. Ron's strong arm was around Harry's shoulders, and Hermione was gripping Harry's arm with one hand, clutching Ron's hand with the other, tears streaming down her face. His friends—no, his family were there for him, helping him however they could.

Harry scrubbed at his eyes and wondered how long it would be before he could pass this statue without it slashing his heart into bloody ribbons. One look at Ginny's face, though, told him he'd not only survive but would thrive wherever he lived, as long as she was with him. He hugged her, then turned to Ron and Hermione with a tremulous smile on his face. He wanted to say so much, but couldn't find the words. Finally, he said what he could.

"Thanks."

"Are you all right?" Hermione said, studying his face with worried eyes.

"Yeah. It was just . . . a bit of a shock, y'know?"

"It was nice of the village to do this," Ginny said, turning inside Harry's arms to look at the statue now that Harry seemed to be OK.

Harry kissed the top of her head. "Yeah, it was."

Hermione leaned closer to the statue and read the plaque attached to it. "James and Lily Potter gave their lives trying to save their son on 31 October 1981. Harry Potter is the only known survivor of the Killing Curse. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

The four friends were silent for several moments. Finally, Harry broke the stillness.

"There's a church with a graveyard just over there. Maybe they're there." He looked at his friends. "I can come back by myself some time. I didn't mean to spoil the day."

"No, Harry, it's all right," Hermione said.

"We're here for you, mate," Ron added.

"Let's go," Ginny said, taking Harry's hand and leading the way.

The graveyard was next to a small church with beautiful stained glass windows. Harry looked up at it and wondered if he'd ever been inside it. Shaking his head to stop his mind wandering down that path, he opened the wrought iron gate to the cemetery. Ron and Hermione went one direction, Harry and Ginny another, all of them scanning headstones for the names of Harry's parents.

"Harry! Over here," Ron called after a few minutes' searching.

Harry frowned when they reached the graveside. "That can't be them. It must be new. It's covered with flowers."

"Look at the marker," Hermione said quietly.

Harry faced the double marker, which was made of flawless white marble. Other headstones in the cemetery were made of the grey stone native to the area. His parents' names and their dates of birth and death were inscribed in simple letters. He knelt on the cold ground and ran his fingers over the lettering. He couldn't tell anyone what he was feeling—he wasn't certain himself what was going on inside him. At least the tombstone wasn't as much of a shock as the statue. He'd expected to see their graves at some point.

When Harry felt a tear slide down his face, he stood up and took a shaky breath. He'd grieved enough. He knew his parents were happy where they were, and that they still watched over him. He had a new family now, one his parents would love, he was sure. He looked at Ginny, who was watching him with concern, tears sparkling in her lashes, then at Ron who was trying to be stoic while comforting the weeping Hermione.

Harry pulled Ginny into his arms and cradled her head on his shoulder. "I'm all right. They're all right, too, y'know. They love you. They told me so when I was dying. I told you that, right?" He felt her nod against his shoulder. He rested his cheek on her bright hair and just held her until the tension left her body. "OK now?"

"Yes." She pulled away and looked up at him. "Will you be happy living here, or will memories always haunt you?"

A sad smile crossed his face. "I don't have many memories of being with them. But we'll be happy here, I'm sure of it. And we'll make new memories."

Harry looked over at Ron and Hermione, who had separated. Hermione was examining the flowers and parchments piled on top of James and Lily's graves.

"What is all this stuff, anyway?" Harry said.

"They're thank you cards from people all over England," Hermione replied, looking up at him. "These notes are amazing. They're thanking your parents for you being the hero of the wizarding world." She set down the parchments she'd been reading and lifted some others. "Others thank you for killing Voldemort and setting everyone free."

“How nice,” Ginny said, bending down and picking up a flower. “Some of these haven’t been here long. They’re still fresh.”

Harry looked down at Ginny, who was still kneeling by the pile of things on the graves, and gently tapped the top of her head. “I thought you were hungry.”

“I am!” She stood and brushed leaves and grass off her jeans. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

“Great!” Ron said, helping Hermione to her feet as he spoke. “I saw a pub down the street.”

Harry took Ginny’s hand and led his friends out of the graveyard, glancing back once when they went through the gate. His parents’ headstone gleamed in the cold winter light. He nodded, satisfied somehow now that he’d seen their graves himself. He knew there would always be a sad, empty place inside him where the memories of his parents should be, but that pain would become a distant memory at some point. Harry turned away from the cemetery and gave Ginny a reassuring smile when she looked up at him. The smile she gave him in return warmed him and lifted the lingering traces of gloom from his soul. That cemetery held the pain of his past. The redhead holding his hand was his future, a future that looked bright indeed.





# Now And Forever

## Chapter 16

The four friends entered the pub, chose a table and sat down. Harry and Ron helped the girls with their coats, then took off their own and hung them on the back of their chairs before walking to the bar to place their order.

The man behind the bar, who was busy and had barely glanced up when they entered his pub, turned toward them now with a smile. “Yes, what I can I do for you gentle—” His voice trailed away as he stared at Harry. “Oh my stars. Harry Potter, here at last!” He reached across the counter, offering to shake Harry’s hand. “Welcome to Godric’s Hollow, Mr. Potter! We hoped you’d come.”

Harry shook his hand. “Hello.”

“Have you enjoyed your stay so far? Did you see your statue? It’s the newest one in the square.”

“Yes.” Harry squirmed a bit, still rather uncomfortable about the statue.

The man noticed Harry’s discomfort. “My apologies, Mr. Potter. I’m Ben Sheffield. I knew your father at school, may he rest in peace. Knew your mum too, but not as well as I knew your dad. He was a couple of years behind me, but I knew him even before Hogwarts, from his trips to town, of course. What a lovely man he was! And your mum—such a sweet woman. You look so much like James, it’s just amazing.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that,” Harry said. He’d expected to meet some people who knew his parents, but now that he’d met one, he wasn’t certain how to react to the man’s enthusiasm.

As he released Harry’s hand, Sheffield glanced at it and gasped. “Oh, no! I’m sorry, Mr. Potter, I wasn’t thinking when I shook your hand! I’ve read about those burns. Did I hurt you?”

Harry looked down at the griffins and phoenixes branded into his palm by his wand during the final battle with Voldemort, then turned his hand over, hiding them from sight. “They don’t hurt anymore. It’s OK.”

Sheffield seemed about to speak again, but Ron cleared his throat to get the man’s attention. “We’d like four cups of hot chocolate and we’d like to see your lunch menu, as well.”

“Of course, Mr. Weasley! I’ll bring it out when it’s ready, shall I?” He handed them some parchment menus. “These are our regular meals, but I’m sure Doris has a steak-and-kidney pie nearly ready back there. Shall I check, Mr. Potter? We know that’s one of your favourites. She has fresh treacle tart, as well.”

They know my favourite foods? They’re fans, then. Harry sighed. He’d hoped things would be different in Godric’s Hollow. He wished it was easier for him to accept that fact. Ron loved being recognized by people. Harry just didn’t enjoy the attention the way Ron did. He sighed again as he and Ron took the menus and went back to the table.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione said when she saw Harry’s face.

“They’re fans.”

“What did you expect? You’re the local hero, after all.” She acted as if the situation was perfectly normal.

Harry shrugged, feeling a bit disgruntled. “I dunno. I’d hoped—”

“You can hope all you want, Harry,” Hermione said, practical as always, “but the truth is, you’re a hero. Wherever you go, in England and Scotland, anyway, you’ll be considered a hero by most people.”

A fleeting smile crossed Harry’s face. “Maybe I should move to Australia. Nobody knows me there, and they do speak English.”

“I wouldn’t mind visiting Australia,” Ginny said, “but I don’t think I’d want to live that far from my family.”

Harry gave her a crooked smile and snorted. “I wasn’t serious, sweet girl. I’ll just have to bear up under all the adulation.”

She patted his hand and smiled at him. “That’s my brave Gryffindor.”

“Here you go, ladies and gents,” Mr. Sheffield said, handing around their hot chocolates. “Have you decided what you’d like to eat?”

“That steak-and-kidney pie sounded good,” Ron said.

“Let me just nip out to the back and see if it’s ready,” Sheffield said, then disappeared into the kitchen. Moments later, he reappeared, a woman at his side. “This is my wife, Doris, Mr. Potter. She wanted to meet you.”

She held her hand out to Harry hesitantly. Her husband pushed it down, whispering something in her ear. “Oh. I didn’t think of that,” she murmured, folding her hands together and looking uncomfortable.

Harry wondered how often this kind of scene would be repeated, people offering to do the normal thing then hesitating because of the scars in his hand. He supposed it would go on for years, at least. He smiled and held out his hand, waiting for her to shake it. After a long moment’s hesitation,

she finally took his hand very gently, just grasping his fingers briefly before letting go again. "It's all right, Mrs. Sheffield. My hand doesn't hurt anymore. It's nice to meet you. The food smells delicious."

The woman dropped her eyes shyly, and blushed, then shook herself and looked at him directly, still blushing madly. "I have all your favourites! Just tell me what you want and you'll have it in a jiffy!"

Soon their orders were made and the four friends were left alone to chat while waiting for their food.

"Harry, can you show me that house design spell again? Is it hard to learn?" Hermione said.

"Dunno. I made it up a little at a time. It's easy enough to show you how it works." He pulled out his wand and touched the tip of it to the table top. "Let's say this is your house, just the outline," he said, drawing a rectangle in blue sparkling lines. "You'll want a front door, an entrance hall, a sitting room with a fireplace, a kitchen, a dining room," he said, drawing lines, squares or rectangles for each one as he spoke. "How about a toilet on the ground floor, too?" He looked up at Hermione, who nodded eagerly. "So here we have your ground floor. Now, if you want to move a room, you just touch your wand to the centre of that room and drag it where you want it to go." He matched action to words, dragging the dining room across the house to where the sitting room was located. The entrance hall shivered a bit as he dragged the dining room through it. When he let go of the dining room with his wand, the sitting room popped into the vacated space on the other side of the house.

"Wicked!" Ron said.

"That's wonderful!" Hermione added.

"Yeah, it's good fun, isn't it? If you want a room to be bigger—let's make the dining room bigger, since it will be holding a lot of Weasleys and some Potters, as well, at times. To change the size of a room, just touch the corner with your wand and drag it to make the room bigger or smaller. To change the shape, just touch the middle of one line and you can push or pull it to change the size."

"That really is like a computer program," Hermione said. "It's wonderful! And very easy to understand."

"I'm not finished yet," Harry said with a teasing grin. "If you want to see how it will look in three-dimensions, just touch the edge of the house wall with your wand and lift." He did so, and the ground floor of a house sprang up from the surface of the table.

Harry jumped when he heard a susurration of "Oooooo's" flowing around the pub. He glanced up and saw that, while he'd been concentrating on the house design, a large group of people had entered the pub. All of them were watching Harry and his friends. They gasped and cringed in their chairs, apparently trying to disappear or at least appear smaller, when he looked at them.

"When did they come in?" Harry hissed. He felt like kicking himself. He'd relaxed, he'd actually relaxed, enjoying his friends' delight in his spell. What if these people were dangerous to them? He'd let his guard down. He shook his head in frustration.

"They came in while you were working on the house design," Ginny replied. She showed him the tip of her wand, which she was holding beneath the edge of the table. "They've been coming in fairly steadily. I don't think they're a danger to us, Harry. They seem to just want to watch us, or you, really."

In truth, the pub was becoming more crowded by the minute, as more people came through the doors, standing around the walls when they found there were no more seats.

"Big lunch crowd, eh?" Ron said with a teasing look at Harry. "If you bring crowds like this to all the businesses in town, you could make a good living just sitting in one shop after the other!"

Harry felt Ginny take his hand under the table. "It's good to see you really relaxed for a change," she said. "Don't worry, Ron and I were keeping watch while you and Hermione looked at your spell."

Harry squeezed her hand, grateful that she and Ron had both kept their heads while his was lost in the clouds of imagination.

"Here you go, luv," Doris said as she set Harry's lunch in front of him. "And Miss Weasley—or is it Mrs. Potter now?" She set Ginny's lunch down too.

Ginny blushed. "Not yet. Soon."

When Doris began chatting to Hermione and Ron, Harry looked at Ginny and whispered, "Not soon enough!" which made her giggle.

"Too right!" she agreed.

The food was delicious, but it was strange to be eating with so many people just sitting or standing quietly around the pub, doing their best not to be caught looking at the four young people. When the last of the treacle tart plates were cleared away, Ben Sheffield stopped by their table again, twisting a dishcloth in his meaty hands.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Potter, but I wondered if you'd mind meeting someone?"

Harry looked at the packed room around them. "Just one?"

Ben followed Harry's gaze and laughed. "Yes, truly, just the one. Would you mind?"

Harry looked warily at the crowd ranged around the room. They'd maintained a respectful distance and stayed fairly quiet the whole time they were

there. "OK."

Ben beamed. "Right, then!" He turned to an older man who had a purple porkpie hat in his hands. It clashed magnificently with his robes, which were a strange reddish colour with colourful depictions of planets moving around the fabric in various orbits. "Come along then, Chauncey. He's agreed to talk to you."

Chauncey was a small man with white tufts of hair over his ears and extravagant eyebrows. He was bent with age, but his lively green eyes twinkled with good humour.

"Mr. Potter," Ben said with a rather formal tone, "may I present The Honourable Chauncey Burgess, the mayor of magical Godric's Hollow."

Harry stood up and held out his hand. "Pleasure, Mayor Burgess. And it's Harry, just Harry."

"Oh, my, Mr. Potter! What an absolute honour this is!" Burgess said, taking Harry's hand in both of his. After shaking Harry's hand much more vigorously than necessary, he released it and gasped when the brands on Harry's palm caught his eye. "Oh, your poor hand! I'm—"

"It doesn't hurt anymore," Harry said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Don't worry about it."

The man relaxed visibly. "I'm glad it's healed so well for you, Mr. Potter. But it will always be a reminder to all of us what you suffered for our sake."

Harry had no idea what to say to that, so he just stood there waiting to see what the man would say next.

Burgess took a step back from Harry and turned toward the crowd a bit, opened a scroll of parchment and cleared his throat importantly.

"It is my distinct honour to welcome home one of Godric's Hollow's own sons, Harry James Potter. I have here a proclamation prepared by the Village Council."

Harry remained standing, more uncertain than before. What was he supposed to do now? He looked at Ron, Hermione and Ginny for guidance, but they all shrugged, as clueless as he was.

"Be it known that Harry James Potter, born in Godric's Hollow from a long line of Godric's Hollow residents, is this day being given the Freedom of the Village. This honour is bestowed on very few. With it comes the ancient privilege of carrying a naked sword in the village proper, should he choose to do so. The modern privileges we've added to that one include Mr. Potter's ability to go to the front of any queue in shops, a ten percent discount in the Old Scroll Bookshop, a fifteen percent discount in Sheffield's Pub, a fifteen percent discount in Smither's Sweet Shop and forgiveness of any drunk and disorderly charges, including a free trip home, should he need it. If he should like to speak in any Village Council meetings, Mr. Potter will be given first place in the queue and a reasonable amount of time to speak. These privileges shall be in force all of Harry Potter's life. Furthermore, today shall be known as 'Harry Potter Day' henceforward and shall be celebrated annually as a village holiday. Signed this day, etcetera, etcetera, and so on." He offered the scroll to Harry, then held up a gold medal hanging from a purple ribbon. As short as he was, the mayor needed Harry to bend down to let him put the medal's ribbon around Harry's neck.

Harry hesitated a moment, then bowed to the man's sincerity, bending down low enough for the little man to slip the ribbon over Harry's head and settle it around his neck properly. When he straightened up, scroll in hand, Harry had no idea what to say or do. The people in the pub stood watching him expectantly, their faces bright and excited, nearly leaning forward in their eagerness to hear whatever he had to say.

"Erm . . . I had no idea you were going to do this. You certainly didn't have to. But thank you."

The mayor beamed at him. "Mr. Potter, we knew you'd come to see your birthplace at some point in your life, especially once the war ended. We've had that proclamation and medal ready for quite some time, merely adding to it as you added glory to your name. And we made the medal gold instead of silver when you finally defeated You-Know-Who."

Harry shook his hand again, thinking that something about the little man reminded Harry of Professor Flitwick. Perhaps it was his size, but then again, his earnestness and enthusiasm were quite similar to his old Charms professor's manner.

"Would you like to say anything else, Mr. Potter?" the mayor said when he released Harry's hand. "The whole village has come out to see you." His arm swept around the pub, indicating all those gathered there.

"The whole village?" Harry swallowed hard, then looked at the gathered throng again. He laughed nervously. "We were just saying what a good crowd this pub attracts at lunchtime." The crowd laughed much harder than Harry's lame comment deserved. Harry felt he needed to say something more important, but what? He blew out a nervous breath, cleared his throat and tried again.

"Erm . . . I brought my fiancée and my friends, Ron and Hermione Weasley, to Godric's Hollow today. I, um, wanted to see the place myself, to visit my parents' graves and see my old house. I knew there was a village here, but I didn't know what a pretty place it was. The square with all the statues is very impressive, and, erm . . ." He didn't know what else to say. "Anyway, erm, thank you very much. I don't expect to need that drunk and disorderly pass, but the discounts in the pub, book shop and sweet shop are much appreciated. Thank you." He felt his face flame with embarrassment as he sat down. Had he ever sounded more lame? He didn't think so.

While the crowd applauded, Ginny murmured. "That wasn't bad. Stop kicking yourself."

He turned and grinned at her. "You know me too well."

She looked rather pleased with herself. "Yeah, I do."

People began to approach the table then, offering to shake hands with each of the four friends, and often telling Harry they knew his parents, his

dad, or his grandparents.

"Actually, you and I are cousins," one woman said, smiling at him. "My mum was your great-grandfather Potter's sister, so that makes us cousins of some kind."

Harry gasped. "I didn't think I had any family left except Dumbledore."

"Oh, my dear, I think all the wizarding families are related somehow. Godric's Hollow doesn't have anyone by the name of Potter living here anymore, but you do have loads of distant relatives." She patted his hand and smiled. "You're not an orphan anymore. You have family here." She turned to the crowd around her, queued up neatly now to meet Harry and his friends. "How many of you are related to the Potters?" Quite a few hands went up. "Be sure you tell him how you're related, then. It's time he knew his family!" She turned back to him. "There you go, love. An instant family reunion."

Harry felt both shock and a bright bubble of joy forming inside him. I have relatives here! He had no idea why the thought had never occurred to him. Overcome by a variety of emotions he couldn't name, it took him a moment to reply. "That . . . that means a lot to me."

"I thought it might. Any time you want to hear stories about your relatives, just let one of us know."

One by one, people introduced themselves and told him how they were related to him. Harry knew he'd never keep them straight, but he saw Hermione taking notes. He flashed her a grateful smile as he shook the hand of the next person in line. He glanced over at the woman who'd told him he had relatives. She had black hair like his, but it was shot through with silver. Would his hair look like that when he was older? He realized she had his chin. No, wait. He had hers. He shook his head, amused at the paths his brain was following. Many of those who now introduced themselves as relatives had some feature he recognized from his own face or his dad's.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in hearing all kinds of tales of his father as a boy, James and Sirius as teenagers and the antics they got up to, and James and Lily as young married people. Only a few people told him about the beautiful little boy James and Lily were so proud of—not many of them had been allowed to visit after the Potters went into hiding. Harry learned that he'd had a toy broom—a gift from Sirius—that he rode much too fast, terrorizing the family cat and keeping James and Lily busy trying to keep up with him even before he could walk well.

When the crowd finally thinned a bit, Harry asked the church pastor, who was one of the last to introduce himself, "What happens to the stuff that's piled on my parents' graves?"

"We have several storage boxes filled with the cards and letters. Would you like me to send them to you?"

"Erm . . . I dunno."

"You'll want the parchments, Harry," Ginny said. "Someday you may want to read them."

He thought a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, OK. But not for a while, all right?"

"We'll be happy to save them for you, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you. And thanks for taking care of things for so long."

Harry looked around at the people gathered in quiet clusters around the pub. The wonderful stories he'd heard from those he'd met, the warmth and kindness people had shown him and his friends, were overwhelming. And once they'd met him, everyone had backed off and left him alone. No fannish behaviour, even among the younger people. They treated him with respect bordering on awe. Hopefully that would fade into more normal feelings over time, but still, Harry thought he was going to like living in Godric's Hollow. He had real, blood-related family who knew his family's history, who'd known his parents. He had a place where he felt he belonged at last.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 17

A few weeks after the Christmas break was over, Ron and Harry were in the library at Grimmauld Place doing some of their Auror School homework. Suddenly, Ron jumped as if startled and turned toward the door. His abrupt movement made his book slam closed, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Mione? Is that you?" When he received no answer, his shoulders slumped and he opened his book again with a heavy sigh.

Harry gave his friend a sympathetic look. "She stays at school awfully late, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, and it drives me mad. I miss her."

Harry understood the feeling. He was lonely for Ginny, too. "What's she doing that's keeping her at Oxford so late every day?"

Ron lifted a shoulder and dropped it, sighing again as he did so. "Some project for one of her classes."

"A project? Then it should be finished soon, right?" Harry said, hoping to cheer Ron up a bit.

"Yeah, I guess." Ron sat with his shoulders slumped, head bowed, looking miserable.

Ron's attitude had been getting worse every day. Worried enough to brave the question that had been plaguing him, Harry said, "Is everything OK between you?"

Ron looked up at him, startled out of his reverie. "Huh? Oh! Yeah, we're fine." He dropped his eyes and said no more.

Harry crossed his fingers and plunged on. He couldn't help them if he didn't know what was wrong. Of course, it was possible there was nothing he could do to help, but if he didn't ask . . . well, he was just going to have to be blunt about it.

"C'mon, Ron, I know you too well. What's going on? I'm not trying to be nosy, you know that, right? But I'm worried about you. You're not paying attention in class, and you haven't been too sharp in practice lately either."

"Noticed that, did you?" Ron's expression grew even more morose. He was silent for several minutes. Harry sat watching him but said nothing to interrupt Ron's thoughts. "D'you think they'll kick me off the team?"

"It isn't that bad yet, but you've got to concentrate, both in Quidditch and in class."

"It's just hard for me right now." Ron fell silent, the misery in his heart evident on his face and in his posture. Finally, he sighed. "I don't know what's going on with her. She's withdrawn and grouchy all the time. Maybe it's hormones, I don't know."

Harry frowned. "Hormones?"

"She says that's what makes her short-tempered every month—you know." Ron shrugged, not wanting to go into any more detail about the mysteries of women.

Harry understood what Ron meant now. "If it's causing problems, maybe she should see a healer."

"She says she's fine."

"It doesn't sound as if she's fine."

Ron lifted one shoulder and dropped it in a very discouraged shrug. "I figure she's just busy at school and too tired. She'll get over it eventually. I hope so, anyway."

"Yeah, me too."

\* \* \* \* \*

Several days later, Harry arrived at Number 12, Grimmauld Place and headed up the stairs to get some notes he'd left on the library table that he needed for class. Partway up the stairs, he paused, straining his ears to hear a soft sound that had caught his attention.

The house should be empty except for the elves. Ron stayed after practice to study the new playbook, and Hermione should be at Oxford. He drew his wand and crept up the stairs as quietly as possible. He stopped by the drawing room door and listened. Nothing. He moved on softly, going from room to room and listening. At the library door, he stopped and listened again. There was the sound again! It was quiet, but it was definitely coming from this room! Slowly, quietly, Harry opened the door, his wand at the ready. He lowered his wand when he saw it was Hermione.

"Hermione?" he said as he approached her.

Hermione whirled around, her face red and blotchy, fear in her eyes. "Oh! Oh, Harry, it's you." She stuffed something in the couch cushions and sat trembling and uneasy, her face streaked with tears.

Harry could see she was making a valiant effort to stop crying. He sat down on the couch next to her. "What's wrong?"

She waved her hand in front of her face as if she were trying to shoo midges away from her eyes. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

Harry grabbed her waving hand and held it, noticing how fragile it felt. Hermione had never been the least bit podgy, but she’d lost weight, so much so that her hand felt like little more than bone. He shook his head and studied his friend’s face. She looked gaunt, with deep hollows under her cheekbones and dark circles under her eyes. She hadn’t looked this bad at Christmas. What happened? “No, you’re not fine. And you haven’t been fine for a while. You’re exhausted, short-tempered and much too thin. Are you eating at all?”

Hermione jerked her hand away from him and looked at him with a bit of the usual fire in her eyes. “Of course I’m eating! Dobby and Winky feed us very well!”

Harry put his hand on her shoulder, nearly wincing when he felt the bones protruding there. “They make wonderful meals, yes, but are you actually eating them? Or are you ill?”

“I’m not ill!”

“Then what’s wrong? Ron’s worried about you, and so am I. Why were you crying? And why aren’t you at Oxford? Did you finish the project that was keeping you late all the time?”

Hermione dropped her eyes to watch her hands nervously twisting in her lap. “There is no project.”

She’d spoken so softly, Harry wasn’t certain he’d heard her properly. “Did you say—”

She looked up at him, tears spilling from her eyes now. “There is no project. I lied about it.”

Harry was totally confused. “Why?”

She dropped her eyes again. “I just wanted to be left alone.”

“Why? What’s wrong? Come on, Hermione, you’re driving me mad here! And Ron’s already round the twist with worry.” As she hesitated to answer him, Harry thought of something. “What did you stuff in the cushions when I came in?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t believe you.” He shoved his hand in the cushions and pulled out a light blue jumper. “Why are you hiding this? Is it yours? I don’t remember seeing it.”

Hermione had stiffened when he pulled the jumper out of the cushions. Her face was set in angry lines, but tears trembled in her lashes. “It . . . it was . . .”

Suddenly, he knew. “Your mum’s.”

She nodded, her lips pressed together, looking entirely miserable.

Harry looked at the jumper. It was quite ordinary, a simple cable-knit made from soft wool. He caught a faint fragrance from it and lifted it to his nose. “What’s that scent?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It just smells like my . . . my mum. She wore that jumper a lot. It was her favourite.”

Harry thought he understood now. “You’re smelling this scent and remembering your mum and it hurts. Is that it?” She nodded. “So is your grief over your parents what’s making you ill?” She shrugged again. “And this non-existent project at Oxford. What’s the deal with that?”

“I can’t study in the library there. I never know what will start me crying again. I’m rarely alone here, and I just wanted a place where I could be alone—just in case, you know.” She sniffled. “I found a relatively private spot at Oxford, so I try to study there, but sometimes . . . sometimes I can’t study at all, no matter where I am.”

Harry was shocked. Hermione, unable to study? “Why not?”

She shook her head and sobbed, unable to speak for a moment. “I . . . I was such a bad daughter, Harry.”

“No you weren’t!”

“I was! I was horrible! For years, I spent as much of every holiday as possible with Ron—and you, too—instead of with my parents. Sometimes I’d spend the whole holiday with Ron and his family. I should’ve gone home! If I’d known . . .”

“If you’d known, you would’ve spent that time with your parents. But you didn’t know, Hermione. You couldn’t have known they’d die so young. Did they ever say they minded your spending so much time with us?”

“They loved both you and Ron, and they liked the Weasleys,” she replied, “but I had to talk them into letting me stay nearly every time. Eventually, they stopped arguing with me about it and just let me go. I told them . . . I told them . . .” Fresh tears spilled down her face. She looked up at Harry, her face twisted in misery. “Oh, Harry! I lied to them. I told them you both needed my help with your holiday homework or you’d get detention.”

Harry almost smiled. “So they thought we were both terrible students?”



Not exactly, just that your grades improved a lot with my help.”

Harry snorted. “That wasn’t a lie.”

“But that wasn’t why I spent holidays with you two! I just . . . I wanted to be with Ron, even before he finally admitted he cared about me. And of course, I wanted to do everything I could to help you, too, and it was easier to help if we were together.”

Harry wished he could do something to make things easier for her, but couldn’t think of anything at the moment. Perhaps just keeping her talking until she relaxed was the best thing he could do. He tucked a stray hair gently behind her ear. “Did your parents know you fancied Ron all those years?”

“Mum knew. She thought it was a bit funny that I cared about a boy so much that it distracted me from studying, especially when the boy was too thick to realize . . .”

Harry did smile this time. “Yeah, that would be Ron. So why were you here today? Did something happen at Oxford?”

She took a shaky breath and looked up at him. “I didn’t have any classes today, and I knew Ron planned to stay at the stadium to study the new playbook. I didn’t expect you to come over, so I just stayed here. Since I was alone, I pulled out Mum’s jumper. I thought if I just had a really good cry, instead of holding it in all the time, I might finally get past my grief.”

“And did you?” Harry said in a gentle voice. He slid his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer to him, hoping to console her at least a little.

“No.”

“I know Ron wouldn’t mind comforting you. Why did you need to be alone?”

“He lost two brothers!” she wailed. “He’s still in so much pain! I couldn’t add to that.”

“Hermione, he’s doing better—”

“You don’t hear him at night.”

Harry sighed. “You’re right, I don’t.” He moved his hand on her shoulder a bit, trying to find a spot that wasn’t quite so bony. “You didn’t look so thin over the holidays, and that wasn’t long ago. What happened?”

She waved her hand dismissively. “I tried what you did. I’ve kept a glamour on me for ages so I’d look all right, but I didn’t bother with it today, since I thought I’d be alone all day. I didn’t want anyone to worry about me.”

“Well, you failed spectacularly there. Ron and I have both been worrying about you, especially Ron. He talked to me about you just a few evenings ago. He’s losing his mind wondering what’s wrong and what he can do to help.”

“Oh, I never meant—” She dropped her face in her hands, looking totally disconsolate.

He ran his hand gently across her back to comfort her. “I know you meant well. He’ll understand.” At least, I hope he will. Harry chewed his lip a moment, wondering how he could help his friends, both of whom needed to deal with grief that seemed to be overwhelming them. No inspirations came despite his best efforts. Holding Ginny usually makes me feel better. Maybe—

“Come here.” When she looked up, Harry gathered her in his arms, tucked her head into his shoulder and held her tightly. “You can cry all you want. Go ahead.”

She tried to pull away. “No, I’ll get your shirt all wet.”

“I have others, Hermione. Go on. If you need to cry, I have a shoulder right here for you to cry on. Ginny says it’s a pretty comfy shoulder, at that.” He gave her a cheeky grin, trying to tease a smile out of her. He was rewarded with the tiniest of smiles.

Hermione snuggled against him for a moment, finding a comfortable spot for her head. “Ginny’s right. You have a very comfy shoulder.”

“I’m glad you approve. Now go ahead and cry all you want, okay?” He handed her the blue jumper, which she clutched to her chest. A moment later, she bowed her head over it and sobbed for a few minutes, then turned to Harry and buried her face in his shoulder, her arms around his neck as she wailed in an agony of grief.

Harry rubbed her back and wondered how she’d held such guilt and pain in for so long. Several long minutes passed with Hermione sobbing her heart out on Harry’s shoulder. He could feel her tears soaking through his shirt, chilling his shoulder a bit. Finally, she pulled back and looked at him, her eyes calmer than before.

“You’re right. That helped,” she said, gazing up at him. “You’re so sweet. Thanks.”

“Any time.”

“Harry?” She hesitated, then cupped his cheek in her hand, her thumb stroking his cheekbone. “Life’s so short. We shouldn’t put off important things.”

“I agree. What important things are you putting off?”

“Saying something that you should hear as often as possible. I love you, Harry.”

Harry was a bit startled, but decided to take her comment at face value. “I love you too.”

“Carrying the flirting a bit far this time, aren't you, mate?” Ron's voice made Harry and Hermione both jump and face the door. He looked uncertainly from his wife to his best friend and back.

Had Ron heard him and Hermione saying they loved each other? From the uncertainty in Ron's eyes, Harry suspected he had. “This wasn't flirting, mate.”

Ron frowned. “Then what was it?”

“I was comforting Hermione.”

“Comforting . . . ?” Ron shook his head as if he didn't understand.

“You know how you've been so worried about Hermione?” Harry said. “You were right to worry. I found her crying when I got here a little while ago and came in to see what was wrong. She's in a lot of pain, Ron. You two need to talk.”

Ron looked at his wife. “Are you ill?”

Hermione stood up, her mum's jumper still clutched in her hand. “I . . . in a way, I guess I have been. But I'm getting better. Harry helped me. That's what he was doing, Ron. Helping me.”

“Helping you with what?”

Hermione seemed incapable of answering him.

“She needed a shoulder to cry on,” Harry said at last.

Ron turned to Hermione, his blue eyes dark with pain. “What's wrong with my shoulder? Why did you need Harry's?”

“I . . . I was . . .” Hermione shook her head and lowered her eyes, crying again.

“What?” Ron demanded.

“Hermione, if you don't tell him, I will, but it should come from you,” Harry said.

“Mione?” Ron said, looking miserable. “What's wrong?”

Hermione held out her mum's jumper. Ron took it, looking confused.

“That's my mum's favourite jumper,” she began, her voice shaky. “I've been grieving over my parents.”

“Why did you need Harry for that? I'd—”

“You're still grieving for your brothers. I didn't want to burden you with my problems.”

Ron crossed the space between them and gripped her shoulders, loosening his grip a bit when she winced. “I'm your husband, 'Mione. Your problems are my problems. You should've come to me.” His voice was firm but sad.

She moved closer to him and slid her arms around his waist. “I know, but I just couldn't, not for a while anyway. I love you, Ron. I didn't want to hurt you.”

Ron looked puzzled. “How could sharing your grief hurt me?”

“I was just trying to protect you,” she said. “You've been hurt enough.”

“Tell him everything, Hermione, so he'll understand,” Harry urged.

Hermione led Ron to the couch and sat down with him, and hesitantly explained her guilt over spending holidays with Ron instead of her parents, and how she couldn't forgive herself for being such a bad daughter.

Ron shook his head. “Do you think your parents thought you were a bad daughter?”

“No, but—”

“Then stop beating yourself up. You can't change the past. They loved you. They wouldn't want you making yourself ill from all this, would they?”

“No,” she said in a small voice.

Harry watched Ron talking to Hermione in a calm, mature voice. Ron was being wonderfully understanding and supportive. If Hermione had only given him a chance months ago. . . .

“And another thing,” Ron was saying now. “You never let me take care of you. You seem to think you have to take care of me.” When she started to

protest, he put his finger on her lips. "No, I'm serious. This is another case of it. You were trying to take care of me somehow, and you were making yourself ill from it. I won't stand for that anymore, Hermione, do you understand? I'm the man of the family."

A small smile played across her face. "Yeah, you are."

"Then let me be the man of the family! I want to look after you and protect you and help you, but you won't let me!"

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't realize . . ."

"That's right, you didn't! I've been worried sick about you!"

"Yeah, Harry told me."

They both turned and looked at Harry.

"Thanks for helping her, Harry," Ron said at last.

Greatly relieved at how everything had worked out, Harry turned to leave. "I'll just leave you two to kiss and make up, shall I?"

"Thanks for helping me, too, mate," Ron said, already pulling Hermione closer to him.

"Harry, wait!" Hermione called.

Harry stopped in the doorway and turned around to face her. "What?"

"You never showed me how to do the house design spell. I'd like something to take my mind off of school things. Would you show me that spell?"

"I'll be back over here to study with Ron in a couple of days," Harry replied. "If you look more rested and not so thin and pale, I'll be happy to show you. So eat well and get some rest!"

A small smile crossed her face. "You're blackmailing me."

"I'm using incentives I know will work with you, to get you to do the right thing."

Hermione looked up at him, a thoughtful expression on her face. "You sound like a parent." She winced a bit when she said "parent," but made an obvious effort to get past that pain.

"Someday I hope to have kids," Harry said with a mischievous grin. "Practicing on you and Ron isn't a bad idea."

She actually laughed at that.

"Made you laugh," Harry said, delighted to see spots of colour appear in her pale cheeks.

"Yeah."

"If you pass inspection in a couple of days, I'll teach you that spell. Goodnight."

"Night."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Harry! Harry, guess what?" Ron called as he entered the locker room one morning a couple of weeks later.

"What?"

Ron beamed. "'Mione's better. She's playing with that house design spell and really enjoying it, and she's eating more, too. I think planning for our future is really helping her."

Harry felt as if a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. "That's great!"

"Yeah. She was actually humming while she was playing with that spell last night, can you believe it? I haven't heard her do that since . . . well, since before the war." He grabbed Harry's shoulders and squeezed them. "I can't thank you enough, mate. Really." He pulled Harry into a hug, then let him go and stepped back, blushing now.

Harry smiled. Seeing Ron so relieved lifted his heart. Maybe they'd all heal soon. He was sleeping a bit better now, with fewer nightmares per night, but still, it would be so good when he and Ginny were married. He knew he'd overcome his nightmares with her by his side.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 18

Early February stormed in with blustery winds and bitter cold. Harry hated to think how cold it must be at Hogwarts if he was so chilled in relatively temperate London. Quidditch practice was an exercise in willpower, with those who could force themselves to stay in the horrible weather the longest jeering good-naturedly at those who simply couldn't take it. Harry and Ron stuck it out, determined to be among the best of the team no matter what it cost.

"Whose idea was it for Quidditch to be played all winter anyway?" one of the beaters complained. "When I hit the Bludger that last time, my hand was so numb, I nearly lost my bat!"

"I bloody well couldn't hold on at all," the other Beater growled. He'd dropped his bat twice before practice was over.

Harry looked at Ron and grinned. Ron had saved nearly every goal today, and Harry had caught the Snitch three times. Harry didn't know if their success today was due to the Snitch as well as the other team members simply being slower in the cold, or to pure, golden luck. It was a lot more fun to give luck the credit.

The team captain called for everyone's attention. "Since the weather's so foul, and supposed to continue the same way all week, we've decided to cancel practice the rest of the week." A ragged cheer rolled through the locker room. "Now, lads," the captain continued, "don't be like that. We just want everyone to be in top form with our match against the Tornadoes coming up in two weeks. While you're off, study your playbooks. I want all the new plays memorized by our first practice next week. And remember to exercise even when you aren't flying! Right, then! See you lot next week."

Another weary-sounding cheer filled the locker room, along with some ribald jokes and a good bit of laughter.

"I expect you're off to Hogwarts with all this free time, eh, Potter?" the captain said as he passed Harry and Ron.

"I wish," Harry said with a wistful sigh. "We have a project to work on for Auror School. The extra time will be put to good use."

"Never let it be said that the Lions got in the way of higher education," the captain teased. "Good work today, lads. And Weasley—you've improved tremendously in the last few practices. Whatever you're doing, keep it up!"

Ron's ears turned red, but he grinned. "Thanks." Since the scene with Harry and Hermione where she'd finally admitted what was bothering her, both Hermione and Ron were in better moods as well as being more productive in their school work, and in Ron's case, in Quidditch practice.

After changing back into their street clothes, Harry picked up the book bag he always carried in case he had a spare minute to work on the analysis of the evidence against Ginny's stalker. "You want to work on this stuff today or what?"

"Yeah, of course!" Ron said. "Mione's at Oxford, so we'll have the house to ourselves."

"I thought it might be good to work at Remus's, so we could pick Tonks's brain. I've talked to her about the case several times already," Harry said, "but every time I think I have a handle on things, something else occurs to me. There are so many ways to look at the evidence. I'm still confused about some of the process."

"Hey, we're only first-years, after all!" Ron said with a cheerful grin. "This stuff is supposed to be confusing at first. I think they design it that way, actually." He laughed. "Yeah, let's go and see if Tonks can help us."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry sat with the sleeping baby cuddled in his left arm, writing in the margins of his notes with his right hand. Tonks had pointed out the errors in their analysis process and was now starting dinner while the boys finished making notes about her explanation.

Ron sat back and sighed. "Blimey, Tonks, if you hadn't helped me with that last calculation, I never would have finished."

Tonks grinned at their praise, then shrugged as she tossed a handful of herbs into the pot bubbling merrily on the stove. "Hermione would've sorted you out eventually, ducks." Motherhood had somehow cured her of much of her clumsiness. The pots barely rattled as she cooked these days. "It was Harry's idea of coming at it from a different angle that made all the pieces of the puzzle come together properly. But the best part is, your analysis shows that the same person sent all those things. That will be a big help to the Aurors."

"They probably worked that out ages ago," Ron said as he stuffed his books back in his bag.

"No, they haven't," Harry said, surprising both Ron and Tonks. "I heard them talking in the corridor when I went back to get my book last night. They said they're still stymied. With what we've worked out here, at least we know it's one person. That's something, anyway."

"The methods they have for tracking down who did a particular spell will amaze you when you learn them," Tonks said. "Take good notes! I want to know what's new out there, since I've been off work for so long."

"When are you going back to work?" Harry said, holding little Matthew closer now that he'd finished writing.

"I don't know." She turned and leaned against the counter, watching Harry with the baby. "I'd like to stay home with Matthew until he's in school, but I don't want my skills to get sloppy either. And of course, I need to get my girlish figure back!" She sauntered the length of the kitchen and posed like a catwalk model, making both young men laugh.

"We'll drill you on things we learn, how's that?" Harry offered with a grin. "And you look great. Nobody would know you'd just had a baby."

"You're sweet, you are," she said, batting her eyelashes at him outrageously, "but I'll be back in fighting trim soon. And as for drilling me on what you learn, that would be brilliant! You're on!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A few nights later, Harry and Ron were in class working on another aspect of the evidence analysis.

"More calculations," Ron grumbled.

"If it helps Ginny—"

Ron sighed. "Yeah. It's for Ginny. I keep telling myself that."

They and their classmates were deep in mathematical hell, or at least it seemed that way, when the door of the classroom opened. Harry glanced up and saw Kingsley Shacklebolt enter the room. He grinned at the man, but Shacklebolt's attention was on Professor Thurston as he strolled between desks supervising the class's work.

"Kingsley! Nice to see you," Vance Thurston said.

"Vance," Shacklebolt said in his deep, slow voice. "A word, please?"

"Of course!" Thurston turned to the class. "Keep working on those calculations. I'll be back in a moment." He followed Shacklebolt through the door and closed it behind him.

"What d'you reckon?" Ron said, staring at the door as if he could see through it.

"I reckon we should have brought some Extendable Ears to class," Harry said, chewing his lip. "Something's up. Kingsley usually looks for us when he drops in."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too." Ron turned to Harry. "Call Ginny on your ring. Make sure she's OK."

"Yeah, good idea." Harry was about to press the stone on his ring when the two Aurors returned to the classroom.

"May I have your attention, please?" Thurston said, his voice much more serious than usual. "For those who haven't met him, this is Kingsley Shacklebolt, the new head of the Auror Division. He has something to tell you."

All eyes turned to Kingsley, who stood quietly before him, his innate dignity shining through his eyes. "First, I want to commend you on the work you did on the evidence evaluation in the Ginny Weasley case. Your work saved us a good bit of time, and your conclusions were right on the money. We've gone over everything and incorporated your findings, and we've narrowed down the suspects to one. We're going to apprehend her tonight. I've just spoken to your professor, and he agrees that you've earned the right to observe our capture of this witch."

An excited murmur ran around the room, but Harry didn't feel the same excitement as the others. He wanted revenge. He wanted to hurt the witch who'd tried so hard to hurt Ginny.

His dark thoughts startled him. He couldn't think this way if he planned to be an Auror! He had to be logical and keep an emotional distance from the case and the criminals so he could be objective and avoid making mistakes that could get guilty parties let off with no punishment because of legal complications. He blew out an impatient breath and forced himself to relax, then looked at Ron. He saw something in Ron's eyes that felt all too familiar before Ron managed to master himself.

"Thinking of ways to get back at her, weren't you?" Ron said after a moment.

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah."

Kingsley was still explaining the process that had been used to determine which suspect was the guilty one. When he finished, he turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, may I see you outside for a moment?" Harry got to his feet and followed Kingsley through the door.

With the door closed behind them, Kingsley turned to Harry. "Would you help us apprehend this woman, Harry?"

Excitement filled Harry. The Aurors were going to let him help arrest Ginny's stalker! "Of course! What can I do?"

Here's the plan . . ."

\*\*\*\*\*

The house was nondescript, a row house identical to all those around it in this section of East Finchley. It was two stories tall with a small porch and a tiny fenced garden in front. The Aurors, both professionals and students, were gathered in a sad, dusty park across the street, hidden in the shadows of the ancient beech trees there.

"You remember the plan, Harry?" Kingsley said, giving Harry's shoulder a firm squeeze.

Harry blew out a nervous breath. "Yeah, I've got it."

"I still think it's a bad idea to send a student," one of the Aurors, a small woman with mousy hair, said. "From all reports, she's quite dangerous."

Kingsley gave the woman a withering look. "You weren't at the final battle against Voldemort, Gladys. You didn't see him fight."

"I saw the films!"

"The films were useful, but you had to be there. Trust me on that. Harry Potter can handle himself. After all, he killed Voldemort. He'll be just fine."

Harry wished he had Kingsley's confidence. He wasn't comfortable with the plan at all. He knew he could do what was required, but he'd have to keep a tight hold on his emotions or he'd ruin everything.

"Ready to go?" Kingsley said, giving Harry a brief smile.

Harry blew out a nervous breath. "Yes."

Ron gave him a friendly punch in the shoulder. "You'll be fine, mate. And Ginny's life will be a lot more peaceful after this is over."

Harry nodded. Ron was right. He needed to remember Ginny . . . no, he needed to put her out of his mind and concentrate on the task at hand. Yeah, that was it. He took a deep breath and left the park, crossed the street and entered the shabby little garden. He stepped up onto the porch and knocked on the door, hoping everything would go as planned.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice called through the closed door.

"Harry Potter from the London Lions. Is Nancy Warton in?" Harry said in his most polite voice.

"Harry Potter?" The curtain at the window nearest the door shifted aside, revealing part of a young woman's face. Her eyes widened in shock when she saw him. "Harry Potter! Here?" The door flew open and she stood there panting with excitement. "Harry! What are you doing here? Oh, my manners! I'm sorry. Would you like to come in?"

About five foot four, long brown hair—she matched the description Ron had given of the woman who'd set Ginny's robes on fire at Madam Malkin's. This was it. She was the one. He swallowed hard, determined not to let his nerves show.

"Nancy Warton?" She nodded, her face bright and eager. He tried to give her a friendly smile. "I remember you. You're at all the home games."

"You remember me? Wow!" She clasped her hand together so tightly, the knuckles were white. "That's so cool! But why are you here?"

"You've won a contest the Lions were running. Can you come outside so we can talk? I've been cooped up inside all day studying our new plays. It isn't too cold out. I'd love a walk in the fresh air."

"You're inviting me to go on a walk with you?" she gasped. "Won't your girlfriend mind?"

Harry crossed his fingers behind his back. "No. We broke up."

The girl clapped her hands gleefully. "I knew she was wrong for you!"

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, well, it was something I had to learn for myself."

Instantly sympathetic, Nancy put her hand on Harry's arm. "Oh, poor, dear Harry. Did she hurt you terribly?"

Harry decided to evade her question. "Could we just go for a walk so I can tell you about this contest the Lions were running?"

"Oh! Of course! Let me just get my cloak." She disappeared for a moment, then returned, swinging her cloak around her as Harry pulled the door closed behind her. She didn't notice him casting a wandless spell that kept the door unlocked, nor had she seen him cast the spell that searched the house for other people. He'd just sent a quick Adfero to Kingsley to tell him the house was empty when the girl appeared with her cloak.

Harry adjusted the cloak on the girl's shoulders and helped her pull her long brown hair out of the collar.

She beamed up at him. "Oh, you're such a gentleman! I knew you would be!"

Harry shrugged, uncertain what to say. He was doing his best to be a good escort and keep her both intrigued and entertained while the Aurors entered her house to look for evidence. They had the necessary paperwork from the Ministry to search the premises, but, given the nastiness of some of the spells she'd put on the letters and packages she'd sent Ginny, the Aurors had decided sneaking in with her out of the house would be better than trying to enter by force. Who knew what kind of booby traps she might have in there that she'd certainly set off if she felt threatened.?

"So what is this about a prize? What contest did I win?" Nancy prompted. She also took his hand, which made Harry flinch involuntarily. "Oh, I'm sorry. Too soon after breaking up?"

Harry managed to extricate his hand from her clinging fingers. "Yeah, a bit soon. Thanks for understanding."

She shrugged and looked up at him with sparkling eyes. "No problem."

Harry smiled down at her, trying to look appreciative, but certain his smile looked sickly. It certainly felt sickly! He wanted to rub his hand on his robes to get the feel of her skin off of him, but, with a great force of will, he kept his hands relaxed at his sides.

"The Lions' management chose a name from those who attend our home games regularly. The winner gets to spend a day with their favourite player. And the winner is you."

She gasped and clutched her hands to her chest, her eyes and mouth wide open in amazement. "Me? I never heard about the contest! I didn't know —"

"Management wanted it to be a surprise. There will be a big article about it in the Daily Prophet."

"So I won you?"

"If I'm the one you want to spend the day with, sure."

"What will we do?"

"Whatever you want, within reason."

She laughed. "Define 'within reason.'" She slipped her hand between his arm and his body, grasping his arm lightly.

Harry decided to leave her hand where it was for the moment. It seemed to make her happy and keeping her happy and distracted was his job.

"'Within reason' means whatever doesn't make me uncomfortable or risk the reputation of the team," he explained.

"You're a pretty tough guy, though," she said, flirting madly. "You defeated You-Know-Who and won the war. I'll bet there isn't much you'd think was beyond reason."

"You'd be surprised," he said, wondering how much longer he'd be able to keep up his end of the conversation without cringing. He thought he would've received the signal that the Aurors were finished with their search by now! He'd no sooner thought this than he heard "Incarcerous!" from somewhere behind him. He whirled around, wand in hand, but relaxed when he saw the people behind him were Aurors. Nancy, on the other hand, was screaming like a banshee.

"Harry! Help me! Harry!" She struggled against her bonds hard enough that she lost her balance and fell to the ground. Nobody bothered to try to catch her. Harry cast a Tongue-Tying Jinx on her to shut her up.

"Did you find what you needed?" Harry asked Kingsley.

"Oh, yes. She's the one. Wait until the all clear is given to be sure it's safe, and then you can go in with the rest of your class and look around. Just be sure not to touch anything." As Harry nodded and began to turn away, Kingsley put his hand on Harry's arm, detaining him. "Good work, Harry. You were very convincing."

"Thanks."

"She did have some booby-traps in the house, but since we were able to go in carefully, we defused all of them. But I have to warn you, Harry. There are things in that house that will disturb you."

"I already feel as if I need a bath, just from her holding my hand," Harry said with an involuntary shudder. "If she's really the one who's stalking Ginny —"

"All the evidence points to it. You'll see when you're in there."

Harry glared down at the young woman now looking up at him with stricken eyes. "I don't know what gave you the idea that you could bully Ginny enough for us to break up. All your bullying did was make us closer to each other. I'm marrying Ginny Weasley, and you are not going to bother her, or me, ever again." It took every bit of self-control he could muster, but he managed to refrain from kicking her, then turned on his heel and headed



toward the house. He caught up with Ron in the doorway.

Ron clapped him on the back when Harry joined him. "Blimey, Harry, you had me convinced she'd won a date with you and you were going to cooperate with the whole thing! Bloody well done!"

"Thanks."

"Merlin's knobbly knees, Harry, come and look at this!" one of his classmates called.

Ron looked at Harry, his mouth quirked in an amused grin. "Merlin's knobbly knees?"

"Don't let Merlin hear you say that," Harry said, feeling more cheerful than he had in months. They'd caught the stalker! Ginny was safe now! He felt as if his lungs were filled with clean mountain air, as if a great weight had lifted from his shoulders. It was a delicious, invigorating feeling!

He and Ron entered the room his classmate had wanted him to see. Harry stopped and stared around him. It felt as if his stomach was filled with hot lead, had dropped through the floor and drilled a hole many feet into the ground. He couldn't breathe. His head was pounding, yet he felt light-headed at the same time. All around him, pasted to every square inch of the walls and ceiling, were photographs or newspaper or magazine clippings of him, many with Ginny at his side. But Ginny didn't look like herself. Many of the pictures had Nancy's face pasted over Ginny's. In others, Ginny's face had been shredded by spells or scissors or knives. Some were obliterated with red paint spelling out, "Die, Ginny Weasley! Die!!!" Dolls with long red hair lay in pieces around the room, destroyed in various ways—arms and legs ripped apart, heads torn off, hair shredded, bodies pierced with various sharp things ranging from straight pins to knives.

"Bloody hell," Ron murmured with an involuntary shiver. "What a nutter."

Harry couldn't respond. His tongue seemed to be glued to the roof of his mouth, but he was certain every bit of food he'd eaten in his entire life was about to come back up. Harry turned and ran from the room, only stopping when he was outside. He bent over the garden wall and threw up behind the bushes lining the front of the house.

"All right there, Potter? Good work tonight," an Auror said as he passed by.

Harry tried to clear his throat. "F-f-fine."

The man stopped and looked at Harry. "No, you're not. But it's understandable. She's a real nightmare. We have enough evidence to keep her in Azkaban for the rest of her life. She's done this before, you know."

Harry wondered how many more shocks he could bear. He swallowed the bile rising in his throat again and shook his head. "No, I didn't know."

"She killed the other girl. We found evidence in there that points to a case we've never solved. She killed the man, too. She kept souvenirs of the killings—photos as well as lengths of hair, a man's ear, the girl's ring finger."

Harry recoiled in horror, but the man didn't notice, caught up in excitement over the evidence they'd discovered. "And guess what we found in her aunt's bedroom?"

Harry swallowed hard and braced himself for more awful news. "No idea."

"Her aunt. Poor old lady's been dead for months from the look of her."

Harry was shocked into forgetting about the roiling of his stomach for the moment. "Are there many cases like this? Or is this a rare one?"

"Not as rare as you'd think. Some people just fixate on a famous person and then everyone around that person is in danger. Celestina Warbeck had similar problems with stalkers a few years ago."

"How did she handle it?"

"She always has an army of bodyguards around her, didn't you know?"

Harry shook his head. "How does she have a private life, then?"

"No idea, lad. At any rate, this is one nutter who won't bother anyone else. Good work tonight."

Harry just nodded, his mind spinning. He felt ill again, but he swallowed the bile rising in his throat.

"Harry? You OK?" Ron said. "I looked everywhere for you. Have you seen the rest of the house?"

"No. Is it worse than what we saw in there?"

"More of the same, really. But her auntie! She's like a mummy now. Disgusting!"

Harry swallowed again, hoping his stomach would stop rolling soon.

Ron stood beside him and pushed on Harry's arm, turning Harry's face to the light. "You look terrible. What's wrong?"

"Rough night. I, uh, I need to go. Tell the prof for me, OK?"

"Where are you going?"

Harry just Disapparated without a word.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 19

When Harry let himself into the Lupins' house, he hoped to sneak back to his room without being noticed, but he had no such luck.

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks called brightly. Her hair was a cheerful tangerine colour this evening. "How was class?"

"Fine." He wanted to go to bed. He wanted to pull the covers over his head and pretend . . . pretend what? He'd had a wonderfully happy life for a little while, with a girl who loved him, godparents who truly cared about him, and a brand new baby brother. He was glad they'd caught Ginny's stalker, but the things he'd learned in her house were horribly disturbing. He didn't want to think about them, but he couldn't avoid them. They simply wouldn't leave him alone.

Tonks came to the door, frowning in concern at Harry, who hadn't moved and wasn't looking at her. "You OK, luv? You're awfully pale." She put her hand on his forehead. "Harry, your skin's clammy! Are you ill?"

Harry forced himself to focus on his godmother. She'd asked if he was ill, right? "A bit."

Tonks's newly developed mothering skills took over. "What can I do for you? D'you want something to eat or drink, or do you want to go straight to bed? Have you taken anything for it? How long have you been feeling like this? And how do you feel, anyway? What's wrong, Harry? Talk to me!"

Harry was feeling a bit overwhelmed by Tonks's concern. He was rescued from answering her by Remus emerging from his study.

"Did I hear Harry come in?" Remus said.

"Yes, but he's ill," Tonks said, keeping her attention fully on Harry. She kept pressing her hand against his forehead, then each cheek in turn, as if checking his temperature repeatedly might tell her something different. "What do you want us to do, Harry?"

"Nothing. I'll be fine." Her loving concern touched him tremendously, but he had to think, he had to sort things out, he had to understand the things whirling through his mind at maddening speed.

"Come and sit down," Remus said, taking Harry's arm. "You do look a bit peaky."

Harry tried to let them fuss over him, answering their questions as well as he could, but he couldn't take it for very long.

"Listen, thanks for your concern, but I'm fine. I'll just go and lie down, OK?"

"Harry, I heard what happened," Remus said. "That's why I was late coming out of my study. Ron contacted me via the Floo Network and said you'd captured Ginny's stalker."

"That's fantastic news!" Tonks said.

Harry tried to smile. "Yeah."

"Ron said the things you saw in the house seemed to upset you. Do you want to talk about it?" Remus said.

"No. I—" Harry had no idea what to say. After an impatient shake of his head, Harry yanked off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, then dropped his face in his hands. He felt two arms come round his back and heard sympathetic murmurs from both of his godparents, but he couldn't make sense of their words. His body began to tremble. Harry tried to fight it, but things just seemed to be spiralling out of his control.

"What is it, luv?" Tonks said, rubbing his back gently. "What happened?"

"Talk to us, Harry," Remus said. "Please. Let us help."

Remus's calm, kind voice finally broke through the barriers Harry had put around his mind. He swallowed hard and slipped his glasses back on as he straightened up. "I . . ." He took a deep breath and stared into his godfather's eyes. "I, erm, I can't . . ." Cursing himself for being such a coward, Harry shook his head hard and forced himself to say what was necessary. "I can't marry Ginny."

A confused look crossed Remus's face. He held his hand up to quiet Tonks, who was bursting to say something. "Why not?"

The words exploded out of Harry. "No matter what I do, I will always be the bleedin' Boy Who Lived!" His voice breaking, he continued. "Ginny will never be safe with me. I can't marry her. I can't marry anybody." Harry bit his lip and tried to master himself, but a rebellious tear slid down his cheek. He brushed it away, his gesture full of rage. "All I've ever wanted my whole life was a family of my own, someone to love who loved me too! But I can't, I can't! I can't endanger her that way." He sobbed and dropped his face in his hands again.

Remus pulled Harry against him, cradling the younger man's head against his chest. "It's all right, Harry. Let it out."

"It's not fair," Harry muttered. "Voldemort killed my parents and ruined my childhood. I thought I'd have some peace once he was gone, but no!

Everyone wants a piece of me, and they don't care if I'm enjoying my life or not!" He pulled away from Remus and slammed his fists against his knees. "It's NOT FAIR!"

"No, lad, it isn't." Remus's voice was quiet and soothing as his hand gently rubbed Harry's back.

Harry was grateful for his godfather's comfort, but his brain was spinning in useless circles. How was he going to tell Ginny? How was he going to go on without her? Why did he have to? Did he have to? Yes, he should break up with her. That was the right thing to do, but it was a horrible thing to contemplate. He heard the windows rattling in response to his rage and did his best to calm down, but it was so hard, so hard.

Harry, Remus and Tonks were all startled by a heavy pounding on the door. All three of them pulled their wands and ran to the door. Remus and Harry stood on either side of the door, wands at the ready, while Tonks moved the curtain away from the window by the door so she could see who was there.

"It's OK," Tonks said as she relaxed and stowed her wand. The pounding continued as Harry and Remus pocketed their wands and moved back into the living room and Tonks unlocked the door. Ginny stormed in, followed closely by Albus Dumbledore.

"Harry Potter, you are NOT going to break up with me, do you hear?" Ginny cried as she ran to him.

Harry was gobsmacked. How did she know? He hadn't told Ron anything. He hadn't pressed the stone on his ring and called her. Her momentum made him back up until he fell into a chair. He sat goggling at her in disbelief as she continued to rage at him.

"No stupid fangirl is going to come between us, do you hear me? I don't care what she had on her walls!"

Now Harry understood. "Ron told you?"

"Yes, he did, and when he said you were ill and Disapparated without telling anyone else, I knew." Her eyes flashed with fury, and her cheeks were pale with red patches so bright, her freckles paled in comparison. Harry had never seen her so angry. "I promise you, Harry Potter, if you try to break up with me, I will hex your bits off and then we'll both be sorry!"

"Yeah, I agree," he said, almost smiling. Ginny in full "warrior princess" mode was a sight to behold, even if his heart was breaking. Harry hated to be the reason for her anger, but he loved that she was fighting so hard to keep him. No. I can't think that way. She isn't safe around me. He swallowed hard and sighed, his whole body sagging in misery when he tore his eyes away from hers.

Ginny's voice was like a whip crack. "HARRY! Where's the fighter I love? Fight for me!"

He forced himself to look up again. "Who am I supposed to fight? I can't protect you, Ginny. I don't know where the next threat's coming from. She didn't seem dangerous when I talked to her in the stadium or on the street. A bit obsessed, yeah, but not dangerous. If I misjudged her—"

"I can take care of myself! I haven't been hurt since that Howler gave me purple boils. I won't get hurt that way again!"

"You were hurt when she set those wedding robes on fire," Harry reminded her.

"And you healed me right away. We can't live our lives in fear, Harry. We can't let other people tell us how to live, either." She knelt in front of him and took his hands in hers. "I know you love me. You do, don't you?"

How was he going to get through this? Harry's heart was pounding, banging against his rib cage as if it wanted to burst free and go to Ginny. How he wanted to let it have its way! He swallowed hard and forced himself to be calm when he replied. "I love you more than life, Ginny. You know I'd die for you. But—"

"But nothing! I don't want you to die for me, I want you to live with me! You're the bravest person I know. Stand up for what you believe in. Stand up for the people you love. If you won't stand up for yourself, at least stand up for me, Harry!" She was sobbing now. "Don't leave me! I love you! We've been through so much, and waited so long to be married. Don't quit on me now!" She lifted his hands and kissed them over and over, then pressed her streaming eyes against his legs.

Harry pulled one of his hands free from hers and rested it on her head. He wished he knew some way to comfort her, but his mind simply wouldn't function. He was in too much pain to think. Every time he tried to think of some way to comfort her, the black reality of his situation hit him with the weight of one of Grawp's fists, knocking the air out of his lungs, making any logical thoughts he'd almost captured flee. So he stroked her hair, not knowing what else to do.

Ginny sighed and turned her head so her cheek rested against his leg. "That feels good."

"I never meant to hurt you, Ginny."

She straightened and glared at him, her fury returning in full force. "Then don't hurt me! Don't hurt yourself, either!" She banged her fists on his thighs. "We're meant to be together! You know that."

He nodded. "I know." She was right, of course, but she hadn't seen those pictures. She hadn't seen the madness in that woman's eyes.

"Your parents told you we were going to have a full Quidditch team! How are we going to do that if you don't marry me?"

"I don't know." His voice was the merest whisper. Harry couldn't imagine life without her, but he had no right to put her in danger, either. He dropped his eyes, unable to look at her any longer.

Ginny gently stroked his cheek as tears streamed down her face. "You're worried that someone will hurt me or kill me because I'm with you, right?"

He nodded.

"Then you need to know this. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Look at me, Harry." She lifted his chin with her finger and waited until he looked at her. "If I only have one hour, or even one minute left to live, I want to live it with you. No matter how long or short my life is, I want us to be together."

"That's what I want too, but I can't endanger you that way!" It felt to Harry as if the words had been torn out of him. He felt raw and wounded and horribly empty inside.

Ginny took a deep breath and gave him her most patient look, as if she were explaining things to a child. "What I do with my life is my own choice, right?"

He was thoroughly confused. "Yes, but—"

Ginny's temper exploded. "No buts!" She scrubbed her tear-streaked face dry with a rough, impatient gesture. "Are you paying attention?" She leaned forward and bent at the right angle to get into his line of sight.

He frowned. What did she mean? He'd answered everything she'd said! "Yes, of course."

"Then hear this. I love you. We need to be together. Let's get married right here, right now. I'll quit Hogwarts and—"

"No, I don't want you to quit school. You're nearly finished!"

"Then we can live in your quarters while I finish. You can flash to London for your practices and school, and come home to me every night. It will all work out. We'll make it work!" She did her best to smile at him.

"What about your parents?"

"They're already married," she quipped.

Harry shook his head, the tiniest hint of a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "You're being silly, but I'm serious. What about them? What about the wedding?"

"We can still have it! We'll keep our marriage a secret!"

Harry could see excitement building in her eyes. She thought he was going along with her plan. Well, was he? It was so tempting. Get married right now, before anything else could make him change his mind. He felt the same way she did—if he only had an hour to live, he'd want to spend that hour with her, married to her, loving her! But what about the danger to her if they were together? How could he protect her?

Ginny took his hands in hers and leaned toward him, her eyes suddenly very serious. "I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me that you'll never, ever try to break up with me again. Now and forever, we're together. Promise me that."

"Ginny—"

"Have I ever asked much of you, Harry?"

"No."

"Well, now I'm not asking—I'm demanding! Promise me, Harry! For now and forever, promise me you'll never even think of leaving me again! If you truly love me, you'll promise! And you'll mean it!"

Harry licked his lips nervously. He wanted to promise her, but if—

"And Harry, you should know this. I was serious. If you try to leave me, I'll . . . I don't know what I'll do, but if I can't have you, nobody else can either."

Harry's eyes widened in shock. "There's nobody else! I love you!"

Then prove it! Marry me! Right now! And you owe me a promise, buster!" She had her wand out in a flash, aiming it at his bits with a steady hand, reinforcing the seriousness of her threat.

Somehow, in spite of everything he was going through, Harry felt a laugh forming inside him. "If I promise under duress, does it count?"

"Promise!"

Harry sighed, and then a slow smile crossed his face as he looked at her. What a magnificent woman she was! How could he live without her? He didn't know how they'd do it, but with her fiery spirit and every protective spell he could find to put around her, they'd manage.

He gently took her wand from her and grasped both of her hands in his. "I promise, Ginny, now and forever, I will never, ever even think about leaving you again."

"And you'll marry me, right here, right now?"

He shook his head. "We don't have rings or the licence or—"

"Not to worry, lad," Dumbledore said. "All of those things can be dealt with."

Ginny turned to him. "Will you marry us tonight, Professor? You were going to do it in a couple of months anyway."

"I think your idea may be the best solution to several problems, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore said. "Harry will sleep better, and you'll concentrate on your work better because you'll see him every day, so your grades will improve."

"Your grades are slipping?" Harry said in astonishment. Ginny was a top student, always had been.

"I've been so worried about you—"

Harry shook his head and frowned. "Me? Why? Nobody was after me."

"It's a short step for a nutter to go from being after your girlfriend to going after you, too," Ginny said. "And Ron told me about the other couple that girl stalked. She killed both of them! Or didn't you hear that?"

Harry gasped. "I heard it, but I can't believe Ron told you!"

"Don't change the subject, Potter," Ginny said, her eyes twinkling now. "You were about to agree to marry me right this minute."

His smile broke through despite the turmoil of the dark thoughts still filling his mind. "If you'll still have me, and if Grandfather is OK with us living in my quarters, then yes, Ginny. I'll marry you right here, right now."

"Yes!" Ginny said, leaping to her feet and pulling on his hands. "Come on, let's do it before you change your mind!"

Harry stood up, surprised at the radiant joy he could feel flaring into life inside him. We ARE meant to be together. Why should I let anyone keep us apart? He turned to his godparents. "Will you stand up with us?"

"So we're going to have a wedding?" Tonks said, her hair suddenly changing to a bright sunshiny yellow.

Harry nodded. "Looks that way."

"Wonderful!" Tonks grabbed Harry and hugged him tightly, then pulled back and kissed him on both cheeks. "I'm so happy for you!" She turned to hug Ginny, who Remus had just released.

Remus pulled Harry into a hug and clapped him on the back. "Best decision you ever made, lad."

Harry looked at his godfather, worry still rumbling around inside him. He knew Remus had had similar worries when he'd married Tonks. If Remus thought this was a good idea . . . "Honestly?"

"Absolutely. I think it's best for both of you. And I'm honoured to stand up with you."

Remus's support made Harry feel a good deal better. He turned back to Ginny. "We should invite your family."

Ginny shook her head. "We can't! I got Ron's Adfero when I was studying in the library with Colin and Luna. I left my books there, and they'll expect me back. If I don't return, there will be questions. But they aren't the problem, Harry. Just think about it. Contacting my family and getting them here will take time, and calming Mum down and getting her to understand why we're doing this will take even longer. I need to get back to school so nobody knows what's happened."

"But we could at least invite Ron and Hermione—"

"I'd like them to be here, too, but you know how transparent Ron's face is. He sees Fred and George every day at lunch time, doesn't he?" Harry

nodded. "They'll know something's up the first time they see him! They'll have it out of him in no time!"

Harry sighed. "You're right. He may still be at the crime scene with the Aurors anyway." The arrest of Nancy Warton seemed a lifetime ago, but when he glanced at his watch, he saw it had only been about half an hour since he left the woman's house.

"And Dad sees the twins fairly often too, so it wouldn't take any time for everyone to know. And Mum and Dad have paid for so many things, and put so much effort into the wedding—if they find out we married in secret, they might call it off and be out all that money. And it could take years for Mum to forgive us. It has to be a secret, Harry, just our secret. Do you understand?"

He looked down into her earnest face. "Yeah, I do. And I agree with you." He grinned at his grandfather. "OK. What do we do now?"

"Let's get you married!" Dumbledore said. "Merlin, old friend, may I have two of your breast feathers?"

Merlin left his perch and flew to the chair next to Dumbledore, then released two lovely scarlet feathers into the old wizard's hand.

"Harry, Ginny, come stand before me," Dumbledore directed. "Remus, Tonks," he said, indicating where they should stand. He pulled his wand and tapped the two feathers in his hand, which transformed into two gold rings. A feathered texture was engraved on each ring's surface, with a hint of red showing in the carving. Dumbledore handed the larger ring to Tonks, the smaller one to Remus.

The rings were beautiful, but Harry had a concern. "But Grandfather, if we're wearing those rings, people will know we're married."

"No, dear boy, they won't. I will put an Invisibility Charm on the rings once your vows are completed. You will feel the weight of them, but no one will be able to see them. These rings will vanish entirely when these rings are touched by your gold wedding rings when you take your vows."

Harry grinned. "You've done this before, then?"

"No, I haven't, but Merlin suggested the idea to me during one of our conversations. He and I both thought we might need to prepare for such an occasion. I'm glad we did."

"Me, too." Harry grinned at his phoenix. "Thanks, Merlin!" The bird sang a single sweet note in reply.

Harry was ready to get on with things. He couldn't believe how nervous he was, when all he'd wanted for ages was to marry Ginny. But he wanted everything to be right, and they were rushing into this. No, that wasn't true. He and Ginny had been married in their hearts for a long time now. There was no rush here, simply a minimal ceremony. Maybe what he thought felt like nerves was just excitement. He ran his hand over his hair, trying to flatten it, then blushed when Ginny pulled his hand away.

"I like it like that. Leave it alone," she said, smiling up at him.

"You both look wonderful," Dumbledore said. "Oh, Miss Weasley—and this may be the last time I call you 'Miss Weasley' in private, although I shall continue to do so in school to maintain appearances," he said with a smile, "what kind of flowers would you like?"

"Roses."

"Roses it shall be, then," he said, and conjured a gorgeous nosegay of white roses, then handed it to her. "Here you go, my dear. Shall we begin?"

"Yes!" Ginny said, her face glowing with joy.

"Yes. I'm ready," Harry said, gazing down at the woman he loved.

The next few minutes passed in a blur for Harry. He said what he was supposed to, responded at the right times, and meant every word of his vows, but somehow, his grandfather's words seemed to be coming from a great distance. Harry could only see Ginny's brown eyes looking up at him with trust, love and that fierce, blazing spirit he so loved. He slipped the ring on her finger, and held his hand so she could put his ring on him, yet it seemed like a dream to him. Was this real? If it wasn't, it felt so right to him, he fully intended to find Ginny and Dumbledore and make it real as soon as possible!

It wasn't until his grandfather did the spell that bonded their two wands that Harry was certain this was reality. When his wand tip touched Ginny's, the griffins and phoenixes on his wand handle did the dance inside his palm that they normally only did when he used full power on a spell. It didn't last long, but it proved to him that this was no dream. He'd just taken part in a very powerful spell.

"You may kiss your bride," Dumbledore said at last.

Harry had no trouble complying with that. As they kissed, the rings flashed with golden fire and disappeared. When he and Ginny finally parted, they stared at their ring fingers, which felt as if they bore the weight of the gold bands, but nothing showed. Harry turned to his grandfather. "This is real? We're legally married?"

"The Ministry likes paperwork such as marriage licences, but there are wizarding laws far more ancient than the Ministry. According to those laws, yes, my dear boy, you are married legally. We'll deal with the paperwork at your other wedding, shall we?"

Harry beamed. "Thank you, Grandfather!" He hugged Dumbledore, then Remus, then Tonks. "Thank you all!"



"We'll keep your secret, ducks, don't worry." Tonks sighed happily and leaned against her husband. "This is so romantic!"

"I will have to inform Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore said, "but she won't be a problem."

"Why do you have to tell her?" Ginny said, looking both defiant and nervous.

"She's your Head of House, so she needs to know why I'm putting certain spells on the Head Girl's Suite and where you'll be at night, since you won't be there. Harry or Merlin will be able to flash you to his quarters without setting off the alarms once I get the proper charms in place."

"I'll resign as Head Girl. I don't want to cause any problems," Ginny said.

"No, my dear, you are an excellent Head Girl. I don't believe being secretly married will hinder you in performing your duties, and after all, your resignation would bring up questions you won't want to answer if you intend to keep this wedding a secret. I'll set a spell on the Head Girl's Suite that will alert you when someone knocks on the door needing you. You can be flashed back to the suite and all will be well. Will that be all right with you?"

Ginny beamed. "Of course! Thank you, Professor!"

"I cannot tell you how pleased I am to have such a beautiful new granddaughter," Dumbledore said, patting her cheek fondly. "Now, Mr. and Mrs. Potter, I believe a celebration is called for!"

Ginny turned to Harry, nearly squealing in her excitement. "He called me 'Mrs. Potter'!"

Her obvious joy gave Harry an overwhelming sense of tenderness. She'd taken his name! She was his wife! Harry knew he'd never forget his feeling of absolute jubilation at this, the happiest moment of his life so far.

"And so you are, Mrs. Potter," he said, enunciating every word very carefully.

Ginny sighed with happy satisfaction. "And so I am."

\* \* \* \* \*

After a brief celebration, Merlin flashed Harry and Ginny to Harry's quarters at Hogwarts. Harry would pack his things at Remus's house in a few days and take them to Hogwarts, as well. For now, he had enough clothes in his quarters to manage.

Merlin chirruped and ruffled Harry's hair before going to his perch in the sitting room.

Ginny smiled at Harry's expression. "What did he say?"

Harry blushed. "He, erm, wished us well and said congratulations and all that. He's happy for us."

Ginny gave him a knowing look. "None of that would've made you blush."

"Hush, wife!" Harry said, laughing now. "Just because we're married doesn't mean I need to tell you all my secrets."

"Yes it does." She slid into his arms and smiled up at him, her eyes hinting at things Harry wanted to explore in more detail in the bedroom.

"Oh. I didn't realize that was in the contract," Harry said, grinning at her. "I suppose I should've paid attention to the vows."

She gasped. "You didn't pay attention?"

"All I could pay attention to was you, love. But I know the gist of it."

She playfully smacked him on the arm. "The gist of it?"

"Yeah! Let's see, that 'obey' line was in there, wasn't it?" he teased.

"No, it wasn't!"

"Damn. I knew there was something missing." He cringed in mock horror as she smacked his arm again. "Don't abuse me, woman!"

Ginny shook her finger under his nose in a very Molly Weasley-like gesture. "The only 'obey' line in there was that you had to obey me!"

"I think I would've remembered that." He swept her off her feet and carried her toward the bedroom. "Of course, we could negotiate."

"Negotiate, eh? Is that what they're calling it now?"

"Mrs. Potter, are you going to give me a hard time?" he said as he plunked her on the bed, then flopped down beside her.

“For the rest of your life, Mr. Potter.”

“Good! That’s exactly what I was hoping for,” he said, nuzzling the ticklish spot on her neck, making her giggle. “I love you so much.”

“Mmm, I love you too.”

Harry raised up on one elbow and looked at her seriously. “I’m sorry I put you through such an awful time. I only wanted—”

She put her finger on his lips. “To protect me. I know. For a quiet man, you talk a lot. Shut up and kiss me!”

Harry laughed and followed her every instruction, thinking that obeying her wasn’t a bad idea after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they cuddled together later, Harry said, “You wouldn’t really have hexed my bits off, would you?”

She laughed, a delicious sound that warmed Harry’s heart. “Not until I learned a spell to restore them.”

He wrapped his arms around her more tightly. “I’ll keep that in mind in case I ever decide to cross you again.”

“Good plan.” She snuggled into his shoulder, but then gasped and lifted his arm so she could focus on his watch. “Oh no!”

“What?”

“Look at the time! I need to get back to the library!” She jumped out of bed and pulled her clothes on.

Harry got up on one elbow to watch her dress, something he never tired of. “Shall I go with you?”

“If you want.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A short time later, the two of them entered the library together and joined Colin and Luna at a work table.

“Hi, Harry!” Colin said. “I didn’t know you were here. It isn’t a Tuesday. What’s up?”

“Hello, Harry,” Luna said at the same time. “Ginny, where’d you go?”

“Oh, it was just a glitch in the wedding plans,” she said, improvising madly.

Harry felt her squeeze his hand, warning him to go along with her story. Since he’d had no ideas on what to say, he was glad she was taking charge of things.

“I had to talk to Hermione on the Floo Network to sort something out. And then Harry and I ran into each other, and here we are!”

“So Harry, why are you here early?” Colin said, shoving some books aside to make room for Harry to sit down at the table.

“I wanted to see Ginny. You’ll be seeing me here a lot more often with the wedding coming up soon.” He looked at Ginny and they shared a smile. Well, what he’d said was the truth, as far as it went.

“You’re both glowing,” Luna said in her straightforward way. “You’ve been up to something, haven’t you?”

Ginny blushed. “We’re engaged to be married! An occasional snog should be expected!”

Harry looked at Ginny. Yes, her lips were still swollen and red from their kissing. And yes, she was glowing. He hoped Luna wouldn’t ask any more questions that could get them in trouble. He smiled at his friends, determined to change the subject. “So what are you studying? Can I help?” He felt Ginny squeeze his knee under the table and grinned at her. The next couple of months would be tricky to manoeuvre without slipping up, but he didn’t care. They were married. That’s all that mattered.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 20

“Blimey, you’re chipper today!” Ron said when Harry entered the locker room whistling a cheerful tune the next day.

Harry decided sticking as close as possible to the truth was probably best. “I slept well.”

“I’m glad to hear that! After the night we had, I’m surprised.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, well, I had a hard time dealing with all that. That fangirl was completely round the twist.” He looked at Ron seriously now. “Thanks for sending for Ginny.”

Ron blushed. “I thought you’d be angry with me for that.”

“I was, at first, but we worked everything out.” Harry spread his hands in an expansive gesture. “All’s well in my little world.”

“Excellent.”

“Did I miss anything by leaving early?”

“Yeah, a bit.” Ron caught Harry up on the rest of the evening’s events.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next few weeks passed in a haze of happiness for Harry. Yes, he still had nightmares, but Ginny was adept at waking him just enough to stop the nightmare so he could get back to sleep quickly. They spent more time together, with Harry staying at Hogwarts to study as often as he could, frequently inviting Colin and Luna to join Ginny and him in his quarters so the three Hogwarts students could work on their Transfiguration project.

“Oh, Harry,” Luna said one evening during such a work session, “thanks for the help! And thanks for letting us work in here. It’s much easier to have you so close by when we need to ask you questions!”

“Yeah, mate,” Colin agreed. “When we decided to do our project on the Animagus transformation, we thought we’d only have Ginny to ask about it. What luck to have a multiple-Animagus to interview!”

Harry grinned. He enjoyed Colin and Luna’s company, and their project interested him, as well. They were trying to discover why some wizards could learn the Animagus charm, while others never mastered it. “Let me know if you have any more questions.”

He went into his bedroom and settled on the bed to work on his Auror homework. Hedwig, who had been sitting on the back of Harry’s chair, followed him into his bedroom and sat on his bedpost, blinking her huge amber eyes at him.

“Seems like old times, having you around while I’m studying,” Harry said, reaching out to stroke her beautiful white feathers. “You enjoy carrying Ginny’s mail, don’t you, girl?”

The owl chirruped an approving sound.

“Good. I want you to be happy. And I’m glad you’re looking after Ginny for me when I can’t be with her.” He let her nibble his finger affectionately for a while before getting back to work.

After studying a while, Harry shoved his glasses up and rubbed his eyes. He was still tired all the time, but being able to sleep better these days was fantastic. As he adjusted his glasses on his nose again, he noticed the murmur of voices from the sitting room and smiled. Someday we’ll have kids doing their homework in the kitchen. It’ll sound similar to this. What a lovely thought!

When Colin, Luna and Ginny were ready to leave, Harry petted Hedwig before she left for the Owlry, then walked with Ginny and their friends back toward Gryffindor Tower. He draped his arm around Ginny’s shoulders, while hers was around his waist. Luna left them to go to Ravenclaw Tower, and Colin, Harry and Ginny swapped Quidditch stories all the way to Gryffindor Tower.

“See you, Harry!” Colin said as he entered the portrait hole.

“Good night,” Harry replied with a grin. When they were alone, he turned to Ginny. “I can’t wait to see you again,” he said, leaning his forehead against hers.

Ginny’s eyes were sparkling with mischief as she looked up at him. “Me neither. I love you.”

“Love you more,” Harry said, bending to kiss her. He breathed in the scent of her as they kissed, savouring the warmth of her lips on his, the exquisite torture of holding her in his arms and having to keep his hands someplace “polite” since they were in the corridor.

When they finally parted, Harry smiled at her. “See you.”

Yeah. 'Night."

Their fingers remained entwined until Ginny was almost through the portrait hole. She turned back to smile again as the portrait closed.

Harry grinned and danced a bit for his first few steps. He loved Ginny so much! Being married was the best, even if it had to stay secret a while longer! He knew Ginny had some things to do before she'd send him the signal to come and get her. Then he'd flash to her room and take her back to his quarters where they'd love each other until they fell asleep. Merlin would wake them early enough to get Ginny back to the suite before anyone missed her, and they'd go through the whole "we're not married yet" act again tomorrow. But all this playacting and deception would be over soon! He couldn't wait for the Easter holiday and their public wedding—and the honeymoon! He was keeping their destination a secret from everyone, including Ginny. It was going to be the best surprise ever!

\* \* \* \* \*

On the next Hogsmeade weekend, Harry and Ginny went straight to Mr. Joyero's jewellery shop as soon as they got to the village.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley!" Mr. Joyero said with a bright smile. "I thought I'd be seeing you soon."

"Good morning! We need to order our wedding rings," Harry said.

The jeweller pulled out a tray of rings. "I designed these with Miss Weasley's engagement ring in mind, but of course, you can choose anything in the shop. Or I can make something new for you, if you'd prefer."

Before long, the counter was strewn with trays, the rings glittering and gleaming within them. Some of the wedding bands they looked at were plain, some engraved, some had a few diamonds, some had many. Others had rubies or rubies and diamonds. Ginny looked at each tray, scanning the rings there carefully before she looked up at Harry. "What do you think?"

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled at her. "Pick whichever one you want, love. You'll be wearing it a long time, so it should please you."

She pointed at a ring that had a few tiny rubies in it. "That one's nice."

Harry bent over the tray and looked at it, then studied her face. "You don't love it, though."

Startled into a laugh, she looked up at him. "It's very pretty!"

Harry just smiled and went back to looking at the trays. After a moment, he picked up a ring that had a row of diamonds and a row of rubies twisted together in a pattern that looked a bit like a figure 8 lying on its side. "Is this the symbol for infinity?" he asked the jeweller.

"It's similar to what the Muggles use to symbolize infinity, yes." Mr. Joyero lifted the ring and held it so the stones caught the light and flashed beautifully as he moved it around. "It's actually the rune Gebo. By itself, it looks like a letter 'X' and means gifts, both sacrificial and generous. It indicates balance in regard to relationships, contracts, that kind of thing. I thought it would make a pretty ring design. As you can see, the 'X' is repeated three times across the top of the ring, which is why it looks a bit like a figure 8, I suppose. Three is a significant number in magic. I thought tripling the X would symbolize the strength of the union this ring will seal."

"That's beautiful," Harry said, taking the ring from him and looking at it more closely. He took Ginny's hand and slid the ring partway onto the ring finger of her left hand, careful that the gold didn't touch the invisible phoenix feather ring. "What do you think?"

Ginny laughed. "I thought you were going to let me choose it myself?"

"I am letting you choose it. You looked at every ring in all three trays, but every time your eyes settled on one ring, they went back to this one. That made me think this might be your favourite, but if it isn't, that's fine. It is up to you." He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "It looks beautiful on you," then kissed her temple before straightening up again. "Of course, if you're tired of rubies and diamonds—"

Her eyes sparkling, Ginny said, "I'll never get tired of rubies and diamonds! But this one has so many stones—it must be quite expensive, Harry."

"Mr. Joyero always takes good care of us, Ginny. You choose what you like. I want you to be happy."

"I'd be happy if you just tied a string around my finger," she said, meaning every word.

"If that's how you feel," Harry quipped, lifting a bit of blue ribbon from the counter, "how's this?" He wiggled his eyebrows, teasing her.

Ginny made a droll face. "I don't own anything blue to go with that."

"Then I suppose you'll be forced to choose one of these, m'lady." Harry took the ring with the X rune on it from her finger and was about to put it back in the tray when she reached for it.

"Let me see it again." She held it up to the light, then down near the counter, admiring the play of light flashing in the stones.

"Do you want that one?" Harry said.

“Mum would say I’m a magpie and have expensive taste.”

Harry laughed. “So what?”

Ginny tossed her head and grinned. “Yeah! So what! Yes, I do like this one the best, and not just because it’s beautiful. I love the meaning behind the rune.”

“Me, too.”

“That’s one ring down,” Ginny said, calling Mr. Joyero back and handing him her ring. “Now Harry needs to pick one.”

“A simple gold band will be fine,” Harry said.

“Ron got a gold band with a lion on it. Don’t you want to see what’s here?” Ginny said.

“I do have some beautiful designs in fairly simple, and quite sturdy gold rings, Mr. Potter,” the jeweller added.

“OK. Let’s see what you have.”

A short time later, Harry had chosen a simple gold band that had the X rune carved into its surface in a pattern repeated around the ring. “I like this one, and then our rings will match.”

“They’ll match better if you have the pattern on yours filled with diamonds and rubies,” Ginny teased.

Harry wrapped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “I’ll let you be the family magpie and wear all the sparkly stuff. This is perfect for me.”



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 21

"Hi, beautiful," Harry said as he bent over Ginny to give her a quick kiss before dropping into a seat beside her at the Gryffindor table. "What's good for lunch?" She handed him the platter of chicken just as Colin answered Harry's question.

"Everything's great, as usual." Colin was talking around a mouthful of chicken.

Harry laughed. In some ways, Colin was a lot like Ron. He always enjoyed his visits with both Creevey brothers. Harry loaded his plate with food and tucked in, joining the chatter around him when he could.

"I thought you had to be in London today," Colin said. "Don't you have a class tonight?"

"Yeah, I do." Harry wiped his face with his napkin. "I have to leave in a few minutes, actually."

"You're here a lot more than you used to be. Has your class schedule changed or something?" Dennis said.

Harry and Ginny shared a glance, but kept their faces carefully still. Harry looked up at Dennis. "No, my schedule's the same, but we'll be living in my quarters after we marry in a few weeks, so I'm moving my books and things I need for classes to my quarters here. And this way, I get to spend more time with Ginny."

"Don't you and Ron study together anymore?" Colin said.

"Yeah, when we need to, but he's married, mate. If we don't need to study together, he works with Hermione and I work alone. If I'm alone, I may as well be here as anywhere, right?" He turned to Ginny for confirmation.

"That's right! And I'm glad you're here more often," Ginny added, leaning her head on his shoulder for a moment.

"Me too." Harry kissed her forehead, then got to his feet. "I've got to fly. See you later."

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days later, Oswald Murphy, the Lions' team manager, looked up to see three dour-looking men had entered his office. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"We're here to see Harry Potter," one man said. He had a pinched face, emphasized by the small black pince nez perched precariously on his long thin nose. His mouth seemed to be permanently frozen in a disapproving scowl.

"Why do you need to see Potter?" Murphy said. He didn't like the look of these three. He was certain they meant trouble for Harry.

"School business," the first man said, clamping his mouth shut as if he were afraid Murphy might try to pry the information out of him.

"He's at practice now. He won't be finished for a couple of hours. You're welcome to wait, of course—"

"I didn't make myself clear," the man said. "We're here to see Potter. We need to see him now."

"Who are you gents and what do you want with him?" Murphy said more firmly.

"I am Chatsworth Thistlewood," the man said with an imperious sniff, as if Murphy should've known who he was. "My associates are Blanford Peabody and Pollock Smedley." He indicated the two sour-faced men with him. Peabody was short, round and ordinary-looking, but with the bright red nose of someone who enjoyed his brandy too much. Smedley was taller than Peabody and had pig-like eyes in a round pink face with a magnificent black moustache.

"And why do you need to see Potter again?"

"School business. We don't need to say more," Thistlewood said, sniffing importantly. "We really must see him right away."

"We don't interrupt practice," Murphy said firmly.

"He's the Seeker. The others can play without him for a while," Peabody said, his voice stiff and disapproving.

Murphy sighed. If the Auror School had sent these men to talk to Harry, he'd better bring Harry to them. As he stood up, he looked at the men again. They sure don't look like Aurors. He shook his head and left his office without another word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry was nearing the Snitch when he heard someone on the ground calling his name.



“Harry? Harry! Come down, please!”

Harry ignored the call and kept going. The Snitch was just out of reach. He put on more speed and would've caught the golden ball if he hadn't been startled by his name being blared over the stadium speaker system.

“Harry Potter! You are needed in the manager's office! Please land immediately!”

The Snitch seemed to laugh at Harry as it skittered away from him. He growled in frustration as he aimed his broom toward the ground.

“You made me miss!” he grumbled when he landed beside Murphy and Smithers, the team captain. “What's up?”

“You have some visitors, Harry,” Murphy said. “Sorry to bother you. They were quite insistent on seeing you right away.”

“Who are they?” Harry said as he fell into step with Murphy after Smithers waved him off the field.

“Three blokes from school, or so they say. They say it's school business, anyway.”

“Huh?” Harry turned a blank look on Murphy as he shouldered his broom and walked inside with him. Harry couldn't imagine what would be so important that the Auror School would send three blokes to see him and interrupt his practice. And why had they not called Ron down as well? Maybe they thought it would be easier for the team to keep practicing without a Seeker than without a Keeper. Harry shrugged. They were right in that assumption. At least they were being logical about it, but what could they possibly want?

Harry was shocked to see three totally non-Auror-like men in the office. All three were older men and soft-bodied, as if they'd never worked hard in their lives. Most Aurors tried to stay fit so they could run after felons if they had to.

Harry hung his broom carefully on the broom rack inside the door, then turned to face his visitors. “I'm Harry Potter. What's up?”

“We represent the Board of Governors at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” Thistlewood said, puffing himself up importantly. “We need to speak to you in private.”

Murphy clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Go ahead and use the office, lad. Call me when you're finished.”

“Thanks, Murph.” As Murphy left, Harry gestured toward the chairs ranged in front of the desk. “Have a seat, gentlemen. Would you like something to drink?”

“This is not a social call, Mr. Potter,” Peabody said, his voice stern, his eyes glittering strangely.

Harry stared at the three wizards, who stood shoulder to shoulder, as if they needed each other for courage. “OK. What kind of call is it, then?”

Thistlewood answered. “A disciplinary call.”

Harry was gobsmacked. “What?”

“You have been accused of improper and unbecoming behaviour toward a student, Mr. Potter,” Smedley said with a disapproving shake of his head. “These are very serious charges.”

Harry frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Smedley unrolled a long scroll and began reading off dates and offences. Each offence was an instance of Harry holding Ginny's hand, or kissing her, or having his arm around her, or hugging her, all during this school year.

Harry's temper flared. “That's not improper behaviour! We're engaged to be married! And we were engaged before I was asked to be the Flying Instructor! I was told the Board had approved everything.”

The men quailed a bit in the face of Harry's temper. Smedley was the first to recover. “You will face a disciplinary hearing on March 26, Mr. Potter.”

Harry couldn't believe it. “No, I won't! That's my wedding day.”

Peabody had regained his courage. His voice was stern again. “You will, or you'll suffer the consequences, Mr. Potter.”

“What bloody consequences? Detention?” Harry snarled. Then he remembered a passing comment of Dumbledore's. “Hang on. The Board's meeting right now, isn't it? At the Ministry?”

Thistlewood glared at Harry. “That's no business of yours.”

“The hell it isn't.” Harry turned on his heel and stalked out of the office. He saw Murphy down the corridor. “I have to leave for a while, Murph. I'll be back as soon as I can.”

What's wrong, Harry? Is there something I can do to help?"

"Thanks, but I'll handle it. It's just a misunderstanding. I'll be back soon."

The three men had emerged from the office. In front of their astonished eyes, Harry turned into a phoenix and flashed out of sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry arrived at the Visitors Entrance to the Ministry of Magic and changed back into a human. He entered the phone booth, punched in 62442, stated his business to the automated witch's voice and pinned on his visitor's badge, then tried to calm his racing heart as the phone booth slowly descended. Within minutes, he was through Security and on a lift heading toward the first floor, where the security wizard had told him the Hogwarts Board of Governor's meeting was being held.

Harry stopped outside the door, working hard to calm down. He looked down at his sweaty, dirty Quidditch practice robes. Why hadn't he changed? Oh well, he was the Flying Instructor at Hogwarts. At least he looked the part. He took a deep breath, shook out his hands and opened the door without knocking.

The room held a large rectangular table with nine wizards and witches ranged all around it, one of whom was Dumbledore. They all turned to stare at him in shock when he entered the room. He noticed three empty chairs, probably those of the three who'd gone to the stadium to see him. He no sooner thought this than those three men pushed open the door and came into the room, sidling along the wall away from Harry while keeping their eyes on him. They looked a bit green and more than a little nervous. Good! They should be nervous!

"I'm sorry to disrupt your meeting, but those blokes interrupted my Quidditch practice, so I decided interrupting your meeting was only fair." He looked at his grandfather, who gave him a slight smile. "They said you have a problem with my fiancée and I holding hands in the corridors and so on. Is that true?"

Varying looks of discomfort flowed across the faces of the majority of those at the table. Peabody stood up and cleared his throat.

"As we told you, Mr. Potter, your displays of affection for Miss Weasley are inappropriate and unacceptable. You will have a disciplinary hearing March 26, for which Mr. Thistlewood, Mr. Smedley and I served you notice. There was no need for you to come to this meeting today."

Harry was fighting to control his temper. He couldn't just blow up—he had to be logical and sensible, but right now, he couldn't find a sensible thought in his head. He'd just have to wing it.

"Yeah, there is a need for me to be here right now. As I told you lot at the stadium, I'm getting married March 26, and nobody's going to stop me. If you want to have a disciplinary hearing that day, you can damned well have it by yourselves. If you aren't happy with how I've been teaching your children, tell me so and I'll see what I can do to change my teaching methods. But you lot knew before I took the job that Ginny and I were engaged, and nobody expressed any concerns about that at the time. What changed?"

"You became a teacher at Hogwarts," Smedley said with an expression that looked as if he'd just smelled something rotten.

"So what?"

"So you cannot fraternize with students, Mr. Potter. It just isn't done," Smedley said in his prissy voice.

Harry looked at Dumbledore. "What's going on here?"

"There has been a complaint, I'm afraid," Dumbledore said. "I just found out myself or I would have said something."

Harry couldn't believe it. He knew he was generally well-liked by his students, and he'd gone out of his way to be fair and even-handed with all the Houses in his teaching, when they asked him questions about Quidditch strategies or just when he saw them in the corridors. "Who complained?"

"It doesn't matter, Harry," Dumbledore began.

"It matters to me."

Dumbledore sighed. "A student complained to a relative, who's on this board."

"Some girl with a crush on me complains and Ginny and I have to pay the consequences? That's not fair." Harry looked around the table, wondering if he could see a family resemblance to some of his students.

"Don't jump to conclusions, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly.

"Why not?" Harry demanded, still furious.

"Please excuse us for a moment," Dumbledore told the Board, then touched Harry's shoulder, trying to turn him toward the door.

Cooperating wasn't something Harry was interested in right now. He wanted to fight the Board, and he wanted his grandfather to stand beside him in the fight! And now Grandfather wanted Harry to leave? Why? What was going on?

“Please come with me, lad. I need to speak to you, and I’d prefer to do it in private.”

Harry grumbled a bit under his breath, but turned and left the room with his grandfather, who led him to an empty office a few doors down the hall.

Dumbledore closed the door behind them, then looked at Harry. “It doesn’t matter who reported it. The fact is, what you were doing was against the rules, rules which I ignored with joyful abandon because I believe, and many agree with me, that you richly deserve any pleasure you can find after what you’ve done for the wizarding world. I’d hoped the Board would see things my way, but they haven’t. Fortunately, there weren’t any complaints until recently. That’s why you have been allowed to do as you wished all this time. But my dear boy, you are a teacher at Hogwarts. If a complaint is lodged, and the Board decides to allow you to continue kissing or holding hands with Miss Weasley,” he winked as he said Ginny’s maiden name, “then we’ve set a precedent that subsequent teachers can say should apply to them as well. While you present no threat to the student body because you and Ginny are committed to each other, other teachers might pose more of a danger. Such a precedent could lead to serious problems in the future.” He squeezed Harry’s shoulder gently. “I’m so sorry, dear boy. It’s my fault entirely. I shouldn’t have been so lenient with you, but I am entirely too fond of you. I want to give you anything your heart desires, Harry, believe me in this. But this time, I’ll have to agree with the Board. Can you forgive a foolish old man for making a mistake out of love?”

Harry sighed. He knew his grandfather was right in principle, but this was Ginny he was talking about! How could Harry not hold hands with her, touch her, kiss her? They were newlyweds! He fought the anger welling up inside him. No teacher would take advantage of a student, would he? It’s a ridiculous rule! Then he thought of Gilderoy Lockhart and the effect he’d had on the girls in the school, including the normally level-headed Hermione. If there wasn’t a rule defining teacher/student relationships, Lockhart might have taken advantage of some of those girls—even Hermione. Harry sighed again and looked at his grandfather, a sad half-smile on his face. “I don’t have to like it, do I?”

Dumbledore looked relieved. “No, you don’t. But it would be helpful if you accepted the ruling with grace, and behaved accordingly at school.”

“Will this have any impact on, um—”

Dumbledore leaned toward him and whispered, “What happens at night is between you, Ginny and Merlin, dear boy. Just don’t get caught!”

Harry smiled then. “OK. I guess I can live with the rule for the few weeks until the wedding. But what about after we’re married at Easter?”

“I’ve fought hard to keep your wedding on schedule,” Dumbledore said, “but it’s still an uphill battle.”

Harry gasped. “You mean they might not allow it? Ginny will quit school if they make us put it off!”

“I’m aware of that. I’m doing all I can to make things go smoothly.”

Harry looked at the aged, careworn face. There was no sign of the twinkle that normally sparkled in his grandfather’s eyes. Now that Harry’s temper had abated somewhat, he could see this battle was a real burden to his grandfather. “Thank you, Grandfather. I didn’t mean to cause you so much trouble. I’ll resign my post. That will solve all the problems.”

“No, no, I don’t want you to do that! Where will I find a competent Flying Instructor this late in the school year? And your students are so pleased with their progress, as am I! You’re a fine teacher, Harry, and a simply magnificent flyer. I can’t replace you. The students will suffer greatly if you leave.”

Harry shook his head. He’d thought resigning was the best option, but he understood his grandfather’s points, as well. “Then what should I do?”

“Come back into the meeting with me and just be yourself, lad. You have wonderful judgement when your temper’s under control, as it seems to be now. Stay in the meeting and listen. If you feel you can contribute something, go ahead.”

“OK.”



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 22

Back in the meeting room, Harry settled on a chair next to a long table by the wall while his grandfather addressed the Board. He listened to the discussion going back and forth about what the rules should be, what should be done to discipline Harry, and finally just shook his head and stopped listening. He knew his grandfather would take care of him as well as possible, and Harry would just have to live with the consequences of the Board's decision. Ginny would be finished with Hogwarts forever in June. It was almost March now. He could survive without holding her hand or kissing her or touching her in public that long, couldn't he?

Just as he wondered if he could get away with snogging her in Hogsmeade, he heard someone say that he'd need to maintain a distance from her in Hogsmeade, London, wherever they were, because Harry represented Hogwarts as a teacher wherever he went. Harry slumped in his chair, truly dejected now.

His attention was caught by the sight of a tray of food entering the room, apparently under its own power. He bent down and saw house-elf legs scurrying busily under the heavily-laden tray. The tray was much too large and heavy for such a small elf. When it teetered dangerously, Harry stood and lifted it from the tiny elf's hands, smiling down at her as he did so.

"Does this go here?" Harry said kindly, holding the tray over the table beside him.

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," the elf said. She had huge blue eyes and seemed to be rather young. She bobbed a little curtsy, then looked up at him again and gasped. "Oh! You isn't . . . you is! Is you really . . ." she stood on her toes for a closer look, "is you Harry Potter, sir?"

"Yes, I am. What's your name?" Harry said. He could use a distraction from what was going on at the Board table.

"Dinky, sir." She curtsied again.

"It's very nice to meet you, Dinky."

She wrung her hands and trembled, a huge smile on her face. "Dinky has heard many good things about Harry Potter! Is it true Master Harry owns house-elves named Dobby and Winky?"

"Yes, I do, but I prefer to think of them as friends. I don't think of it as owning them. I don't believe in slavery."

Tears came to the young elf's eyes. "Oh! Master Harry is too kind! Is it true Master Harry allowed them to marry and said they could have children?"

Harry sat down so he was closer to her height. "I'm not your master, Dinky. You don't have to call me that. I don't let Dobby or Winky call me 'master' either. And yes, I allowed them to marry and told them they could have children whenever they want to."

Now the tears spilled down Dinky's face. "Dinky wishes all masters was so kind." Her hands flew up to cover her mouth, her eyes widened in horror, and then she started to run.

Harry grabbed her before she could crash into the wall. "Dinky, I forbid you to punish yourself."

"Thank you, Mast-, erm, Harry Potter, sir! Dinky didn't mean to say bad things about her master."

"Who is your master?"

"Dinky belongs to the Ministry of Magic. Anyone who works for the Ministry is her master."

"So you have to take orders from a lot of people?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir."

Just then, the door opened and another tray, this one filled with drinks, came bobbing toward them.

"Please excuse Dinky, Harry Potter, sir," Dinky said, then ran toward the other elf. She helped him carry the tray, talking to him all the while.

Harry heard his name mentioned several times, as well as Dobby and Winky's. When the elves neared him, he lifted the tray from their hands and set it on the table by the first one. He smiled at the two elves. "Hello. What's your name?"

"Pip, sir! Pip is honoured to meet the great Harry Potter, sir!" Pip swept his arms aside and bowed so low, his long nose actually touched the floor. He had brown eyes and was a good bit taller than Dinky.

Dinky crept closer to Harry. "Dinky is telling Pip about Dobby and Winky, sir."

Harry sat in the chair again so they wouldn't have to look up so far. He smiled at the little elf. "What did you tell him?"

That it's true Harry Potter sir allowed them to marry and have children!"

Harry looked at Pip. "It's true, but they don't have any children yet." He looked at the two elves and noticed them holding hands. "Is Dinky your girlfriend, Pip? She's quite pretty."

Both elves blushed. "House-elves isn't allowed to have girlfriends, sir, but if we was, Dinky would be mine."

"Why aren't you allowed to have girlfriends?" Harry thought whoever was making the house-elf rules sounded as stuffy as Hogwarts' Board of Governors.

Pip dropped his eyes. "Dinky and Pip isn't breeding-stock elves, sir. We isn't allowed to marry or have children, so we isn't allowed girlfriends either."

"Breeding-stock elves? I never heard of that."

"It's where new house-elves come from, sir," Pip explained.

Harry frowned. Hermione would pitch a complete wobbly if she heard this! "And who decided you weren't breeding-stock house-elves?"

"Our masters, sir."

"Where are the breeding-stock elves? Do they work here too?"

"No, sir. They lives in the country and raises baby house-elves."

"And you get no choice? You're not allowed to become breeding-stock elves?"

"No sir."

That's just unfair! Harry thought he might just pitch a wobbly himself. "I'm sorry to hear about this, Pip. Dobby and Winky didn't tell me anything about breeding-stock elves. They were both in service working for other families before they came to me. Nobody said I had to declare them breeding-stock elves. I don't understand."

"Each master can do what he wants with his elves, sir," Pip explained. Dinky nodded her agreement.

"Really. Hmm." Harry sat back, thinking hard. He might not be able to do anything about the stupid school rule the Board was still wrangling about, but he might have a chance at improving things for these elves. "If you could, would you want to marry and have children?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Dinky and Pip would love to have their own family, sir!" Dinky said, holding Pip's hand with both of hers.

"Mr. Potter!" Smedley called. "What are you doing over there?"

Harry glanced up at the man, annoyed by his superior tone. He sighed, determined not to lose his temper. "Talking to these house-elves. Sorry if we bothered you."

Peabody looked shocked. "Why on earth would you—"

"Harry is a friend to house-elves," Dumbledore explained in a quiet but firm voice.

"Why would anyone want to be friends with house-elves?" an obese witch said, dabbing daintily at her sweaty face with a lace hanky. "Blasted hot conference room anyway."

"Would Mistress like a cool drink?" Pip offered, lifting his tray off the table and carrying it toward her.

The witch took a drink from the tray without comment.

Harry was seething. "You asked why anyone would want to be friends with house-elves," he said, doing his best to control his temper. "My friend Dobby has risked his life to protect me more than once. He's a house-elf, as is his wife."

"His wife?" the woman said, looking at Harry oddly.

"I gave them permission to marry."

"Hmm." The woman finished her drink and set the glass back on Pip's tray with no further comment.

Dinky lifted her tray from the table and offered it to Harry. "Harry Potter, sir, would you like some lunch?"

"Thank you, Dinky. Do you want help with your tray?"

This is Dinky's job," she said with a little shrug of her thin shoulders. She waited for him to choose something, then hurried off toward the conference table. She followed Pip's progress around the table, letting those on the Board take what they wanted from each tray.

Harry noticed that only Dumbledore said anything to the elves. He shook his head, saddened by the way house-elves were either ignored or abused, and had so few rights that anyone should have. A smile flitted across Harry's face. He knew Hermione would be delighted with the idea that had popped into his head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lunch was over, and the Board was still arguing about Harry's situation. The wedding was a real sticking point, as was how he and Ginny would be allowed to behave toward each other in public after the wedding.

"He'll still be a Hogwarts teacher!" Peabody said. The longer the discussions had gone on, the more his tightly-wound personality had unravelled, until now, his cravat was undone, his hair was mussed from him running his hands through it as he tried to keep his temper, and there were red blotches on his face. He'd been yelling for the last few minutes.

"Hogwarts teacher or not," a tiny old man said in his querulous voice, "they'll be married! He's a hero, as is she! They deserve a little leeway."

"I want to know why they're rushing into a marriage before the school year is over," the obese witch said, dabbing delicately at her sweaty eyebrows. "Is she in the family way?"

"NO!" Harry bellowed, his patience at an end. "She is not pregnant. It's my fault we have to get married sooner!"

"How in the world can it be a man's fault that a couple has to marry quickly?" the witch sniffed, giving Harry a very sceptical look.

"I . . . it's . . ." Harry looked to Dumbledore for help. If he told very much about his nightmares, he might lose the job anyway, not that he cared much anymore. But his grandfather, and, if he were honest, his students were all depending on him to stay.

"What Harry is reluctant to tell you—" Dumbledore paused to look at Harry again. When Harry nodded, he went on, "—is that he is suffering from a common post-war malady that afflicts many combatants. He has terrible nightmares in which he relives battles and watches his friends die over and over. The only way to stop the nightmares is for someone to be with him to wake him before they get too bad. He shares his home with Ron and Hermione Weasley, who, along with his house-elves, Dobby and Winky, wake him when they hear him cry out in the night. But they don't always hear him, and Harry suffers greatly as a result. When he and Ginny are at her parents' home, or on a picnic, perhaps, and he falls asleep in the afternoon, if he has a nightmare, Ginny can wake him much faster than anyone else who's tried. He seems to hear her voice more easily than anyone else's. He's told me that he'll hear her voice and follow it back to the light, until he finally wakes up. These dreams are a very real form of torture for those who've survived warfare. He's sought medical help, and the prescription Marcus Pomfrey gave him the last time he checked Harry was to move up the wedding." He smiled and looked at Harry. "That's true, isn't it, Harry?"

Harry sat amazed at the wonderful job his grandfather had done of spinning out lies laced liberally with truth to create a story that was believable and yet didn't cast any shadows on Harry and Ginny's relationship. "Yes. I showed the prescription to the Weasleys when Ginny and I talked to them about having the wedding earlier. It's at home. I can bring it if you need it."

Dumbledore looked around the table. "Do you need to see it, or will you trust me?"

"I'll just go and get it, shall I?" Harry said, getting to his feet. He could do with a break anyway, and he should send a message to his coach to let him know he probably wouldn't be back at practice today.

"I move we table this discussion until Mr. Potter returns with the prescription," Smedley said.

Someone else said, "Second."

"All in favour?" the chairman said.

As the others voted their approval, Harry wondered what the chairman thought of the proceedings. He'd been quiet nearly the entire time. He shook his head. It didn't matter what this bloke thought. They'd voted, he could leave, and breathing fresh air sounded like a really wonderful idea at the moment.

"Mr. Potter," Thistlewood called as Harry reached for the door knob. "Could you contact the healer who wrote your prescription and ask him to attend us this afternoon?"

"He's very busy—" Harry began.

"I expect a sworn statement from him will suffice," Dumbledore said in a calm but commanding voice. He raised a bushy eyebrow at Thistlewood. "Won't it?"

The man fidgeted a bit, but finally agreed.

"So I'm to go to St. Mungo's and try to get a sworn statement from Marcus, too?" Harry said.

Yes, if you would, Mr. Potter,” the chairman said. “All right, let’s go to item three on our agenda.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who was sitting with his elbows on the table, his fingers steepled in front of his chin. Dumbledore noticed Harry’s gaze and winked at him, then went back to paying attention to the chairman. Harry shrugged and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry sent an Adfero to Marcus to let him know he’d be there in a few minutes and needed to see him if at all possible, then flashed to Grimmauld Place to retrieve the prescription. He was glad he’d kept it in the little writing desk in his room, so he knew exactly where to find it. Shoving the parchment in his pocket, he flashed to St. Mungo’s and asked the nurse to let Marcus know he was there.

A few minutes later, Marcus came out of an examining room. “What’s wrong, Harry? Are you injured?”

“No, nothing like that. I just need to speak to you for a moment.” Harry glanced up at the nurse, who looked away guiltily when he caught her eye. “In private, please?”

“Of course.” Marcus led Harry to his office and sat down behind his desk. “What’s up?”

Harry explained the situation.

“You can’t hold hands or anything? And they don’t want to allow the wedding? Well, of course I’ll give you a sworn statement, but I would think the prescription was enough.”

Harry shrugged. “I guess they think I might’ve forged it or something.”

“No problem. We’ll even get two witnesses to sign it, how’s that?” Marcus said with a smile.

“Great! Thanks a lot.”

“It’s a silly rule in your case, Harry. I can understand it, for other teachers, but you’d think they would’ve given the Chosen One a break.”

“I’ve heard fame is fleeting. I guess this is proof of that,” Harry said.

“I suppose so. Welcome to the real world.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As he walked down the Ministry corridors to the meeting room, Harry considered Marcus’s parting words: “Welcome to the real world.” If he looked at things objectively, that’s what was happening. Harry had always resented the fame that had been thrust upon him because of his scar and his subsequent battles with Voldemort and the Death Eaters. And now he was expecting special treatment because he was the Chosen One? He almost laughed. He should be welcoming the chance to live a normal life, and the first time normality reared its ugly head, he wanted to hex it! Not holding hands or kissing Ginny whenever he wanted to would be tough, but he would learn how to deal with it. It was part of the normal life he’d always wanted.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry returned to the meeting, showed them the documents and was soon on his way again, with the Board’s decision still ringing in his ears. He sighed. This is what you get for wanting to be treated like anyone else.

As he walked toward the lift, he passed the Minister’s office. Remembering his idea earlier, he entered the office and stopped in front of the receptionist’s desk. She was busy writing something, so he stood waiting patiently for her to look up. When she ignored him, he cleared his throat, then decided he may as well say something.

“Excuse me. Is the Minister in?”

The woman didn’t look up from whatever she was writing. “She doesn’t have a free appointment for two weeks.”

“I only need a minute of her time.”

“Sorry. Owl me and I’ll set up an appointment for you.”

“All right.” He sighed, but realized that he should’ve expected the Minister to be too busy for drop-in visits. He’d just reached the door when Minister Bones stepped out of her office.

“Harry Potter! What are you doing here?” She laughed and crossed the room toward him, her hand held out to shake his. “And in your practice robes at that! How are things with the team? I’m a huge fan!”

Harry noticed the receptionist had looked up and now had a shocked expression on her face, her mouth actually hanging open. He almost felt a bit ashamed for wanting to laugh at her reaction to seeing who was standing in her office, but he restrained himself. He smiled as he shook the Minister’s hand. “The team’s doing well, thanks. And I’m sorry about how I’m dressed. I know it isn’t appropriate for the Ministry, but I was called



from practice to attend a meeting, so—”

“What kind of meeting?”

“Something to do with Hogwarts. I was just leaving when I noticed I was passing your office. I’d like to speak with you for a moment, if you can manage the time.”

“I have a few minutes free right now. Come on in.” She glared at her receptionist. “The next time one of the heroes of the wizarding world stops by my office, interrupt whatever I’m doing to let me know they’re here. Understand?”

The woman’s mouth snapped shut and she nodded, her eyes still wide as she watched Harry follow the Minister into her office.

“Have a seat, Mr. Potter. Now, what can I do for you?” Minister Bones said as she settled behind her desk again.

“It’s about the Ministry’s house-elves . . .”



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 23

After checking in at the stadium to apologize for being gone all day, Harry flashed to his quarters at Hogwarts and called Ginny on his ring.

“Hi, pretty girl,” he said when her face appeared above his ring. “Did you have a nice day?”

“Hi yourself! It was OK. Why weren't you at dinner?”

Harry thought for a long moment. Nope. He didn't want to talk about the Board's decision over their rings. Better to do it in person. “I don't want to go into it now.”

Her eyes filled with concern. “What's wrong?”

“I need to talk to you, but I can't see you until later.”

“How much later?”

“Late.” He smiled, trying to tell her a great deal without actually saying anything aloud.

“Did you have a bad day, Harry?”

“It was . . . a day. Let's leave it at that for now. I'd better go.”

She knew him well enough to accept what he said and not push him. “See you later, then.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When Harry flashed Ginny into his quarters late that night and changed back into a man, he pulled her to him and kissed her as if his life depended on it at first, then relaxed into a warm, tender kiss. When he finally released her, she was gasping.

She smiled and ran her finger over his lips. “Wow! What was that all about?”

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too. What's going on? Professor Dumbledore acted a bit odd when I saw him this evening, and so did McGonagall. And you weren't yourself when you called me on your ring.”

“Come and sit down,” Harry said, sitting in his most comfy armchair and pulling her into his lap. He told her about his day, leaving out nothing.

Ginny was livid. “They were going to make us cancel our wedding?”

Harry felt the knot of tension around his heart ease, now that he'd told her and she was taking it as he'd expected. “I love seeing you angry—as long as you're not angry with me!”

Startled enough to calm down a bit, she looked at him. “Why do you say that?”

Harry put on an innocent face. “Because I don't like it when you're angry with me!”

“No, you silly man, why do you like to see me angry?”

“You probably aren't aware of this, but golden flecks show up in the brown of your eyes when you're angry—or when you're passionate,” he added, nuzzling her neck and making her giggle. “They're quite attractive, actually. And I can just imagine them changing into daggers and skewering whoever's on the receiving end of your temper!”

That made her laugh. “Daggers from my eyes. Sounds like you've been reading Parvati's romantic novels.”

He grinned, glad he'd managed to make her laugh after so much bad news. “Really? Nope, I haven't, but that makes them sound more interesting than those titles they have. ‘Ropes, Chains and Leather Robes,’ or ‘One Wizard at a Time.’ ”

“Those titles are tame, you know. Others are much more bizarre.”

“And how would you know?” he said, continuing to nibble on her neck and ear. How could anyone's ear be so tasty? He sucked on her earlobe, careful to not disturb her earring.

Ginny gasped a bit in pleasure before answering. “I saw her reading them in the Common Room. She usually tried to hide them in her history book.”

Harry straightened up and laughed. “I saw her with a hollowed-out book one time where she had several of them hidden. The two I mentioned were

ones I saw her take out of that book. Hermione would've been furious if she saw what Parvati did to that book!"

Ginny chuckled, slid her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. "So this and Grimmauld Place are the only places we can snog or do anything else and get away with it, huh?"

"Until we're 'officially' married, yeah." He told her about the rules the Board had set in place, watching her face carefully to gauge her reaction.

Ginny nearly growled when he was finished. "I can't imagine—"

Harry gently tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear and sighed. "I couldn't either, but then I remembered Professor Lockhart." He rolled his eyes dramatically, which made Ginny laugh.

"Oh yeah! Lots of girls were smitten by him, even Hermione—not to mention my mum!" Ginny ran gentle fingertips down his cheek. "Well, we'll just have to make up for lost time when we're here." She rubbed noses with him. "Weren't you about to carry me off to the bedroom?"

"Your wish is my command, m'lady." He held her tightly as he stood up and carried her to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, people stared whenever Harry and Ginny were together, because they were staying about a foot apart. Also, Harry took his meals at the staff table rather than at the Gryffindor table, as he'd been doing since Christmas.

"Ginny, did you and Harry have a fight?" Colin said.

"No, we're fine. Some idiot blabbed to the Board of Governors that Harry and I held hands and snogged in the corridors, so he had to deal with an angry Board all day yesterday. And now we have to stay apart, at least until we're married."

"What about after?"

"They tried to stop our wedding, can you imagine? After we're married, we can hold hands in the corridors and he can sit with me at the Gryffindor table, but that's all they'll allow. They had to write a special rule that applies only to 'Harry James Potter' and me, so nobody else could do the same thing. He's not even allowed to study with us, can you believe it?"

Colin gasped. "He can't help us with our project anymore?"

"He can talk to us for limited amounts of time in the library, but then he has to leave us alone so nobody can say we're getting too much staff help," Ginny said with obvious disgust. "And we can't work in his quarters anymore, either."

"That's mad!"

"Tell me about it."

"How's Harry taking it?"

"He offered to resign, but Dumbledore wouldn't let him. Harry's not happy, but he's managing."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry, Ron and the rest of the Lions team were in the showers after an exhausting practice that had gone long past their normal quitting time. Their coach and captain were pushing them hard, getting them ready for the semi-finals coming up just before the Easter holidays.

Weary men sometimes get silly, and that was the case today. They emerged from the showers snapping towels at each other and telling ribald jokes.

Harry scrubbed his hair with his towel as he left the shower room, dancing away from a towel snapped at his bum by one of the Chasers.

"You missed!"

"Next time, paint a goal hoop on his bum," one of the Beaters said. "Then you'll hit the mark."

"Excellent idea!" the Chaser replied, then managed to snap the Beater on the bum with his towel. "Ten points to me!"

Harry laughed along with the others, then threw the towel over his shoulder and grabbed the other end, rubbing his back one last time. When he was finished, he wadded the towel up and tossed it toward the hamper in the corner, earning several whistles and cheers when it sank out of sight without even touching the sides of the basket.

Harry and Ron's lockers were in the row nearest the door to the corridor. Harry was nearly there when he stopped and stared, startled to see someone standing in front of their lockers, someone who was too dainty to be a man and who had long curly hair. He squinted, trying to see better, then remembered he was naked. He swallowed hard, but didn't bother to try to cover himself. There was no point. She'd had plenty of time to look already.

Feeling his cheeks burning with a blush worthy of Ron, Harry cleared his throat and finally managed to speak. “Erm . . . Hermione? Is that you?” A small squeak from her was enough for him to know he’d guessed right. “What’s wrong? Why are you here?”

“Erm . . . I-I . . .” She gave up and just giggled.

“Oy, who’s the pretty bird, Potter?” one of his team mates called.

A Chaser answered. “She’s Weasley’s wife, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.” Harry couldn’t decide if he should continue to his locker or just stand where he was. He’d have to reach past Hermione to get his glasses and clothes. “Erm . . . you should wait outside. Ron’s still in the shower. I’ll tell him you’re here, OK?” He took a couple of steps closer to her so he could see her fairly well without his glasses, then looked at her more carefully.

Her cheeks bright with embarrassment, her wide, nervous eyes flew from naked man to naked man, finally settling on Harry’s familiar face again. She started then, as if awakening from a dream.

“Oh! Yes, of course, I’ll wait outside. I’m sorry. My last afternoon class was cancelled and I thought Ron would be finished by now and I just . . . came in.” She shook her head and dropped her eyes at last, then gasped and flashed them up to his face again, her face even redder than before. “I’m sorry.”

Laughter in his voice, Harry leaned toward her and murmured, “This is payback for that time at home, isn’t it?”

She gasped again, and then grinned. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.” With a deliberately saucy toss of her curls, she turned on her heel and walked toward the door.

Just as she reached the door, Ron emerged from the showers and spotted her. “Hermione? What are you doing here?” He was as naked as the rest of them, although some of his team mates had managed to get at least partially dressed by now. Ron wrapped his towel around his waist and moved closer to her, stopping when he saw that Harry was still naked. “Harry! Blimey, mate, cover up!”

Harry looked over his shoulder at Ron as he dug his briefs out of his locker. “I’m working on it.”

Meanwhile, Hermione had turned back. “I, erm . . . Harry can tell you why I’m here. I’ll wait outside.” Her eyes moved from Ron to Harry’s back and slid downward. “Oh, Harry!”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. “What?”

“I can’t believe your aunt didn’t take you for stitches for that horrible cut,” she said, staring aghast at the ragged scar on his bum from Dudley ramming him with a toy metal bulldozer when they were little.

“I’m okay, Hermione. Don’t worry about it.” He bent over and pulled on his briefs, then his jeans, amazed that he was as unperturbed as he was by her staring at his bum. Then again, he’d been naked in the hospital so often, he was kind of surprised she’d never noticed his scar before. “I thought you’d seen it.”

“That was Ginny, not me, who saw all those scars,” she reminded him.

“I was unconscious a lot of the time, so I thought maybe . . . never mind.” He flashed her a grin, then tugged his T-shirt over his head.

Ron, meanwhile, was standing there staring at his wife as she held a fairly normal conversation with his best mate, who’d been completely naked until a moment ago. “Mione?”

Hermione’s cheeks flamed anew. “Ron, I’ll be outside. And the rest of you, I’m very sorry! I was just so surprised, I, erm, simply couldn’t move for a while.”

One of the Beaters laughed. “Got herself a real eyeful, she did, Weasley!”

The other men joined his laughter, but Harry was watching Hermione’s face, which had gone from a fetching pink blush to completely drained of colour. “It’s OK, Hermione. Next time, stop at the front office to see if we’re dressed yet, OK?”

Her eyes huge, she nodded and backed away, finally disappearing from view outside the door.

Ron turned to Harry. “What’s going on? Why’s she here? Were the guys rude to her?”

“No more than you heard, mate,” Harry answered. “And I don’t know what she wants. She just said her afternoon class was cancelled, so she came here to see you.”

Ron was pulling on clothes as fast as he could. He didn’t bother to comb his hair, but ran into the corridor with his socks, shoes and belt still in his hands. Harry watched him go and hoped that there was nothing wrong. It wasn’t like Hermione to just come in like that.

Harry finished tying his shoes and took the time to straighten not only his locker, but Ron's as well. Most of the team had left by now. He'd heard their teasing comments as they'd passed Ron and Hermione in the corridor. Why had Ron and Hermione stayed? He shook his head, reminding himself that he had enough of his own problems to worry about. He didn't need to take on their worries as well.

Satisfied at last, Harry picked up his ever-present book bag and swung it over his shoulder, then walked out of the locker room. He expected the corridor to be empty. He didn't expect to see Ron and Hermione locked in an embrace.

Ron pulled back and grinned at Harry. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"Hermione came to tell me we got the flat we were hoping for! It's brilliant, really. It's near the twins' shop and it's big enough for us to have parties once in a while. Come and see it!"

Harry looked at Hermione and saw that she was beaming as well. "That's great! Of course, I'd love to see it."

The three friends fell in step as Hermione explained why getting this flat was such an accomplishment. "There were so many homes destroyed during the war, nice flats that are reasonably priced are hard to find. We were very lucky to find this one just as the previous tenant was letting it go."

Before long, they were climbing the stairs from a small doorway by a shop that sold household goods like self-stirring saucepots and sets of kitchen knives spelled to slice, dice and julienne on their own. At the top of the stairs, Hermione turned left and led them to a door near the front of the building. "This is it." She unlocked the door and swung it open, revealing a large room that was probably meant to be both living room and dining room. A small galley-style kitchen was on the far wall. A narrow hallway led to two bedrooms and a bathroom. "See?" Hermione said after giving Harry the tour. "It has everything we need!"

Harry thought about all the comforts of Grimmauld Place they'd be giving up for this little apartment. He swallowed hard, not wanting to spoil their pleasure in the apartment. He had to be careful what he said so he wouldn't slip and make a mistake that would hurt them.

Ron and Hermione explored their new flat hand-in-hand, talking about what colour to paint the walls, the curtains they needed to buy, and what furniture they'd need.

"Furniture?" Ron said after Hermione brought it up. "I suppose we could use some of Mum and Dad's old stuff. Or we could buy new stuff."

"We shouldn't waste money on new furniture right now," Hermione said. "We should save as much as we can to build our house in Godric's Hollow."

"Yeah, you're right, but we'll be living here for a few years," Ron said. "We should be comfortable."

"We'll work something out," Hermione said, leaning her head against his shoulder and smiling. "Our own place. Won't it be fun?"

"Yeah."

Harry watched this exchange and smiled. Hermione's parents' house had sold recently, and her mood had been improving ever since. Now she seemed to be genuinely looking forward to starting her own little household. He wondered if there was any way he could help, then smiled. "Erm, would you like to use your bedroom furniture from my house? At least until you can find something you like better."

Hermione turned to him, beaming. "Oh, Harry, thank you! That would be wonderful!"

"There's a lot of furniture in the house Ginny and I won't need for a while. Some of it might be useful for you. We can go through the house and choose which pieces you want this weekend." Harry looked around the apartment, which had an air of shabby gentility as well as some very odd-coloured walls. "And if you want help with the renovations, painting, that kind of thing, Dobby would love to help you, I'm sure. He has my house in good shape now and told me recently he wished he could find more ways to use his tools."

"That would be brilliant, mate," Ron began.

"Oh, no, Dobby can't work for us unless we pay him!" Hermione said.

Harry grinned. "He'll like that."



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 24

It was just a week until the Easter holiday, just seven days until Harry and Ginny's wedding. As Harry flew over the crowded stands in the Lions' stadium, he was filled with a monstrous case of nerves as well as overwhelming joy: nerves because this was a vital game for the Lions, joy because the wedding was only seven days away.

As the wedding day approached, Harry's team mates put ever greater efforts into taking the mickey out of their Seeker in every way they could think of, but on game day, they were all business. The London Lions were currently in first place in the Quidditch League standings, but with only a few games remaining in the season, they were only slightly ahead of the Holyhead Harpies. This Easter match-up between the Lions and Harpies was vitally important as a result.

The game was a close one, keeping the spectators on their feet screaming themselves hoarse nearly the whole time. The Harpies gave the Lions a serious run for their money, but in the end, the Lions won by a good enough margin to maintain their lead in league standings.

Harry soared above the cheering crowd pumping his Snitch-filled hand joyously. Most of the team was clustered around Ron, who had made some spectacular saves. The rest raced to thump Harry on the back and congratulate him as he headed toward Ron.

Harry pounded fists with Ron. "Well done, mate!"

"And you, as well!" Ron said, absolutely beaming from the praise of his team mates.

Harry accepted and shared congratulations with the rest of the team, then dutifully flew to pound fists with the opposing Seeker. When the Lions took up their positions around the stadium to sign autographs, Harry signed autographs for a little while, then flew to the family box, where Ginny was watching her first game since school had started. She'd been given special permission to leave school to do final preparations for her wedding.

"You were wonderful!" Ginny said when Harry landed next to her.

"Having you here made such a difference for me," he said, pulling her into his arms. Their embrace resulted in cheers all over the stadium. Harry looked up and saw that the cameraman filming the game had spotted them and was showing the live feed on the giant screen that showed the details of certain plays as well as the score. Harry turned and waved to the crowd, resulting in more cheers, then lifted Ginny in his arms and kissed her soundly. The crowd reacted by sending off sparks from their wands and stomping their feet in time to the chant, "POT-TER! POT-TER! POT-TER! POT-TER!"

Harry found himself chuckling against Ginny's lips. He pulled back and grinned at her. "You know what this is like?"

"No."

"It's what I feel inside when I kiss you. Thousands of people screaming and cheering me on."

Ginny laughed. "If they do that when we kiss, then . . . ?" She left the thought hanging in the air, which made Harry laugh and kiss her again.

They were interrupted by the twins, who'd held off interrupting as long as they could stand it. "Well done, Harry!" Fred said, clapping Harry on the back.

"Excellent!" George added. "We won a lot of money on this game!"

"And now it's on to the championships! You do plan to win that one too, right?" Fred said, frowning and acting much more serious than usual.

"Yeah, I plan on it," Harry said, grinning.

Fred's serious demeanour vanished in an instant. "Good, because we have a pile of Galleons riding on it!"

"Potter!" Captain Smithers said, hovering his broom in front of the family box.

"Yes?"

Smithers waved Harry toward him. Once Harry was at the rail, Smithers said, "For this bachelor's party tonight—any restrictions?"

"Restrictions?"

"Is there anything you don't want us to bring, or do, or whatever?"

Fred and George suddenly surrounded Harry and leaned toward Smithers. "No restrictions whatsoever!" Fred said with a huge, wicked grin.

"Yeah, the wilder the better!" George added with a grin that matched his brother's.



Harry felt a surge of panic. “Now wait a minute, guys—”

“No worries, Harry,” Fred said, clapping Harry hard on the shoulder.

“We’ll take good care of you!” George added.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about!”

Smithers laughed. “See you at seven then, Potter.”

“Right.”

\* \* \* \* \*

An owl followed Harry into the locker room. He sighed when he saw the red envelope tied to its leg.

“You just had to go and spoil my day, didn’t you?” he grumbled at the owl. The bird gave him a reproachful look and stood there patiently with its leg held up so he could remove the letter. With a heavy sigh, Harry untied the Howler. He was still glaring at the red envelope when Ron joined him in the locker room.

“Blimey, Harry, who’d you piss off now?” Ron said, clapping him on the back. “Great game.”

“Yeah, it was.” Harry blew out an impatient breath and ripped open the Howler. A snippy woman’s voice echoed through the locker room, making the other players duck and cover until they realized there was no woman there.

“Mr. Potter, it has come to our attention that you were observed in a public display of affection with Miss Ginevra Weasley at four o’clock this afternoon, in direct violation of the agreement you made with the Hogwarts Board of Governors. Your services at Hogwarts are hereby terminated. You may send for your things—”

Harry cast a small Blasting Charm at the Howler, which covered up the rest of what the shrewish voice had to say as well as disintegrating the envelope.

“Nice spell, Harry,” Smithers said as he walked by. “So you’re not working at Hogwarts anymore?”

“I guess not.” He sighed. It was going to be so perfect! And he had to screw it up to celebrate the Lions’ win with Ginny today. Damn, damn, DAMN!

“That’s just not right, mate,” Ron said, shaking his head. “It’s stupid, that’s what it is.”

Harry dropped like a stone onto the bench in front of his locker, his head in his hands. “It’s my own fault. I’ve never been good at following rules.” He rubbed his eyes wearily. He and Ginny were already married! Living in his quarters was perfect for now! He was sleeping so much better with her next to him. When he did have nightmares, she could wake him quickly and he’d soon fall back to sleep with her snuggled up against him. What was he going to do?

“Have you considered talking to the Minister? She likes you. Maybe she could—” Ron suggested.

Harry looked at Ron. “Do you remember what happened the last time the Ministry interfered at Hogwarts?”

Ron shuddered. “Yeah. Umbridge. But Minister Bones is a lot better than Cornelius Fudge was. She wouldn’t let anything bad happen. You’re a hero, Harry. She’ll do it for you.”

Harry shook his head. “No. I won’t ask her. It’s my own fault. I’ll just have to live with it. I just don’t know how I’m going to tell Ginny.”

A light voice came from just outside the door by their lockers. “Tell Ginny what?”

Harry and Ron looked at each other in horror. How much had she heard?

“I’ll be out in a bit, Gin. Hang on,” Harry called.

Ginny laughed. “After what Hermione told me about going in there unexpectedly, I won’t wander in unless I need an eyeful of naked men.”

“She didn’t hear anything important,” Ron murmured, “or she wouldn’t be so cheerful.”

Harry nodded, then sighed and stood up. “Guess we’d better hit the showers. The whole family’s probably waiting to celebrate.”

“Yeah, you look in a right state to celebrate,” Ron said. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

\* \* \* \* \*

"They did WHAT?" Ginny was livid. She and Harry were in the drawing room, but her voice carried throughout the house. All of the Weasleys and Dumbledore were at Harry's house to change and have a quick dinner before the parties that evening. Remus and Tonks had gone home with Matthew, since the baby needed a nap and Tonks was hosting Ginny's party that evening.

"What's wrong, dear?" Molly said from the sitting room.

"Nothing," Ginny called back.

"Gin, I'm sorry," Harry murmured. "It's my fault. I just didn't think about it before I kissed you."

A sad smile crossed her face. "Nor did I. It's as much my fault as yours."

"You're too kind and I don't deserve you," Harry said, wrapping his arms around her and nuzzling her neck.

"Too bloody right," she replied. She was still angry, but not at Harry.

"They did WHAT?" Hermione said from across the room. Harry and Ron had agreed to tell the girls at the same time. Hermione's clear voice carried so the rest of the family heard her.

"OK, both girls are annoyed about something," Fred said, a gleam of mischief in his eye as he and George entered the room. "What's up? You two boys been up to no good? Or is it something to do with the stag party?"

"Yeah, um, that's it," Ron said quickly. "Hermione doesn't want us to have a stripper."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. That's true."

"Ginny?" George prompted. "Are you on about a stripper too?"

"No, I bloody well am not on about a stripper, although I could add that to my list," Ginny said. She turned back to Harry. "You need to talk to your grandfather."

He sighed. "Yes. I do." He squeezed her hand and started to leave her, but she didn't release his hand.

"I'm going with you. They're messing with my life, too," she said. She led Harry into the living room and stopped beside Dumbledore, who had been talking with Arthur and Molly. "Professor, may we have a word?"

"Of course." He got to his feet and followed them to the library. Harry quickly filled him in.

"I'm sorry, Grandfather. I shouldn't have kissed her in public. I knew the rules," Harry said.

Dumbledore smiled. "My dear boy, under those circumstances, if I were you, I would've done the same thing."

"You'll have my resignation in the morning," Harry said. "I'd like to return to Hogwarts to pack my things, if you don't mind."

Dumbledore gave Harry's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "You're not leaving Hogwarts."

Harry frowned. "I have to."

"No, you don't. The Board may make rules for the staff, but they can't tell me who can live on the grounds. Those are your quarters, Harry. You and Ginny are welcome to them."

Harry wanted to be excited by this news, but he was afraid to trust it. "But your new Flying Instructor will need them."

Dumbledore quirked an eyebrow. "What new Flying Instructor? I have no intention of hiring someone else."

"But then the students won't have instruction the rest of the year."

"And even with no further instruction, I believe they would all pass any level exam given them. You've trained them very well. Let me deal with the Board. You carry on as usual."

"But—"

"Harry—do you trust me?" Dumbledore said.

"Of course, but—"

"Then stop worrying. No matter what else happens, you don't have to move out of those quarters until you want to, which I suspect will be at the end of Miss Weasley's school term, yes?"

“That was the plan.”

Dumbledore’s eyes grew distant and stroked his silver beard for several long, quiet minutes. Then he smiled. “Something just occurred to me. There is a way around the problem.” He quirked a bushy eyebrow at Harry. “And you know it as well as I do.”

Harry was thoroughly confused now. “I don’t understand.”

“Am I paying you to teach, Harry?”

“No. I told you to use the money to buy new brooms.”

“Then, my dear boy, you are a volunteer, not part of the school staff. The Board cannot tell you what to do.”

Harry goggled at him. “Huh?”

“My mind just isn’t as quick as it once was.” Dumbledore shook his head. “I wish I’d remembered earlier. It would have saved you and Miss Weasley a great deal of annoyance. I believe this lovely loophole will work. I don’t know if they’re aware that you take no salary for your work for Hogwarts. I will meet with them tomorrow, and I expect everything to be straightened out soon thereafter. Don’t you worry about it, all right?”

Harry felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “Thank you, Grandfather!”

“It was all your doing, lad. You’re the one who refused to be paid because you thought the school should buy new brooms. Hogwarts can only repay your kind generosity by supplying quarters for your use.”

“So I can still teach?” Harry loved teaching. The thought of not finishing the school term with his students was a painful one.

“I believe so, yes. Don’t worry about it anymore. We’re here to celebrate a great victory!”

“Make that two victories,” Harry said, grinning now.

“Professor, you’re a wonder,” Ginny said.

“Thank you, my dear. I take that as high praise indeed.”

“And that’s how I meant it.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed Dumbledore’s withered cheek, making him laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

Since their wedding was on a Friday night, Harry and Ginny’s friends had decided to have the stag and hen’s parties the Saturday before, rather than on Thursday night since both Hogwarts’ and Auror School students had the last of their pre-holiday tests the following day. When the Lions game didn’t go into overtime, all the players had time to clean up and change clothes, but they’d already told Harry if the game went into overtime, they’d just show up for the party sweaty and dirty—after all, he should be used to their smells by now, right?

Harry’s stag night was in an upstairs room of the Leaky Cauldron. Friends from Auror School and the entire London Lions team and staff were there, as well as Colin and Dennis Creevey, Dean Thomas, Neville Longbottom, Oliver Wood, Charlie Weasley and Fred and George, who’d organized the party. Dan Jacobs and a couple of the lads from Toads in the Loo joined them, as did the photographer, Trent Baird, and other shop owners from Diagon Alley who’d become friends with Harry on his lunchtime wanderings there.

Harry followed Ron into the room and simply stopped in the doorway, stunned at the huge turnout and by the flashbulbs going off in his face. More than a little unnerved, he shielded his eyes with his hand until the lights stopped flashing.

“I thought this was a private party?” he murmured to Ron when the hubbub died down.

“Yeah, well, with Fred and George in charge, what can you expect?” Ron grabbed Harry by the sleeve and led him to the table where Fred and George were demonstrating some joke products.

“See, it won’t open no matter what you do,” Fred said as he tried to pry open a box of sweets. “But if you do anything other than try to pry open the lid—” He banged it on the table in apparent frustration. With a loud pop, the box burst, releasing a huge cloud of confetti that created purple-with-pink-polka-dots spots wherever they landed, whether on clothing, furniture, someone’s skin or hair. Shocked laughter rocked the room as Fred’s face was covered in purple-and-pink spots.

“How long before that wears off?” Dan Jacobs said, laughing with the rest.

“It can linger for days,” George said with a wicked grin. “Or you can reverse it right away. Finite.” With that, all the spots disappeared. Fred and George both spread their hands dramatically and said “Ta-da!” with identical grins.

“So what’s the entertainment tonight, lads?” Oliver Wood said.

“Yeah, I hope it’s better than it was for Weasley’s stag party!” one of the Lions’ chasers called, then laughed. “Not that it wasn’t entertaining, mind you!”

“What did I miss?” Oliver said, turning to look at Ron. “Was it good?”

Ron shrugged. “Depends on who you ask, I reckon.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Neville! I thought you were still in the Mediterranean,” Harry said, sitting down with his friend.

“I got my mail when we came into port about a week ago. Owls only come out to ships at sea for emergency messages, you know,” Neville said. “When I saw the invitation, I had to stay ashore long enough to come to your stag party and wedding! I wouldn’t miss them. How’s Ginny?”

Harry grinned. “Beautiful. Funny. Feisty. As eager to be married as I am. She’s Head Girl this year, you know.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“How’s your research going?”

“It’s brilliant! I can’t tell you how exciting it is to be on a real research ship.” Neville’s excitement was palpable.

“What kind of plants can you research in the middle of the sea?”

“Plankton, of course! And kelp, seaweed, and other such things. And we do go to port in various places, as well, and take smaller boats up rivers and so on. I was on the Nile a month ago, Harry! We collected samples of various reeds and other river plants there. You should see Egypt! It was amazing.”

Harry was impressed. Neville had matured, with a great deal more self-assurance the most obvious change. And he was clearly very happy with his life. “And what about girls? Are there any on your ship?”

Neville blushed. “Well, there are a few.”

Harry grinned and nudged his friend with his elbow. “And you’re quite taken with them, yeah?”

Neville ducked his head, his face bright pink now. “A bit.”

Harry clapped Neville on the back. “Good for you, mate! Maybe your wedding will be next!”

Neville’s eyes widened in shock. “Oh, I don’t know about that!”

“Don’t forget to send Ginny and me an invitation!”

“No worries there. If and when that happens, you’ll be at the top of the list.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ginny’s friends from school as well as many of her relatives showed up at the Lupins’ house for the party. The presents ranged from the normal housekeeping type of thing to lingerie naughty enough to make even Tonks blush. That particular garment came from Parvati, who beamed at the attention it got.

“It’s one of my designs, something I’m doing for my Paris portfolio,” Parvati said. “I thought it would be fun to research the market for it in England. What do you think?”

Ginny’s face was as red as her hair, but she bravely held up the tiny little froth of lace. “It’s, um, exquisite. Thanks.” She giggled. “Harry will love it.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear!” Parvati said. “That’s the market I’m after!”

“Speaking of Harry,” Alicia Spinnet said, “that beefcake calendar was hot!” This comment met with a great many cheers. “Is he going to do more like it?”

“I don’t know. It’s up to the Lions,” Ginny said.

“I read that it out-sold any calendar that’s ever been published in the wizarding world,” Angelina added. “And when I saw it, I could see why! Whoooo! That scrawny little boy grew up just fine!” More whoops and excited chatter erupted, including some ribald comments about Ron’s calendar as well as continued suggestive, cheeky, even off-colour comments about Harry’s.

Ginny just shook her head and smiled. And these are our friends! Just think how strangers talk about him! But they can’t have him. He’s mine! That thought warmed her heart to the point that she simply ignored the banter going on around her, lost in dreams of the life they’d soon start together.

Earth to Ginny," Tonks said. "You OK?"

Ginny grinned at Tonks. "Couldn't be better. Well, I could, actually, if Harry were here."

"Oh, no, just imagine how he'd react to all these comments if he were here!" Hannah Abbot said. "He'd just die!"

"He'd blush a lot, but he'd survive," Ginny said. She flipped the lacy lingerie still clasped in her hand. "And he'd want to know if there were more things like this in those packages." She reached for another present and opened it, enjoying the laughter of her friends.

"Did anyone bring any entertainment?" Alicia said when Ginny finished opening presents.

"Actually," Hermione said her cheeks bright pink, "I found something I thought we might enjoy."

"Bring it on!" the other girls shouted.

Hermione opened a case and brought out a film projector. "I got the idea from the twins, actually," she said as she caught Ginny's eye, resulting in both of them laughing. Hermione started the projector and a film began. The title read, "Young Wizards on the Town." Catcalls and shouts followed as the film began. Four rather muscle-bound young wizards mugged for the camera and strutted around in tight jeans and T-shirts.

"Where'd you get this, Hermione?" Tonks said.

"I saw it in a catalogue Fred and George had."

Ginny looked at her in surprise. "You didn't let them order it for you, did you?"

"Oh, no, I ordered directly from the catalogue," Hermione began. Just then, the film changed from showing the young men pulling off their T-shirts to display their beautifully-muscled bodies, to a scene of toothless old men slurping up coffee from large mugs, then grinning at the camera.

"Those twins!" Hermione grumbled, then laughed. "I guess I deserved that. I messed up every stag film they had."

"You did?" Alicia said gleefully. "What did they do about it?"

Hermione waved at the screen and laughed. "This!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Fred sighed and turned off the projector amid a room full of jeers. The girls had managed to charm—or was it hex?—the films for Harry's party, as they'd done for Ron's. Fred and George hadn't even bothered to hire a stripper this time, remembering what Ginny had done to the last one. Instead, a huge cake was rolled into the room by Tom, the pub's proprietor.

"Thanks, Tom! We'll take it from here," George said, slipping a tip to the man.

"You've got a girl in there, right?" Ron said with a laugh, knowing his twin brothers all too well. "C'mon then, get on with it!"

Fred acted wounded. "A girl. Would we put a girl in there and take a chance on being hexed by not only the great Harry Potter himself, but our dainty little sister, as well?"

"Nope, this is simply a confection we had prepared as a treat," George agreed. He lifted a cake knife and sliced a piece that included a large purple rose, then handed it to Harry. "Here ya go, mate."

Harry took the plate warily, certain the twins were up to something. But what could it be? "Thanks." He eyed the cake but saw nothing wrong with it. The twins were still carving slices of cake and handing it round. Nobody seemed to be having ill effects from it, so he took a bite. "It's good!" He'd no sooner said that than he started itching in places he knew better than to scratch in public. Oh no. Something's very wrong here. He looked at the hair on his knuckles, then shoved a sleeve up. The dark hair on his arms was still simply dark hair, not feathers. He ran a hand over his hair, which still felt like hair. No red feathers for him, then, not like what they did to Ron, but what was this creepy, itchy feeling coming over him? His skin was crawling! Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore and started scratching his chest.

All innocence, Fred said, "Something wrong, Harry?"

"You're not allergic to frosting, are you, mate?" George did his best to look innocent as well, but the gleam in his eye gave him away.

"What did you do to me?" Harry said, giving up all pretence now and scratching his chest, arms and back like mad. His groin was nearly painful now. He was afraid to even think about scratching down there.

"Us? Nothing! You must have an allergy or something," Fred said, acting a bit worried now, but still smiling.

"What did you do?" Ron demanded. "If you hurt him, Ginny will hex your bits off!" His brothers were too interested in watching Harry's transformation to answer him. Ron stood in front of Harry and stared at him. "What's going on, mate? Feathers? Did you try a Finite?"

Harry was sure he must be bleeding in several places now, he was scratching so hard. "YES! It didn't work!" With a growl, he ripped his shirt off and stood there staring aghast at the scales covering his chest, back and now running down his arms to his hands as well as moving up his neck. "What is this?"

"You're an iguana, Harry," George said, trying to stifle his giggles.

There was a mirror behind Fred. Harry stepped around him and gasped when he saw the green and yellow scales now covering nearly every square inch of his body were now moving over his face. He froze in horror when he saw his eyes turn yellow and scales rapidly cover his hair, face, even his eyebrows. The face in the mirror was like a bizarre reflection of Nagini now. Shaking with horror, Harry screamed and fell to the floor, his hands over his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Reverse the spell!" Ron cried, bending over Harry. "Can't you see it's hurting him?"

"It doesn't hurt, it just itches a bit," George said, frowning a bit now. "We've done it to ourselves."

"Stop it!" Ron grasped Harry's shoulders and stared into the yellow eyes with slits for pupils. "It's just a prank, Harry. You'll be fine." When Harry didn't respond, Ron stood up and glared at his brothers. "Get them off him now! Can't you see that he looks like You-Know-Who's snake? You're driving him mad!"

Both Fred and George gasped. "We never meant—" George began as Fred did a complicated incantation that resulted in the scales fading instantly from Harry's skin.

Ron knelt by Harry's side. "It's OK now, Harry. The scales are gone. You're back to normal. C'mon, stand up and I'll show you in the mirror."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry lay panting on the floor, curled in a tight ball, completely unaware of his surroundings. His mind was filled with nightmare images of Nagini, but even worse, with images of himself inside Nagini when he attacked Arthur Weasley in the Department of Mysteries. He wouldn't attack again, no, he wouldn't, he couldn't! He felt something wrap tightly around him, but didn't know what it was. He fought the restraint at first, then became grateful for it. Perhaps it would keep him from attacking someone.

Harry heard someone calling his name, as if at a great distance. He turned his head toward the sound and listened hard, concentrating on following that voice out of the void of terror in which he was trapped.

"C'mon, Harry, everything's OK now," Ron said. He was holding Harry in a tight embrace now, trying to calm his friend as well as keeping Harry from hurting himself. "Harry! Come on! You're fine!"

Finally able to focus his eyes, he saw Ron's face just a few inches from his. "Ron?"

Ron relaxed his grip a little and helped Harry sit up. "Welcome back!"

Harry shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. He felt dizzy somehow. "What happened?"

"Fred and George played a prank on you that went badly," Ron said. "How do you feel?"

"A prank?" Harry shook his head again, trying to clear it of the horrifying memories still flashing before his eyes.

"Yeah, the great prats. I told them Ginny would hex their bits off, if you don't do it first. Or I'll do it for you, if you want." Ron scowled. "They deserve it."

"Harry, we didn't realize—" George began, his face pale and anxious.

"We would never try to hurt you, mate," Fred said, looking equally worried.

Neville knelt beside Harry and peered into his eyes. "How do you feel? I don't have any potions with me, but I can probably get something if you need it. I've learned more healing spells and potions since I've been on the research ship."

Harry swallowed hard, then shook his head. His hands were still shaking and the remnants of his terror still haunted the corners of his mind, but he was calming down little by little. "I'm . . . I'm fine, Neville, thanks. Really, I'm fine. Where's my shirt?" He accepted Ron's and Neville's help in getting to his feet, then looked at Charlie in confusion but accepted the rag Charlie handed him. He stared at the shredded cloth in his hand, his mind still too numb to process what he was seeing. "What . . . is this my shirt? What happened to it? This was one of my favourites."

"You ripped it off yourself, mate," Ron said quietly. He told Harry what had happened.

Harry looked at the twins. "You thought it would be funny to turn me into an iguana?"

The twins shrugged. "We've done the bird thing several different ways, y'know, with Ron and the Canary Creams and so on," Fred explained. "We were trying something different."

"You never told them, did you?" Ron murmured in a low voice.

Harry looked at his best friend and shuddered at the memory. No, Harry had never told anyone but those who'd first heard it about him not seeing Nagini attack Arthur Weasley in the Department of Mysteries, but that he, Harry, had been Nagini then. So the twins had no idea what a horror their prank had brought to his mind. He didn't want to tell them now, either.

Ron watched Harry for a moment longer to be certain he wasn't going to become lost in another horror-filled vision, then hissed to his brothers, "Don't you remember that dream he had Fifth Year?"

Both twins blanched. "We didn't think about that. We just thought it would be a bit of a laugh," George said.

"We're sorry, Harry," Fred said, gingerly patting Harry's arm.

"Yeah, we didn't mean to remind you of, well, you know," George added.

"It's OK," Harry said after a long moment. "Just don't pull that kind of thing on me again, all right?"

"No more lizards for us, mate!" Fred vowed, holding his right hand aloft.

"Nor anything else with scales!" George agreed.

Harry forced himself to smile a bit. "It was a great transfiguration, though. How'd you do it?"

Fred and George began the explanation, warming to their subject when they saw that Harry wasn't angry with them. What they didn't know was that it was taking all of Harry's willpower to keep the smile on his face and to act interested.

"So it was in the frosting around the purple flower?" Harry said after a bit. "It didn't taste odd at all."

"That's the genius of it!" Fred said. "We've discovered a carrier potion that makes the joke potion taste like whatever it's served in, or on. If we'd put it on a steak and kidney pie, and just made certain you got the right piece, you would never have known you'd been pranked until the transfiguration started."

"That's brilliant." And scary. Harry would be careful about whatever he ate around the twins from now on, although after tonight's experience, he doubted they'd ever try to prank him that way again.

Harry's friends gave him some joke gifts: thong underwear—for Harry, not Ginny—with a lovely pink flower on the front; a purple spangled tutu which nobody could explain; a bottle of potion guaranteed to make Ginny mad for him. He laughed when he opened it. At least there's no need for that. Then there were the more useful, practical or at least enjoyable gifts: Dan Jacobs gave Harry a pre-release copy of his next album, the one for which Harry had written a glowing review, already published in the Daily Prophet. Neville gave Harry a book on medicinal potions used in Greece. Ron gave Harry a written promise to make certain Harry survived his wedding without getting drunk or being pranked by the twins. The twins' present was a promissory note for a fireworks display the evening of the wedding. Trent's gift was him doing the wedding photography for free.

Harry was shocked by the value of this present. Trent's fees weren't inexpensive and his work was truly phenomenal. "Trent, this is huge. Are you certain?"

Trent nearly vibrated with glee at Harry's response to his gift. "Yes, I am, and I guarantee no one will receive copies of those photos, Harry. You'll even get the negatives if you want. You said you want no press at your wedding, and I respect that. They won't get any photos from me!"

All in all, Harry thought, it was a stag party to remember even if there weren't any naked dancing girls. He looked at the purple spangled tutu and wondered how Ginny would look in that—and nothing else. He chuckled and stuffed it into his bag along with the other gifts. At the very least, he and Ginny would get a laugh out of it. And thanks to his grandfather saying he could stay in his quarters, he'd be seeing her soon. He couldn't wait.





# Now And Forever

## Chapter 25

Monday dawned bright and beautiful. Four more days and we'll be married! Harry couldn't keep the grin off his face all day. His team mates teased him for being far too cheerful about losing his freedom soon, but he took it all in stride. Four more days!

Late that night, Harry flashed Ginny down to his quarters, where he took his time undressing her. She had on a flannel gown with what seemed to be a hundred buttons on the front. Rather than lift it over her head, he opened one button at a time, tenderly kissing whatever skin he could find in the newly-opened space. He savoured the taste of her, the smell of her, the silky texture of her skin under his lips, tongue and gently wandering hands. By the fourth button, she was already gasping. He chuckled and knelt before his petite wife who was opening buttons as fast as she could now. Harry moved his mouth to her breast and she leaned against him, her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him where she wanted him.

“Harry—”

He was too busy enjoying himself to stop and look up at her. His mouth never left her breast as he answered, “Mmm?”

“H-h-harry! Bed! Now!”

Harry chuckled. “Can't take it, can you?”

“No!” She pulled on his shoulders, trying to get him to stand up. “Harry, please!”

“Your wish is my command,” he said, getting to his feet and lifting her in his arms. He sat her on the bed, whisked the gown over her head and did a Transference Charm on his pyjamas, which landed neatly atop her gown.

“You're too far away,” she said with a pretty pout, then grabbed his hand and pulled hard, making him fall on the bed beside her.

“I love it when you get bossy,” he murmured against her neck.

“And I love it when you cooperate,” she sighed, giggling when he blew a raspberry on her neck. “Be serious!”

He raised himself on one elbow and looked at her. He didn't think he'd ever tire of those beautiful eyes, that sweet face, the luscious body that trembled so deliciously under his hands. “I couldn't be more serious. I love you, Ginny Potter.”

“Say it again!”

“Ginny Potter. Ginny Potter. Ginny Potter.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When they lay in an exhausted tangle of arms and legs, Ginny giggled. “Look.”

Harry was happy where he was, with his face nestled in the crook of her neck. “Mmm?”

“Harry! Look.”

He raised his head and studied her face. “Look at what?”

“It's a new record, I think,” she said, making a sweeping gesture with her arm. “Maybe nine feet this time?”

“Nine feet?” He looked around him then. They were floating at least nine feet above the bed. At least my aura isn't showing like it used to when we wound up floating. As usual, when he became aware that he was floating, they began to fall. He flipped over so he was on the bottom when they landed, their landing cushioned by his quick Arresto Momentum.

“Are you all right?” Ginny said, pushing away from him enough to see his face in focus.

“Yeah.” He held Ginny in place on his chest, loving the feeling of her skin against his. “Just stay there. I'm happy.”

She chuckled as she relaxed against him again. “I'm happy too. I love you.”

“Love you more.”

She lifted her head and grinned. “OK.”

Harry lifted his lips to hers in a slow, tender kiss. When they parted, Ginny nestled her head under his chin and fell asleep.

Harry ran his hands lightly over her silky hair and her back, over and over. The weight of her body on his was so comfortable, so cherished. He found himself wishing they could just merge and be one body forever.

As he began to doze, Ginny woke enough to slide off his chest and nestle against his side, her head on his shoulder, her arm around his chest, her legs tangled with his. In a few minutes, they were both sound asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Harry awoke with a start. “What the—?”

BAM! BAM! BAM!

“Grab your things and go back to your room,” Harry whispered, getting up and trying to pull his pyjama bottoms on without falling over. “Merlin, flash her back, but fly back instead of flashing when you return.”

BAM! BAM! BAM!

“Who could it be?” Ginny said in a hushed voice as she tied her dressing gown around her. She’d put her nightgown on so fast, it was inside-out.

“No idea, but it can’t be good. Stay in your room until I send for you.”

“Be careful!”

“Right. Go!” He watched her grab Merlin’s tail and disappear in a flash, then hurried to the door.

BAM! BAM!—

Harry opened the door, his wand at the ready. Standing just outside were the three men from the Board of Governors who had caused him so much trouble, with Filch hovering behind them.

“What the bloody hell do you want?” It was all Harry could do to avoid snarling.

“Where is she?” Thistlewood said, shoving the door open and striding inside Harry’s quarters.

“I didn’t invite you in,” Harry snapped. It took every bit of strength he had to avoid hexing them as the other two followed Thistlewood inside. Harry sent a quick Adfero to Dumbledore while glaring at Filch, then slammed the door in Filch’s face.

“We know she’s in here, Potter. Where is she?” The three men poked around in Harry’s sitting room, bedroom, bathroom, even the wardrobe, but Ginny, of course, wasn’t there. The men looked at each other in frustration and then scanned the area again.

“Look at that bed!” Smedley’s voice had a victorious ring. “Two people were there! We have you now, Potter!”

Harry’s face twisted in disgust. “No, you don’t. Everyone knows I sleep very badly since the war. Even you know that. You had testimony from my healer about it, remember? By morning, the sheets are usually off the bed from me tossing and turning. And yes, I use both pillows.” Grateful he was so adept at lying, Harry used the time while their attention was on the bed to do a wandless cleaning spell to make certain there were no red hairs evident anywhere in his quarters. Ginny didn’t keep any of her things there, so there shouldn’t be any other evidence of her visits. “Why are you here?”

Peabody turned and glared at Harry. “We received information that she was here.”

Harry spread his hands and shook his head. “You can see for yourself that she isn’t. Why are you harassing me this way?”

“Whether you’re a volunteer teacher or not, you must follow school rules! We’re making certain the rules are followed!” Smedley said from the corner, where he was examining Harry’s Firebolt Excalibur.

“Don’t touch that. It isn’t school property,” Harry said, snatching the broom from his grasp. “And Ginny isn’t hiding in it, either.”

A polite knock sounded at the door. Harry went to open it. “Thanks for coming.” A glance at the Board members told Harry they hadn’t expected to see Dumbledore tonight.

“And to what do we owe this visit?” Dumbledore said, studying each Board member in turn.

“We got a tip that Miss Weasley was spending the night in Potter’s quarters, so we came to see for ourselves,” Thistlewood said.

“And Mr. Filch let you in?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll have to speak to Mr. Filch about that,” Dumbledore said mildly. “No visitors are permitted on the grounds until they have checked in with either

me or Professor McGonagall. You checked in with neither of us—I've already spoken with Professor McGonagall to be certain—so you, sirs, are in violation of school rules. As to your accusation, I don't see Miss Weasley anywhere, do you?"

"No, we didn't find her," Peabody growled. "But she was here! Look at that bed!"

Dumbledore glanced up at Harry. "It is well known that Mr. Potter has trouble sleeping."

Harry nodded, glad his grandfather was backing him up. "I told them that. They chose not to believe me."

"So where is Miss Weasley?" Peabody demanded.

Harry's temper was dangerously near the surface. "In her room! And probably asleep!"

"We'll just see about that," Thistlewood said with an imperious sniff as he left Harry's quarters.

Soon the whole group was standing outside the Gryffindor portrait hole. Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Do you know the password for this week?"

"No."

"What? That's not possible!" Smedley cried. "You're a Gryffindor!"

Harry sighed. "I'm a Gryffindor who finished school last term. Since I teach students from all the houses, I try to treat each house equally, so I don't visit any of their Common Rooms. If I meet any of my Gryffindor friends to study, it's in the library, not in Gryffindor Tower."

A moment later, Minerva McGonagall bustled up. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"Not a problem, Professor," Dumbledore said. "Thank you for coming."

"I've already contacted Miss Weasley. She should be down in a moment," McGonagall said, giving the three Board members a disapproving glare.

A few minutes later, a sleepy-looking Ginny came through the portrait hole and stared at the group gathered in the hallway. Her eyes were puffy, her hair was mussed and her dressing gown was tied crookedly. Harry had to suppress a relieved smile when he noticed her gown was right-side-out now, with every button he could see fastened properly.

Ginny yawned and frowned at the strangers, then turned to McGonagall. "What's going on?"

"How long have you been in there?" Peabody demanded.

Ginny instantly bristled. "What business is it of yours?"

"These are those three blokes from the Board," Harry said.

"It might speed things along if you simply answer the question, Miss Weasley," McGonagall added.

Ginny shrugged, as if the answer weren't important at all. "I studied in the library, then did some more work in the Common Room and went to bed, I don't know, probably eleven-thirty or so." She looked at Harry. "Are you all right?"

"I'm pretty well annoyed. I was asleep."

She turned the full fury of her temper on the Board members, shaking her finger under the nose of the nearest one. "I know you've been informed that he doesn't sleep well! How dare you wake him up! Shame on you!"

Harry almost smiled. It was kind of fun to see her attack somebody on his behalf. Then he remembered that she was under their authority and might get in trouble for scolding them. Before he could say anything, McGonagall stepped in.

"Yes, indeed. How dare you disturb Mr. Potter's sleep, as well as Miss Weasley's, Professor Dumbledore's and mine! What evidence do you have to back up your accusations?"

"We had a tip—" Peabody began.

"And who gave you this tip?" Dumbledore demanded.

Thistlewood drew himself up to his full height and sniffed imperiously. "We cannot reveal our source."

"Then we have nothing more to say to you, either," Dumbledore said. "Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, Professor, I apologize for them disrupting your rest. Good night." With a gracious gesture, he invited the three Board members to precede him down the corridor. As he left, Dumbledore gave Harry a very deliberate wink.

"Well, that was a ridiculous waste of time," McGonagall said, wrapping her arms around herself tightly. "Miss Weasley, go back to bed. I'm sorry you

were disturbed.”

“Good night, Professor. ,Night, Harry.”

Harry took her hand and kissed it, not willing to do more than that under McGonagall’s stern gaze. “ ,Night, sweet girl. See you in the morning.”

Once the portrait had closed, McGonagall turned to Harry. “Will you walk with me, Harry?”

“Of course.” Here comes the lecture. And yeah, I probably deserve it.

McGonagall spoke lightly of unimportant things until they reached her quarters. “Thank you for walking with me. I just found a new kind of tea that’s supposed to help you get to sleep. Would you like to try some?” Her look said he’d better agree.

“That sounds good. Thanks.” He followed her into her quarters, took the seat she offered him, and watched as she cast an Imperturbable Charm on her door.

“I do have that tea, if you’d like some, but what I really wanted was to talk to you.” She bustled around her quarters, opening a tartan tin of Ginger Newts. “Have some,” she said as she got out her tea pot and set the tea to steep.

Harry took a biscuit and ate it slowly as he waited to see what was on her mind.

Once each of them had a cup of tea, Minerva sat down opposite Harry and got right to the point. “Professor Dumbledore informed me of your secret marriage. While I can’t say I approve, I do notice a change for the better in both of you. You seem more rested and she seems less stressed and worried all the time.”

Harry frowned. “She was—”

“Constantly worrying about you, Harry. She loves you greatly, and I’m sure you feel the same way. It shows on your faces when you’re together. I’m very happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“That said, this visit by Board members is quite disturbing.”

“I agree.” Harry sipped his tea. “This is good, thanks.”

“I hope it helps. I know how hard it can be to lose sleep. I’ve suffered similar problems myself since the war. Many of us here at Hogwarts have, actually.”

Hearing McGonagall make such an admission was a shock. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

She sighed, then waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, well, you’re not the only one who mourns all those dear children and friends who died. And that’s not to diminish your suffering, which I’m sure is dreadful. But those men don’t understand, nor will they understand if they ever do catch you and Ginny together in your quarters.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know how to be more careful. Merlin flashes her back and forth, so she’s never seen out of her room at night, nor anywhere near mine. I had him fly back tonight rather than flashing, so there wouldn’t be any flash of light when those blokes were around. They didn’t even notice him return.”

“Someone is spying on you, Harry. You need to be more careful. I think we should view this evening as a warning. Even if they’ve accepted the fact that you don’t really work for Hogwarts but are a volunteer teacher, they can expel Miss Weasley.”

“I know. We’ll be careful.”

“See that you are.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ginny sat on the edge of her bed waiting for Harry or Merlin to come for her. Finally, Merlin flashed into sight.

“Hi, Merlin! I’m ready to go.” She started to stand up to leave, but noticed the bird had a note in his beak. “What’s this?” She took the note and sat on her bed again.

Hi, sweet girl, it began in Harry’s untidy scrawl, I’m sorry, but I don’t want you to return this evening. McGonagall says someone’s spying on us, and I agree. I’ve just finished thrashing about in my room, “going spare” as Ron would say, but now I’m setting some wards in place so I can catch the bastard who’s doing it. You don’t need to see me in a temper, and you do need your rest, so go to bed, sweetheart, and dream of me. I’ll do the same as soon as I’ve checked my wards.

I love you.

Harry

Ginny folded the note and sighed, then turned Harry's note over and wrote a quick response.

When you catch him, can I help you teach him a lesson? I'd be quite happy to rip him limb from limb at the moment! How dare he (or she!) invade our privacy that way! I'll be SO glad when we don't have to go through this anymore!

I miss you. I love you. Sleep well, love.

Ginny

\* \* \* \* \*

The next night, Harry sat in his room alone, talking to Ginny on his ring. Her voice came through loud and clear, and he could see her lovely face floating above the ring. They'd decided to stay apart for the rest of the week to avoid any problems, but that didn't mean Harry had taken the wards down around his quarters.

Ginny was telling him about some incident in the Common Room when Harry's Sneak-O-Scope started spinning. Harry pulled his ring off and left it on the bed. From the sound of the story, Ginny would talk for quite a while without needing his input. Treading softly, he moved to the window and peeped outside. An Extendable Ear dangled just above the window frame. He wouldn't have seen it if he hadn't been looking for it.

I've got you now! He picked up his ring and said, "Huh," which was enough to keep Ginny going for a bit longer while he opened the Marauder's Map and whispered "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good" as he tapped it with his wand. He quickly found what he was looking for. Addison Thayne. In the office above my quarters. He folded the map, picked up his ring and said, "Really?" then moved into his sitting room and put an Imperturbable Charm on the bedroom door. He sent an Adfero to Ginny to tell her to keep talking, that he'd found the spy and was about to catch him. Then he sent a message to Dumbledore to tell him what he was about to do.

Grabbing his Invisibility Cloak, Harry raced out of his quarters and up the nearest staircase, then down the corridor to the unused office located above his quarters. He checked the map again. Thayne was still in there. Wand at the ready, Harry opened the office door and entered, still wearing the Invisibility Cloak.

Thayne sat by the window at the far end of the room and hadn't noticed the door's movement as Harry came in. Harry knew the boy vaguely. He was a fifth year Ravenclaw who wasn't taking any flying classes. He looked sad most of the time and seemed to stay to himself.

Harry walked close behind the boy and then said in a sepulchral voice, "Why are you spying on Harry Potter?"

The boy jumped and spun around, his eyes wide and frightened. "Wh-wh-who said that? Who's there?"

"Why are you spying on Harry Potter?" Harry repeated.

The boy stared around him, but couldn't see anything. Harry could see him gathering his courage. After a moment, he straightened, a defiant look on his face. "He's breaking the rules!"

"So what?"

"He got away with breaking the rules all the time when he was a student! He shouldn't be able to do that as a teacher!"

"Harry Potter spent a great deal of time in detention whenever he broke the rules as a student." Harry wondered what he should say next. Was the boy spying simply to get Harry into trouble? "Do you have a grudge against him?"

"Who are you? Where are you?" the boy demanded, more confident now that the disembodied voice had done nothing to harm him.

"That doesn't matter. What does matter is why you've sullied your own reputation by spying on someone."

"He killed my grandfather and my uncle," the boy snarled. "He killed all those people and he didn't get any punishment at all. My other uncle and my father are in Azkaban now because of Harry Potter. He doesn't deserve to live, much less have a beautiful girl in his room!"

Harry sensed the door opening and turned to see his grandfather enter the room.

"Mr. Thayne, why are you here?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"I, erm, I . . ." the boy stammered.

"You are out of bed after hours, Mr. Thayne. I'll ask you again. Why are you here?" His blue gaze, which Harry knew could be so piercing, focused on the boy before him.

Thayne took a deep breath, then faced Dumbledore with a determined look. "Harry Potter has Ginny Weasley in his room again! He's breaking the rules, Professor!"

"I happen to know that Miss Weasley is not with Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said. "I just spoke with her, and she's in Gryffindor Tower, just as she should be."

"B-b-but . . . I can hear them talking down there!" Thayne gestured wildly toward the window, where one end of an Extendable Ear could be seen on the sill.

Dumbledore walked to the window and picked up the Ear and listened for a moment. "Ah yes. Miss Weasley is telling Mr. Potter a rather involved story, from the sound of it." He put the Ear down and turned to the boy. "They have rings with a spell on them that allows them to speak to each other. That's what you're hearing."

"No, she's there! I'm sure of it!"

"Shall we go to Mr. Potter's quarters and see?" Dumbledore said, still as calm as before.

"Yeah! Yeah, if you catch him—but wait. You're his grandfather. You won't do anything to him!"

Dumbledore tilted his head and studied the boy for a long moment. "I will forgive you for thinking such a thing, Mr. Thayne, but only this once. If Mr. Potter is breaking a rule, I will deal with him. But I believe he and Miss Weasley are talking on their rings. Shall we go and see?"

Harry took this as his cue and left the office quietly, then ran down to his quarters. He shoved the Invisibility Cloak into his bag, then forced his breathing to slow as he crossed to the window. The Ear was gone. Dumbledore and Addison Thayne should be here soon. He picked up his ring and wished he could kiss Ginny. She was sounding a bit hoarse now, but was still chatting away.

"You're brilliant, you know," Harry said, interrupting her.

Ginny sighed heavily. "Did you catch him?"

"Yes. Grandfather's bringing him here now, so let's just chat normally, OK?"

Ginny chuckled. "My voice could do with a rest! Why don't you tell me something funny that happened today?"

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" Harry said, his voice soft and tender. "I miss you so much."

She smiled. "I'm not that far away, and you did see me today, you know."

"Much too far away to suit me, but it will have to do for now. Oh, funny things. Hmm. Oh, remember that little first year girl who was so afraid of flying at first? She did a spiral barrel roll today! I was so proud of her! That isn't exactly funny, but it's cool."

"Yeah, it is. You're such a good teacher, Harry."

"I really enjoy it, too." Harry heard a knock on the door. "Hang on, sweet girl. Someone's at the door." He slipped his ring on his finger as he walked toward the door. "Who is it?"

"Professor Dumbledore and a young friend."

Harry opened the door and smiled at his grandfather. "You're wandering the halls late, aren't you?"

"I'm not the only one." He moved aside to reveal Addison Thayne behind him.

"Mr. Thayne," Harry said. "Why are you out of bed so late?"

"He believes you have Miss Weasley here," Dumbledore replied.

Harry pulled his hand from behind his back. Ginny's face still floated above his ring. "We were talking, but she's not here." Harry felt a bit bad about his deception when he saw the colour drain out of Thayne's face.

"I, uh, I didn't know," Thayne stammered. "I'm sorry."

"Are you the one who contacted the Board about Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked the boy.

Thayne hung his head. "Yes, Professor."

"Come to my office, Mr. Thayne. We need to discuss a few things such as your motive for this behaviour and what punishment I should give you."

"Yes, Professor," the boy said.

Harry watched the two of them leave, then went back into his quarters. He wrote a note to his grandfather detailing what he'd learned from the boy and asked Merlin to deliver it. Once the bird flashed out of sight, Harry dropped onto his bed and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“Harry?” Ginny’s voice called to him from the ring.

“Mmm?”

“Are you all right?”

“I don’t feel right about what I did tonight. That boy has reason to resent me, but he shouldn’t have done what he did. And I shouldn’t have scared him the way I did, either.” He sighed. “I was angry and wanted to get him, to stop him, to get even with him. But that’s why he was spying on me in the first place. We’re no different.”

“Yes, you are! You were right to be angry about his spying—”

“But he was right that I’ve been breaking rules and getting away with it.”

They were silent for a few minutes. Then Ginny said, “I’ll bet he never spies on anyone again.”

“Yeah, that may be true.”

“And if that is true, then you’ve done that boy and the world a service.”

Harry chuckled, but it wasn’t a humorous sound. “Or I’ve cost the wizarding world a budding spy.”

“He wasn’t a very good spy, after all. He got caught.” Ginny’s voice was light and teasing.

Harry laughed. “True.” He smiled at her, the ache in his heart easing a bit. “You always know the right thing to say.”

“I do my best. And now I’ll say goodnight. I love you.”

“I love you too. See you tomorrow.”





# Now And Forever

## Chapter 26

Harry couldn't believe it. The week was behind him. No more school, no more Quidditch, not even a lot of homework faced him for two whole weeks. What did face him was his wedding after the evening meal tonight, and two weeks of bliss with Ginny before the real world reared its ugly head again. He sighed, wishing dinner would end quickly so they could get on with things!

He looked around and grinned at his and Ginny's wedding guests. They'd been invited to come early and enjoy a wonderful Hogwarts dinner, and nearly all of them were there, already dressed in their wedding-guest finery. The Gryffindor table had been expanded to accommodate the entire Lions team and staff as well as all the Weasleys. Various shopkeepers from Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, some of the Auror School staff and other guests were scattered among the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables.

Ginny, who was sitting to Harry's right, was merely picking at her dinner.

"Too nervous to eat?" Hermione said from across the table.

Ginny grinned. "Too excited! I wish we could get on with it!"

Harry wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close, then kissed the top of her head. "Me too."

Molly Weasley came up behind Ginny. "Ginny, dear, shouldn't we go and get you ready now? And Hermione, too, of course," she added, smiling across the table at her daughter-in-law.

"Yay! Let's go!" Ginny got up from her seat and started to follow her mother, then turned back and tapped Harry on the shoulder so he turned toward her. She cupped his face in her hands and bent down until they were forehead to forehead. "I love you." She kissed the end of his nose and turned to go, but Harry grasped her arm and turned her back so he could plant a serious kiss on her lips.

"See you soon!" he said as he finally released her. He turned around and faced a table full of grinning Gryffindors, Weasleys and Lions players, many of whom had whistled and shouted encouragement during the kiss—not that Harry and Ginny needed any encouragement. Harry shrugged and grinned back at his friends. What else could he do?

"We should go soon too, mate," Ron said, looking at his watch.

"What, you think it will take you two as long as the girls?" Fred teased. "You going to curl your hair and eyelashes, Harry?"

"Ron's hair's already curly," George said, considering his younger brother carefully. "Maybe he should wear some makeup to hide his freckles."

"Ha-ha," Ron said, making a face at the twins. "C'mon, Harry. The longer we're here, the more chances they'll have to annoy us."

"All in good fun!" Fred called as Ron and Harry left the table.

"Harry! Will you be flying in on that fancy new broom?" Charlie teased as Harry passed him.

"Nah, I thought I'd save that for our getaway," Harry replied. He'd expected a lot of teasing from the Weasley brothers and the Lions, and none of them had disappointed him. Fortunately, Harry wasn't that nervous, not yet, anyway, so the teasing really was fun for him. As soon as he thought that, he chuckled. Why should he be nervous? He and Ginny were already married! With a huge grin on his face, he turned and waved at the hooting, cheering crowd just before leaving the Great Hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Half an hour later, Harry and Ron were dressed, Harry in emerald-green robes, Ron in a much darker shade of green, peach rosebuds pinned to their lapels. They were waiting in the Trophy Room, just off the Great Hall, for Dumbledore to tell them it was time to go.

"Nervous?" Ron asked.

Harry was bouncing on his toes in anticipation. "Not too bad, no. More excited than anything, I think."

Ron watched Harry for a moment, then laughed. "Calm down, you're making me tired."

Harry stilled, anxious for a moment. "You have her ring, right?"

Ron just grinned and held up his right hand, showing Harry that Ginny's ring was sitting safely on Ron's pinkie. "I won't let you down, Harry."

"Thanks, mate!" Reassured, Harry went from bouncing on his toes to pacing. "Where's Grandfather? We need to get started!"

"Not in a hurry, are you?" Ron teased.

"Not much!"

Just then, Dumbledore came in.

“It’s about time!” Harry said with a laugh.

“Impatient, are we?” his grandfather teased.

“Yes!”

“Then you’ll be pleased to know it’s time for us to make our appearance.” Dumbledore looked at each young man in turn. “You both look wonderful. And Harry, I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you happier.”

Harry grinned and clapped his grandfather on the back as he turned the old wizard toward the door. “You will soon!”

Ron shook his head and leaned toward Dumbledore. “He’s been giddy all evening.”

“I don’t blame him a bit. Shall we?”

“Last one in’s—” Harry said, pretending to start running for the door.

Dumbledore laughed. “You’re quite silly tonight.”

Harry bounced on his toes in front of his grandfather, clearly ready for what awaited him. “Silly’s better than nervous!”

“Too right,” Ron agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Harry entered the Great Hall, he made himself look around at the setting and not simply stare at the doors at the far end, willing Ginny to hurry through them. The House tables had been pushed against the walls, replaced in the centre by rows of chairs now filled with the guests, Hogwarts staff and students. The platform where the teachers normally sat for meals had been cleared off as well. On one end of the platform, Dan Jacobs and his band members had set up their instruments. Dan was now seated at the keyboard playing something lyrically beautiful and uplifting. Dan caught Harry’s eye and nodded in response to Harry’s grin. The bass guitar player had a violin in his hand, but wasn’t playing it yet. Tall candlesticks framed each row of chairs, with small nosegays of peach-coloured roses wrapped with elegant green ribbons attached below each candle. Emerald-green baskets of peach roses and ivory calla lilies sat on the platform and in each window niche.

Dumbledore stood in the centre of the platform, with Harry and Ron to his left. Harry looked toward the doors, which stayed stubbornly closed. His eyes roved from guest to guest, amazed and touched that so many people had come all this way to see him and Ginny get married. He shared smiles with those who saw him looking, then turned his attention to the far end of the Great Hall again. She had to be coming through those doors soon!

The music changed, the violin joining with the keyboard now in a song that was more grand, more stately, yet elegant and light as well. With the change in the music, the doors at the far end of the Great Hall finally opened, revealing Ginny standing there with her arm through her father’s.

Harry realized he was holding his breath when Ron poked him and said, “Breathe, mate,” which made Harry laugh.

He glanced at Ron. “Thanks, I needed that.”

Ron sniggered. “Yeah, I thought a poke would do you good.” After a shared grin, both of them turned to watch their women walking down the aisle.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wait outside the doors was horribly long for Ginny. She was dressed, she was ready, what was the hold up? She watched her father’s nervous pacing and wished she could do the same thing, but she didn’t want to muss her beautiful robes by tromping about in a flurry of nerves. And she wasn’t nervous, not really.

“You look remarkably calm,” Hermione said, adjusting one of Ginny’s curls.

“I’m not nervous at all. Excited, yeah, but not nervous.”

“That’s great!” Hermione leaned closer to her. “I wish your dad felt the same.”

“Me too.” Ginny sighed. She’d always been able to depend on her dad. He was the rock of the family, the calm one when her mum was having wild emotional swings. Her mum was holding up surprisingly well so far. She’d given Ginny a tearful kiss and told her for perhaps the twentieth time that she looked wonderful, then taken Fred’s arm and let him escort her to her seat. But Dad. Why was he so uneasy?

“Dad? Is anything wrong?” Ginny said at last.

Her words startled him. He turned and stared at her. “Wrong? No, nothing’s wrong. Why should there be?”

"Then why are you pacing?"

Arthur pressed his lips together and his eyes grew sad, but he didn't speak.

"Dad?"

Arthur walked over to Ginny and took her hands in his as he stood in front of her. "You look so beautiful. Harry's a lucky man."

Ginny tossed her head and gave him a quick grin. "I agree! But why do you seem sad?"

"I . . . you've always been my precious little girl, but today . . . today you're a woman. It's a hard transition for any father to make." He dropped his chin, refusing to look at her anymore. A moment later, he wiped tears from his cheeks.

Ginny gripped his arm, wishing she knew a way to comfort him. "Dad, please don't be sad. Harry loves me. He'll take such good care of me! And we'll come and see you often! I love him, Dad. We're going to be so happy together."

"I know. I couldn't have chosen a better man for you. I'm so proud of you, and I'm happy for you, I am, truly. It's just . . . you're not my baby anymore."

Ginny hugged her father, then pulled back and looked up into his eyes. "I'll always be your baby, Dad. I can do that and be Harry's wife at the same time. Don't worry, you're not losing me."

A tremulous smile crossed his face. "I know, dear. It's just an adjustment for your poor old dad."

They both turned toward the door when they heard the music change and the violin join the keyboard.

Hermione lifted Ginny's bouquet of peach roses and ivory calla lilies from a box and handed them to her. "Here you go. You look great."

"Thanks! So do you." The girls hugged briefly before Hermione picked up her bouquet of ivory roses and went to take her place behind Ginny.

"It's time," Arthur said, offering Ginny his arm. "Shall we?"

"Can we skip down the aisle?" Ginny said, giving his arm a playful tug.

"If that's what you want, dear." Arthur skipped a couple of steps, making Ginny laugh.

"I think the traditional way might work better in these robes," Ginny said.

Arthur gave her a fond smile. "Ah, well. It could've been brilliant, us skipping down the aisle."

The doors opened and the Great Hall stood before them, filled with friends, family and Hogwarts students and staff. Even the Hogwarts house elves were there, standing along the wall where they could see past the seated witches and wizards, Dobby and Winky at the front of the line.

The music swelled then, and Ginny and Arthur began their long walk, with Hermione, in robes of soft peach with golden embroidery on the skirts, a few paces behind them.

\* \* \* \* \*

She looks like a dream. Ginny's dress robes were some Harry hadn't seen. Her shoulders were bare, but long sleeves covered her arms, ending in points over the back of her hands. Shimmering beadwork covered the rich ivory fabric in moving images of long-tailed birds of some kind. As she got closer, Harry realized the birds were phoenixes. Her robes trailed the floor behind her, making her look taller and rather regal. A small tiara sparkled in her hair, part of which was coiled up on top while the rest cascaded in loose curls down her back. As the music reached a crescendo, she and her father climbed the steps to the platform where Harry, Ron and Dumbledore waited. Hermione moved up the stairs to stand across from Ron.

The music ended, leaving the Hall in silence for a moment. Then Dumbledore's voice rang out.

"Who gives this woman to this man?"

"Her mother and I," Arthur said without hesitation, his voice clear and strong. He squeezed Ginny's hand before removing it from his arm and placing it in Harry's hand, then bent and kissed her cheek. He turned to Harry and clapped him on the shoulder. "Take good care of her."

"I will," Harry replied.

Arthur blinked back tears and nodded, then stepped down off the stage and went to sit with his wife and sons.

Ginny handed her bouquet to Hermione and turned to Harry, who took both her hands in his. Harry stood gazing into her eyes and felt as if the two of them were the only ones in the room. His grandfather's voice startled him out of his reverie.

"Tonight we witness the joining of two lives, two hearts, two spirits as one," Dumbledore said. "These two young people have grown up together

here at Hogwarts, and have been through more trials, pain and fearsome experiences in the past few years than most people face in a lifetime. Despite everything they suffered, their love blossomed and grew into something many of us can only dream of. It is my great pleasure to join Harry and Ginny in marriage.”

He pointed his wand at the ceiling, which changed from a star-spangled night sky to a close-up view of several galaxies spinning overhead in rich, beautiful colours.

“The universe is such a vast place, it’s impossible to imagine how huge it is. So we focus on our one planet, the beautiful planet Earth, which is a tiny speck among all the other heavenly bodies.” The candles dimmed, and a soft light picked out a blue-and-white planet, enlarging it so it became the focus of everyone’s attention. “On this tiny planet live millions of people. Isn’t it amazing that out of so many people on the face of the earth, two people can find each other and their two hearts become one?” He shook his head, a soft smile on his face. “It simply amazes me.

“And here we are, witnessing the joining of these two whose spirits are individually strong, resilient, amazing in every way. And together, oh my. I expect great things from this union.

“The best thing in life is to love and be loved. Love is the most powerful force in the universe. Love heals all wounds and forgives all wrongs. Love trusts. Love never fails. Love stands through everything life throws at us. Harry and Ginny are publicly declaring their love and devotion to each other by the exchanging of vows and rings.”

He turned to Ginny. “Ginevra Molly Weasley, do you take this man to be your husband? Do you promise to love and cherish him, to be faithful and true to him, to stand by his side no matter what happens?”

Ginny gazed at Harry, her face lit with her great love for him. “I do.”

“Harry James Potter,” Dumbledore said, “do you take this woman to be your wife? Do you promise to love and cherish her, to be faithful and true to her, no matter what happens?”

Harry’s voice rang out firm and clear. “Yes, I do!”

“The rings, please?” Dumbledore waved his wand over the rings in Hermione and Ron’s outstretched hands. He Levitated them and haloed them with a golden light so they were clearly visible to everyone in the Great Hall. “These rings are circles, symbolizing your love, which is endless, circling each other forever.” The two rings circled each other and linked together in mid-air. “As a circle goes on forever, so too does the love between two matched souls. Harry and Ginny are two halves of a whole, which will be joined here into one life, one love, one soul.” He separated the rings and gave Harry’s ring to Ginny. “Place the ring on his hand and repeat after me.”

As Ginny slid the ring on Harry’s finger, she gazed into his eyes and swore with every bit of her strength, “With this ring, I promise to be true to you, to love you, to cherish you, and to be your partner all my life. My soul and yours are one.”

Harry felt a tiny sizzle as the invisible phoenix ring vanished. He gazed at the dainty ring in his hand for a moment before sliding it on Ginny’s finger. His heart was overflowing with emotions he couldn’t even name. He just knew he’d never been so happy. When he got to the words, “my soul and yours are one” and slid the ring on her finger, he felt her phoenix-feather ring sizzle as it vanished, too.

Harry lifted his wand for the joining of the wands, which his grandfather had explained would be merely ceremonial, since their wands were already joined in the previous marriage ceremony. Harry went through the motions required, but his concentration was on Ginny’s eyes. She was his both in private and now in public, at last! He glanced up at the sparks around their wands as Dumbledore created an illusion to replicate a real joining of the wands, then grinned at his grandfather and turned his attention back to Ginny. When he heard “You may kiss your bride,” Harry pulled Ginny into his arms and gave her a kiss to remember. Apparently she had the same kind of kiss in mind, because he found himself completely lost in the kiss, the huge crowd of people watching them forgotten. He and Ginny broke apart suddenly, startled when they heard gasps from the watching crowd. Harry felt a spell wrap itself around them and looked toward his grandfather—but his grandfather wasn’t next to him! Harry held Ginny to him tightly when he realized they were floating a few feet above the stage, their descent slowed by Dumbledore’s spell.

Harry looked at Ginny and saw the laughter in her eyes just before he heard cheers and whistles from the crowd and a chuckle from his grandfather.

“You never know what strange new power might show up in someone who’s survived the Refiner’s Fire,” Dumbledore said loudly enough for the crowd to hear. His grin invited them to join his laughter. When the room quieted again, he continued, “And now, it is my heartfelt pleasure to present Mr. and Mrs. Harry Potter!”

Harry and Ginny turned to face their guests, huge grins on their faces. Harry waited for Ginny to take her bouquet from Hermione, then held his elbow out to her and led her down the stairs to start their life together at last.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 27

It seemed as if he'd danced with every female at the wedding. Harry gazed wistfully at Ginny, who was now dancing with Neville. This was all fun, the food was delicious, visiting with old friends who'd come to wish them well was wonderful, but he was tired and wanted to whisk his bride away on the honeymoon he'd planned. Just as another girl approached him, Harry saw Ginny coming toward him.

"Sorry," he told the girl, a fourth-year student, "but my wife has this dance with me." He felt a swell of pride within him as he said "my wife." Were there any sweeter words in the English language? Oh yeah. "I love you." "I do." "I now pronounce you man and wife." Yeah, those were all sweet too.

He was startled out of his momentary distraction by the girl's giggle as she smiled and moved away. A moment later, Ginny dropped into a chair beside him.

"My feet are killing me!" she groaned.

"Poor baby." Harry dug through the puddles of fabric at the bottom of her wedding robes, trying to find her feet.

"Here," she said, lifting her skirts and poking her feet out where he could reach them. "Ooooh, that's so good," she moaned as he removed her shoes and began gently kneading the knotted muscles in each foot.

"Are you partied out yet?" Harry asked, looking at her with a raised eyebrow and a suggestive gleam in his eye.

She dropped her feet to the floor, sat up straighter and grinned, her energy apparently refreshed. "Yes! Let's go!"

"I want to thank Dan first," Harry said. He picked up her shoes and offered them to her. "Your shoes, m'lady."

"I think I'll stay barefoot," Ginny said as she stood up. "The idea of putting them on again just isn't appealing at all."

Harry held the delicate high-heeled shoes up and inspected them more closely. "I can see why. Next time we get married, wear trainers. Nobody would be able to see them under your wedding robes anyway."

Ginny laughed. "Why didn't I think of that? You're a genius!"

"Good of you to notice," Harry said with a chuckle. He took her hand and led her toward the stage, then turned and grinned at her. "Shall I carry you? Your feet must be cold."

Ginny laughed, her face glowing as she gazed up at him. "No, I'm fine! I should've taken my shoes off ages ago."

Harry stopped and looked down at his wife for a moment, then swept her up in his arms, which led to applause from their guests.

"Harry! I said I was fine!" Ginny protested, her voice filled with laughter.

Harry gave her as serious a look as he could manage. "Yeah, you are. But I wasn't. I felt a desperate need to carry you."

Ginny shook her head and slid her arms around his neck. "Poor Harry. All right, then, if you need to carry me so much, go right ahead."

"Thank you." He chuckled and held her closer as he walked across the Great Hall. As they neared the stage, Ginny tapped Harry on the chin, turning his face towards hers.

"Thank you for being so chivalrous, but I can stand on my own feet, you know," she said.

He sighed dramatically, making her laugh. "If you insist."

"I do."

"Two of my favourite words," Harry said as he set her on her feet in front of the stage.

Dan Jacobs grinned at them. "Do you have a request, or are you danced out?" he said, nodding toward Ginny's bare toes, which were just peeping out from under her robes.

"Danced out, I think," Harry said, glancing at Ginny for confirmation.

At her nod, he turned back to Dan. "We just wanted to thank you, mate. You lot were brilliant!"

"The music before and after the wedding, and the wedding march were gorgeous!" Ginny said. "I've never heard them before."

"That's because I wrote them for your wedding," Dan replied. "I'm glad you liked them. The one we played for the bride and groom dance was original too. That one's called 'Ginny's Waltz.'"

Ginny beamed at him. "You named it after me?"

"Who better?" Dan said, winking at her. "Harry's Waltz just doesn't have the same ring, does it?"

"What are the other songs called?" Harry said.

"So far, they're 'here they come' and 'there they go,'" Dan said, "but we'll work out proper names when we put them on our wedding album."

"Wedding album?" Ginny said.

"Yeah! We all got into it once we started working on these songs. We have several more, nearly enough for an album already, including some of the slow dance songs we played tonight. I'll let you hear it when we finish recording them." He looked at Harry. "I know you value your privacy. Will you mind if I mention on the album that these songs were originally written for your wedding?"

Harry looked at his wife. "What do you think?"

Ginny glowed with excitement. She was still a huge Toads in the Loo fan. "I'd be honoured to be mentioned on one of their albums!"

Harry smiled at Dan. "That settles it, then. Go ahead."

Dan grinned. "Thanks." He raised one eyebrow in a humorously quizzical expression. "Are you willing to do some liner notes for the wedding album?"

"Absolutely. You've earned them," Harry said.

"Thanks, mate! The review of our current album that you sent to the Prophet was brilliant! So, are you two ready to leave?" Dan said.

"We just have to change and get our bags," Ginny said.

"Hang on, then," Dan said, then stood and spoke into the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, the party can go on for hours, but for some reason, our newlyweds have other things on their minds than dancing." After the laughter died down, he went on. "Let's give them a proper send-off!" The band played a cheerful, up-tempo song while Harry and Ginny made their way to the doors of the Great Hall, stopping for hugs or handshakes and dodging thrown rice, birdseed, sparks from wands, and patent-pending Never-Pop Bubbles, one of the twins' new products. They joined their guests in gaping at the magical ceiling, which was showing the impressive fireworks going off outside.

Arthur, Molly, Remus, Tonks and Dumbledore stood chatting near the doors when Harry and Ginny reached them. "So you're off?" Arthur said, shaking Harry's hand and bending to kiss Ginny's cheek.

"As soon as we change and get our bags," Harry said.

"Where are you going? You never told us," Molly said.

"Probably because they don't want us to know!" Tonks teased, grabbing Harry for a quick hug. "Right, handsome?"

Harry laughed as he released her. "Even Ginny doesn't know."

"It's a surprise, then?" Remus said, giving his godson a warm hug, then doing the same for Ginny.

"Yup." Harry felt a bubble of excitement growing within him. He'd managed it! His research trips, all his planning, everything was a secret from everyone but Merlin. He hoped Ginny would enjoy the honeymoon he'd arranged. He was fairly certain she would, but a tiny bit of doubt crept in from time to time.

"Wherever we're going, as long as we're together, we'll have a wonderful time," Ginny said.

"But if we need to get in touch—" Molly began.

"Call for Merlin. He knows where we're going, and he can bring us a message if you need to contact us," Harry said. "Don't use Hedwig. The trip would be too hard for her."

"Ahhh," Fred said, joining them, "so it's a long-distance trip?"

"I'm not telling!" Harry said. "Thanks for the fireworks. They were brilliant!"

"Our pleasure," George said, giving his sister a pat on the head. "It isn't every day your baby sister marries the hero of the wizarding world!"

Or anyone else, for that matter," Fred added, "not that she would've married just anyone."

Ron, Hermione and Charlie joined the family gathering. After a final round of hugs, kisses and handshakes, Harry and Ginny walked through the door and turned back to wave one more time.

"See you in two weeks!" Ginny said, waving cheerfully before she slipped her hand into Harry's and followed him down the corridor away from the Great Hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

A short time later, Harry and Ginny were both changed and had the few things they were taking with them in backpacks.

Ginny frowned. "Are you sure—"

"Trust me. All you'll need are jeans, shorts, a few lightweight tops and a sweater. And did you pack your swimsuit?"

"Yes."

"Then you're ready! And so am I." Harry stood in front of her and held his backpack between them. "I need you to carry this for me, OK? Buckle yours first." As soon as she had the strap that secured her backpack shoulder straps buckled together across her chest, Harry slipped the straps of his pack over her shoulders from the front, and buckled the strap that connected the two shoulder straps across her back.

"Oof. That's a load," Ginny said, adjusting the straps on her shoulders.

"I'd wear mine myself, but I'm going to be a bit busy," Harry said as he helped her with the straps, "and sending them ahead isn't practical."

"Are you ready to tell me where we're going?"

"Someplace warm and beautiful," he promised. "Ready? Be sure to keep your eyes closed. It's a long jump and if you peep, it might make you ill."

Ginny looked doubtful. "Are you sure about this? It sounds a bit scary."

"You'll be fine. I'll have a tight hold on the straps, and you'll be holding on to my legs. You'll be safe."

She gulped and nodded. Harry gave her a quick kiss, then changed into a phoenix and flew above her, grabbing the doubled backpack straps that lay across her shoulders securely in his talons. When he felt her get a good hold on his legs, he flashed.

Harry hoped Ginny had her eyes closed, because even with his experience of making this trip several times and seeing through phoenix eyes instead of human ones, the scenery hurtling past at ridiculous speed would give him motion sickness if he didn't stay completely focused on his goal.

What seemed like a lifetime later, he stopped his flight and hovered as well as he could, setting Ginny gently on her feet. She wobbled a bit, but managed to stay upright. Once he let go of her, Harry changed back into himself and unbuckled the backpack strap from her back, then lay spread-eagled on the ground, gasping for breath.

Ginny shrugged quickly out of his backpack and knelt beside him, her face twisted with worry. "Harry! Are you all right? What's wrong?"

He tried to slow his breathing. "I'm . . . fine. It's just a long, long flash."

"Where are we? Why did it take so long?"

Harry closed his eyes a moment, then looked at her and smiled. His heart was pounding more with excitement now than from the enormous effort of the flash he'd just done. "Have you looked around yet?"

"No! You collapsed as soon as you transformed. I'm worried about you!" She wrestled her way out of her backpack, pulled out her wand and ran it over his face and body. "Tell me where it hurts."

"Nowhere. I'm fine, really. Just needed to catch my breath." He sat up and grinned at her. "Look around. What do you think?"

"I think you're mad! Were you trying to kill yourself or what? You're still pale. Don't get up." She put a restraining hand on him, because that's exactly what he was doing, getting to his feet. "Harry! You should rest!"

"I'm fine now, sweet girl! I've done this before, you know." He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her away from him. "Look. What do you think? If you don't like it, I'll take you someplace else."

Ginny tried to turn back toward him, but he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him, with her back to his chest. He could feel the tension in her body. He kissed the top of her head, then rested his cheek on her hair.

"Please don't be angry with me. I wanted our honeymoon to be as special as possible. That's why I did this. Look, Ginny. Look where we are."



When she finally began to look around, she gasped. They were standing on a hillside surrounded by vegetation with huge leaves. In the distance before them was the sea. Behind them was a tall mountain with bright green trees going partway up it. Directly downhill was a long, low building with cars and palm trees in front of it, with tall triangular things of various colours moving behind it every so often. The sky was bright and clear, the air warm and balmy.

In a voice tinged with awe, Ginny murmured, “Harry, where are we?”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful, and it looks very strange to me. We’re not in England anymore, are we?”

He laughed. “Well spotted! Welcome to Maui, Mrs. Potter!”

“Maui? What’s . . . where’s that?”

“Under your feet and all around you, silly girl. It’s one of the Hawaiian Islands.”

She turned and gaped at him. “Hawaiian . . . you mean we’re in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?”

Her amazement made all of his efforts worth it. “If we were in the Pacific, we’d be wet! We’re on an island in the Pacific.”

“You flashed us halfway around the world! No wonder you’re tired!”

Now that he felt better, he noticed how pale she was behind her freckles. He cupped her cheek in his hand and studied her eyes more closely. “How do you feel?”

“I was a little shaky at first, but I’m fine now.”

He put his very best scowl on his face. “Ginny Potter, did you ignore my warning and peek?”

Her eyes widened. “Yes. It was bizarre! There were streaks of light in the darkness at first, then bands or flashes of colour once it got light. What was that?”

“The streaks were lights from the cities we were passing over in the night, and the colours were the colours of the land we were passing over once we reached daylight.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that when we’ve flashed before.”

“And you’ve never flashed so far before, either.” He picked up his backpack and slung it on his back, grabbed her bag, and then took her hand with his free hand. “Come on, Mrs. Potter. We have a honeymoon to begin.” He Disapparated, taking her with him.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 28

"Where are we?" Ginny said when they Apparated inside a building. Planters filled with exotic, gorgeous flowers lined the corridor.

"We're inside the airport. This is the building that was downhill from us when we arrived. If I've timed this right," he looked at his watch, "and I think I have, the flight from England should be arriving just now. We'll join the crowd when they enter so we won't be noticed, and then we'll begin our honeymoon like Muggles. And by the way, we'll be acting like Muggles while we're here—well, when we're where people can see us, anyway."

"Why? And why'd you pick Maui? Surely there are beautiful places closer to England that are warm this time of year."

He grinned. "I've been here four times before, the first time with Merlin, and the other times on my own. I've walked the beach, the streets, the shops, the hotel lobbies. Not once was I recognized. We'll have privacy here we wouldn't have closer to England. Merlin says the magical population here is small and they seem to keep to themselves. I haven't run across any of them on my trips here. Can you imagine it? No fangirls, no bloody paparazzi, nobody watching or bothering us. Privacy!"

She laughed, her face bright with excitement. "Harry, you're a genius!"

He preened a bit. "Nice of you to notice." When he heard the sound of a plane landing, Harry glanced at his watch, then led Ginny to a set of windows that looked out on the runway. "Right on time."

"Why didn't we come by plane, if that's how you wanted us to enter the country?"

He held up three fingers. Folding the first down, he said, "If we'd flown out of England, someone would have worked out where we were going." He folded the second finger. "We would've been stuck on a plane at the mercy of whoever recognized us, and would've been forced to listen to crying babies and to sit in what I've heard are uncomfortable seats for hours and hours." The third finger joined the others. "And this way, we have more days to honeymoon."

"Sounds good to me!"

"I thought you'd agree." Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak. "We'll wait for them to get through Customs and then join them." They found a spot against the wall and waited.

When the plane's passengers emerged from the doorway into the building, they queued up in front of several desks where people in some kind of uniform waited for them.

"What's going on?" Ginny whispered.

"They're going through Customs," Harry replied quietly. "They have to say if they're carrying any food or other stuff they won't allow on the islands from outside."

"The wedding cake and sandwiches Mum packed for us!" Ginny gasped as she watched some passenger's apple being thrown away.

"I fully intend to eat those, which is why we Apparated to this side of the Customs counter."

"Why won't they let you bring food in?"

"I don't really know. If we eat our food quickly enough, there should be no danger to Hawaii from our sandwiches and wedding cake, right?" He gave her a crooked grin and was delighted when she laughed.

"What are they doing to those little books?" Ginny asked, watching as a Customs officer banged something on each passenger's book before handing it back.

"They're putting entry stamps on passports. Don't worry, ours are already done."

"How?"

"Auror training. We learned how to create authentic documents this term. I used what I learned to create passports and driver's licences for both of us."

"But Harry, you already have a licence! And I can't drive!"

"I had to age us a bit so we could rent a car. You're 25, I'm 26." He could see she was still confused. "Just trust me, OK? They'll be walking by soon, so we need to be ready to join the crowd."

Still under the Invisibility Cloak, they followed a group of passengers, removing the Cloak and joining the crowd when they surged toward the baggage area.

“What happens in there?” Ginny whispered as Harry led her past the door most of the passengers were entering.

“That’s where people get their bags that were stored in the bottom of the plane,” Harry explained. “See the people ahead of us? They only have small bags, like we do, so they didn’t need to go in there either.”

She shook her head, a look of wonder on her face. “How did you learn all this?”

“Some I learned on the telly when I was growing up at the Dursleys, some from books, some from travel agents I spoke with, some from Auror training, and some from just hanging around here while planning this trip.”

“When did you have time to do this, with everything else you’re doing?”

“Remember all those sleepless nights I’ve had? I spent some getting Dobby started on the pool, some on that house design spell and some working on this. And I did some of the research during lunch, as well.”

“You amaze me.”

He wrapped an arm around her and gave her a brief hug. “The feeling’s mutual.”

Now they were approaching a counter in front of a wall covered with pictures of cars. “Just go along with what I say, OK?” he murmured as the attendant glanced up at them. Ginny nodded.

“Aloha! Welcome to Maui,” the clerk said with a broad smile. “How may I help you?”

“Aloha! I have a car booked. The name’s Potter.” Harry pushed his passport and driver’s licence across the counter to the man.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Potter! You reserved a very specific car, didn’t you?” The man reached for some paperwork. “Everything’s ready, just as you requested.”

“Thanks.”

A few minutes later, Harry and Ginny were seated in a bright red Mustang convertible, trying to sort out how to make the top go down. Ginny was just as delighted with the car as Harry had imagined she’d be. A red convertible sports car was an obvious choice, but a Mustang—he knew she’d like the horse-related name, and it really was an attractive car. He just hoped he’d be able to remember which side of the road to drive on, since he’d driven so little, and all of that in England. He’d already made the mistake of opening the left-hand door for Ginny. She’d turned a quizzical look on him when she saw the steering wheel in front of the seat.

“In addition to being eight years older, now I’m supposed to know how to drive?”

Harry shrugged and laughed, then led her to the right-hand door and helped her into the car before getting in on the left himself.

Ginny had her wand out to put the top down magically. Before she could try, an attendant walked up to the car. She hid her wand just before the man leaned down to talk to Harry.

“Problem, sir?”

“How do you put the top down? And you’d better show us how to put it back up again, too,” Harry said.

Before long, the top was down and they were on their way, Harry driving carefully at first, then finally relaxing after a few minutes. He glanced at Ginny, who was plaiting her hair so it wouldn’t tangle in the wind. She was having a hard time of it, since she was trying to do it without magic.

Harry glanced in the rear-view mirror, and then at the traffic around them. Nobody was close enough to see anything. “Want some help?”

“I can do it, it’s just—”

Harry reached across the car to touch her shoulder, then tucked some hair behind her ear, and then gathered the length of her hair in his hand and stroked down the length of it. When he took his hand away, her hair was neatly plaited. He rested his hand on her shoulder, as if that had been his intention all along.

She turned her head and kissed his hand. “Thanks. That’s much better.” She leaned her head back against the headrest, basking in the sunshine. “It’s so nice here! Warm but not too warm, and the scenery is gorgeous!”

“Not as gorgeous as you.”

“You’re such a charmer.”

Harry flashed her a grin. “I’ve barely begun to charm you, wife.”

Wife. I love that.”

“Me too.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They pulled up to a huge white building with beautiful landscaping. Two men approached their car, opening the car doors before Ginny or Harry had a chance to.

“Checking in, sir?” one of the men asked.

“Yes.”

The other man had lifted Harry and Ginny’s backpacks from the back seat and put them on a gold-coloured wheeled cart. “Is there more luggage in the trunk?”

“The trunk?” Harry said in confusion. When the man pointed at the back of the car, he laughed. “Oh, we call that the boot. No, this is all our luggage.”

Harry was a bit startled by their bags being taken from the car like that. He thought he’d researched the hotels fairly well, but he hadn’t driven to any of them, nor brought any luggage, since his previous visits had lasted only a few hours at most. He’d done his research, though, so he dug into his pocket and pulled out some money to tip the men for their service. He looked at the one dollar bill in his hand, looked up at the smart hotel they were about to stay in, and decided five dollars would be a more appropriate tip.

A bit startled to see their little red car being driven away, Harry blew out a nervous breath. He could do this! He’d seen enough films on the telly showing how people did things in hotels that he thought he could manage. He hoped he could, anyway.

“Erm—how do we get the car back when we want it?” he asked the man with the luggage cart.

“Just call the number on the ticket they gave you when you want the car. They should have it waiting for you when you get to the lobby.”

“Great. Thanks.”

He took Ginny’s hand and followed the man to the front desk, where he knew he’d have to check in. He pulled out the credit card he’d used to buy lunch once simply to learn how to use the card, and slid it across the desk when the clerk asked for it. Soon they were signed in and Harry held a small envelope with two plastic credit card-looking things in it. These must be our keys. They shouldn’t be too hard to use.

“Mr. and Mrs. Potter?” a beautiful Hawaiian girl in native attire said. She held garlands of flowers on her arm.

“Yes,” Harry replied.

“Aloha. Welcome to Maui,” the young woman said as she draped a flower lei around Ginny’s neck. She repeated the action with Harry.

“Thank you!” Ginny said, admiring the beautiful plumeria blooms in the lei.

“Yes, thanks,” Harry added. He pressed a bill in the woman’s hand as they followed their baggage cart to the elevator.

“Harry,” Ginny hissed, “if you keep giving away money, we won’t have any left!”

“Tips are a large part of how these people make their living, sometimes the only pay they get,” he explained. “I’m not certain how much to tip for this kind of stuff. She looked pleased but not shocked, so I guess I paid her enough.”

“Do they give flowers to all the guests?” Ginny said, looking at the other tourists in the lobby, few of whom wore leis.

“No. It’s a special greeting service. I booked it.”

She gently touched a blossom on the plumeria lei and smiled. “I’m glad you did.”

When the man showed them their room, he put their backpacks on racks in the closet, then showed them the various features of the room. Harry figured this service was worth a bit more, so he gave him a ten dollar bill. He put the “privacy” sign on the outside of the door and locked all the locks on the door before turning back to Ginny.

“Come here,” he said, holding out his hand in invitation. Ginny moved toward him and he swept her up in his arms, then carried her back into the room. “I was supposed to carry you over the threshold, but I thought it would be better to do this in private.” He laid her on the bed and bent over her, kissing her gently. “Hello, Mrs. Potter. Are you enjoying your honeymoon so far?”

“Oh yes! And I’ll enjoy it more when you get down here with me!” She pulled on the front of his shirt hard enough to unbalance him. She scooted over just in time to avoid him falling on top of her.

Harry rolled onto his side, got up on his elbow and gazed down at her. “So that’s how it’s going to be, eh?” A smile tickled his lips. “You’re going to

bully me?"

She giggled. "When necessary, yes. And right now, it seems necessary!"

"Do I need to remind you that just a short time ago, you were complaining about your feet hurting and that you were tired?"

She tapped her chin with one finger, apparently digging through her memories and coming up short. "When was that?"

"At our wedding reception just over an hour ago. Our body clocks think it's the middle of the night. Do you want to sleep?"

"Not yet."

He bent over her, stopping with his lips barely brushing hers. "Good answer."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry woke up to the sound of music drifting in through the partly-opened balcony door. He lay there with his arms around Ginny, who was snuggled up against his side, her head comfortably nestled in the hollow of his shoulder. They were finally married officially, so the world knew they belonged to each other! Nobody could tell them they couldn't kiss wherever and whenever they wanted, not anymore.

Ginny stirred slightly in her sleep. He ran his hand lightly over her shoulder and arm, soothing her back into a deeper sleep. He smiled when she murmured his name and slid her arm across his chest, giving him a little hug before her arm fell lax as her sleep deepened once more. Did anything feel better than this wonderful sense of peace, joy and fulfillment? Harry didn't think so.

The words of the song playing outside drifted up to him, capturing his attention. He listened more closely.

*I watch her lyin' in bed asleep  
And I thank my lucky stars  
For every second she's here with me  
I wanna hold her in my arms  
She is my day  
She is my night  
She is the breath that gives me life*

Harry smiled. That song could've been written about us! He turned his head so he could see his wife's face softly lit by the light coming through the patio doors from the full moon now riding low in the sky. It's all true. She is my day and my night. She's my reason for living. I didn't think I could love her any more than I did, but somehow, now I do. Harry thought his heart would burst, it was so overwhelmed with his love for Ginny.

The music caught his attention again.

*Sometimes we laugh, sometimes we cry  
Sometimes we fight and we don't know why  
But no matter what she believes in me  
She's the closest thing to Heaven  
I'll ever need  
She'll always be an angel in my eyes*

*Sometimes I feel her by my side  
Like she's watching over me  
I get a chill runnin' down my spine  
And that's all the proof I need  
That she fills my heart  
She fills my soul  
She is the half that makes me whole\**

Harry was amazed. That songwriter, whoever he was, had captured the way Harry felt about Ginny perfectly. It was as if he'd read Harry's mind.

As the singer repeated the chorus, Harry held one hand up toward the slightly-opened glass door and cast a wandless spell. A moment later, a small crystal sphere floated from the doorway across the room, landing gently on the table by the bed. Beautiful colors swirled inside, a visual representation of the lovely song Harry had heard. When Ginny woke up, she would have a wonderful surprise waiting for her, one of many Harry planned to give her throughout their lives together.

With a sigh of contentment, Harry rested his cheek against Ginny's bright coppery hair and closed his eyes, a happy man indeed.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 29

The next day, Harry and Ginny were walking down the boardwalk that ran behind their hotel and quite a few others. A pristine white beach dotted with blue-and-white striped sunshades stretched between them and the sea, which sparkled in the sunlight. Harry stopped and pointed toward the water.

“Look there!”

Ginny gasped. Something huge had shot out of the water and crashed back into it. “What was that?”

“A whale, I think. They winter here. I’ve booked us passage on a boat that will take us out to see them. Do you think you’ll like that? If you don’t want to do it, I can cancel it.”

Ginny turned to him, her eyes wide and excited. “We can go out with them? Brilliant! Can we swim with them too?”

He smiled. He knew exactly what she meant. Pulling her close, he murmured in her ear, “I asked Merlin about that. He said our gills are freshwater only, and we might get ill if we try them in salt water. And that’s not to mention the sharks and other things that can hurt us out there. I’d rather we survived our honeymoon unscathed, wouldn’t you?”

She pulled back and looked up at him, a teasing glint in her eyes. “Lost your adventurous spirit, Potter?”

He chuckled. “No. I just want us to enjoy our honeymoon. I’d prefer to avoid the hospitals. Muggle medicine doesn’t compare to magical medicine.”

“Oh yeah, there is that. OK, we’ll be careful then!”

“We can snorkel over a reef when we go on that boat trip. That’s where the pretty fish are, the ones that won’t bite or sting you.”

Ginny laughed. “What does ‘snorkel’ mean? Sounds like something Luna would come up with.”

“I’ve only seen pictures of people doing it. They wear masks and have a tube in their mouths that lets them breathe.” He shrugged and gave her a crooked grin. That was pretty much all he knew about it. “When I booked the trip, they told me it was safe and quite easy to do.”

Ginny’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “When do we go? I’m ready!”

Harry felt laughter bubble up inside him, along with a warm glow of love. Could she be any more beautiful, any cuter, any more fun? She filled his heart with joy, and more each day than the day before. He grinned. “Always ready for fun, aren’t you?”

“You do know me well, love.” Her voice was warm and affectionate.

Harry gently kissed the end of her nose. “I do, don’t I? And I have quite a few adventures planned for us here, but first, we need to buy some sunscreen. Your nose is already red. And you need a hat. We’d probably both be more comfortable with sunglasses, too.”

“We’re going shopping? Why didn’t you say so!” She laughed, took his hand and started leading him down the sidewalk, skipping a bit once he got moving. “I love being married to you, Harry.”

“Because I take you shopping?”

“Because you worry about my nose getting sunburned. And because you take me shopping!”

The boardwalk soon took them to a group of shops offering all sorts of souvenirs, clothing, art, jewellery, even a museum of whaling. A huge glass case in the middle of the square displayed a whale skeleton. They wandered through a few shops before finding one that offered a wide variety of hats, shirts, sunscreen and giftware. Harry plunked various hats on Ginny’s head before finding a broad-brimmed one they agreed on. Ginny returned the favour, finally finding a hat for Harry that had a small brim all around and a brightly coloured fish embroidered on the front with a long, very peculiar name under it, and “Maui” embroidered on the back.

“What do you suppose that is?” she said, trying to sound out the name under the fish. “Hoomoo-hoomoo, huh?”

Harry looked up at a t-shirt on display above them and laughed. “Hoomoo-hoomoo-nookoo-nookoo-ahpoo-ah-ah.”

Ginny stared at him. “Huh?”

“Look.” He pointed at a shirt with a cartoon of a fish standing up with a lot of stick-on name badges going down the length of his body, as if he were attending a Muggle convention or something. Above the fish was a line of print saying, “Hi! My name is” and then each syllable of the name was on a separate badge.

Ginny laughed. “That’s one way to learn to pronounce it. Can we buy presents for the family?”



“It would be almost criminal for us to go to Hawaii and not bring presents to the family. Let’s remember this shop and come back to buy their presents later. We might find other things they’d like better someplace else.”

As they continued browsing the shop, they learned that the fish with the funny name was a trigger fish as well as the state fish of Hawaii. Its name meant “has a snout like a pig” and the fish was used in religious sacrifices when there were no pigs available.

“One mystery solved,” Ginny said when they finished reading about the fish.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Good morning, wife,” Harry said, kissing Ginny when she began to stir the next morning.

“Mmmf.”

He chuckled. “You’re just not a morning person, are you?”

“Mmmf.”

He leaned over and nuzzled her neck, blowing warm breath on her ticklish spot. “You need to get up. I have an adventure planned for you today.”

She opened one eye and gazed blearily at him. “I thought we weren’t being adventurous this trip.”

“We’re not swimming in the sea with our gills. Other than that, we’re being adventurous.”

She opened the other eye and squinted at him. “So what are we doing today?”

“I’m not telling you anything except that you need to wear your jeans today.”

“Why?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?”

“I’ll act surprised!”

“Yeah, you will, because I’m not telling!” He kissed her again, then rolled out of bed and walked to the bathroom, whistling all the way.

“You can walk away from me naked anytime you want, Harry,” Ginny called. “The view is spectacular.”

He poked his head out of the bathroom. “You do realize hotels don’t have soundproof walls?”

She gave him a wicked grin. “I put an Imperturbable Charm on the room as soon as we got here.”

He snorted. “That explains some things. Get up, lazybones!”

She threw a pillow at him, which he repelled wandlessly, sending it back to her and bopping her very gently on the head with it, making her laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

When they finished breakfast, Ginny picked up the dainty purple-and-white orchids that had decorated each of their plates. When they left the restaurant, Harry cupped his hands around her orchids and sent them to a bowl of water in their room where she’d already put blossoms she’d collected at other meals.

Soon they were in the red Mustang, the top down, sunscreen on their faces and arms so they could enjoy the ride without worrying about sunburn. Harry handed Ginny a list of directions. “Help me navigate, OK?”

“Where does this take us?”

“On a drive,” he said, glancing at her and making a face at her in return for the face she made at him. “You’ll like this. Trust me!”

She sighed dramatically. “I trust you, but I’m not sure I enjoy you keeping all these secrets from me!”

He shrugged. “I’ve had secrets all my life. This is no different, except that these are fun secrets!”

After a long drive that involved winding their way up into the mountains, Harry said, “There it is!” and turned quickly into a driveway.

“There what is? Where are we?” They’d turned in so quickly, she hadn’t been able to read the sign over the driveway. But then she saw the sign by the office as Harry parked the car. “This is a ranch?”

Harry felt a bubble of happiness welling inside him as he jogged around the car to open her door. “Yeah. Do you still love horses?”

She gasped. "You know I do!" She got to her feet slowly, her wide eyes locked on his face.

He grinned as he revealed the surprise. "We're going on a trail ride."

Ginny jumped into his arms and kissed him. "Oh, Harry! You take me all the best places!"

"Surprising you with them is half the fun!" He kissed her again and set her back on her feet, then led her into the office. A short time later, they were directed to a van that took them to the trail head where they found the horses waiting for them. Six other people were in the group other than the two guides who were going with them.

Harry looked at the group of horses tied under a huge shade tree. They were shaggy with winter fur despite being in Hawaii, which surprised him, and wore saddles like those American cowboys used. At least these saddles looked as if they'd help keep the rider on top of the horse. The English saddles he'd seen didn't look nearly as comfortable or secure. And the knob in the front might come in handy if he had to hang on!

When the guide asked who in the group had riding experience, Ginny raised her hand. When she saw Harry hadn't raised his, she raised it for him. As the guide separated the riders into groups based on ability, Ginny grinned at her husband. "You're silly. You won't have trouble."

"I've never ridden a horse—"

She leaned close to him and whispered, "You've ridden a thestral and a hippogriff. A horse is much easier to ride than those. You'll be fine."

The guide and his helpers soon had everyone mounted. Ginny and Harry had no problem getting on their horses. Ginny settled in with a grin on her face, Harry with a bit less pleasure. He tried to relax into the saddle the way Ginny was, but she'd grown up riding her aunt's ponies, galloping gleefully over the moors surrounding her aunt's estate. Harry, on the other hand, had ridden Buckbeak the hippogriff and a thestral only out of dire necessity. He was fairly sure that once he got used to how the animal moved, he could enjoy it, but he knew he'd have to spend some time adjusting to this animal's gaits.

"What's her name?" Ginny asked him as they waited for the guide to help the other riders mount their horses.

Harry turned to her, his eyebrows raised in confusion. "Who?"

"Your horse, silly. She's a mare. Did you find out her name?"

"Oh. Morgan."

Ginny giggled. "She isn't Morgan le Fey, is she?"

Harry laughed. "I hope not!"

"She's a Morgan. That's her breed," one of the guides said as he passed by.

"Oh, that's an American breed," Ginny said. "My horse is another American breed, a Quarter Horse. Her name is Blaze."

A crooked grin crossed Harry's face. "D'you think they'll mind carrying a couple of Brits?"

Ginny's hair glinted with coppery highlights as she shook her head. "Nah."

The guides mounted up and sorted the group out in a line along the trail. The path was rocky and uneven, the volcanic nature of the ground showing up in the black rocks littering the rough trail. The horses scrambled at times on steep inclines. Harry watched Ginny, who was riding in front of him, and followed her example, standing in his stirrups and leaning forward when the horse was struggling up the steep mountainside. Riding behind her had more benefits than just following her example. He didn't think he'd ever tire of the sight of her sweet bum. He blushed and laughed at himself for the thought, but that didn't distract him from watching her closely whenever she stood in her stirrups.

Every so often, the guide would let them trot. Harry watched Ginny again and tried to rise and sit in rhythm with the horse's stride as she was doing. Once he found the rhythm, he discovered it was a much more comfortable way to ride than sitting while Morgan bounced along under him.

The scenery was spectacular. At several vantage points, the guide lined up the people who'd come together and used their cameras to take their photos in front of tall, threadlike waterfalls visible across the valley. Harry was glad he'd bought a Muggle camera to use on the trip. He hoped Colin or Trent could make the pictures move, but even if they couldn't, at least they'd have a record of their stay in beautiful Maui.

When it was their turn, Morgan and Blaze flattened their ears and made ugly faces at each other. The guide had trouble getting them to stand still and pose nicely. Ginny patted her mare and said, "Easy, girl, it's OK."

Harry put his hand on Morgan's neck and sent calming feelings through his fingers into her, hoping they'd help. A moment later, the horse sighed and relaxed, looking at the camera-holding guide with calm curiosity and pricked ears.

"That's great! That's the best Morgan's done in a long time! You have a good touch with her, sir," the guide said as he handed Harry the camera.

Harry grinned in response to the man's praise. "Thanks."

"What did you do?" Ginny whispered when they moved away so other people could have their photos taken.

Harry raised an eyebrow and turned a cocky smile on his wife. "She likes me."

Ginny laughed. "You do have a way with females."

Some time later, the guide let the group canter. Ginny sat comfortably in her saddle, riding her horse with no problem. Harry couldn't get Morgan out of a fast trot, which was horrible to ride. Finally, he put his hand on her neck and sent an image to her of her cantering along smoothly. The next thing he knew, she was rolling along under him like a rocking horse. Harry grinned and sat down in the saddle, enjoying the ride.

Ginny glanced back over her shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"Brilliantly! This is much better than trotting!"

When their ride was over, Harry was surprised at how sore he was. Despite his career as an athlete, riding horses used his muscles in ways they weren't used to.

"You could've warned me!" he groaned as he walked stiff-legged to the car.

"You'll fix yourself up in as soon as we're out of sight, you silly man."

"Gee, I was hoping for some sympathy!"

She wrapped an arm around his slim waist and hugged him. "Oh, poor Harry. Sympathy, sympathy!" When he grinned at her, she continued, "Did you like it? That was your first time on a horse, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was, and yes, I enjoyed it once I worked out how to be comfortable at the different speeds."

Ginny nearly skipped in glee. "Yay! We'll get you a horse too, then."

"Whatever you want, sweet girl. Whatever you want." The delighted glow on her face was well worth the aches and pains he'd earned from riding.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 30

Harry had planned for the various adventures he'd booked to be interspersed with days of doing nothing but enjoying the sunshine, beach and each other. He thought this plan was working quite well so far, and, to his delight, Ginny agreed with him completely. He'd also made reservations for some dinner shows. He and Ginny were now queued with a few hundred other people, waiting for the theatre to open its doors. Ginny was wearing a pretty Hawaiian dress in a deep blue with beautiful flowers painted or printed on the fabric somehow. Harry had on a Hawaiian shirt Ginny had picked out for him, green (to match his eyes) with a pattern of huge flowers. He doubted they'd ever wear these things at home, but they were cool, comfortable and fun to wear while in Hawaii, and it was great fun shopping together.

Finally, the doors opened and they were ushered into an open-air theatre where they'd be served a traditional luau and watch a show featuring dances from the various Pacific islands. A lei made of tiny sea shells was draped around the neck of each guest, and they were offered odd-looking drinks called My Ties – at least, that's what the name sounded like. Harry and Ginny each took one. They sniffed and then sipped and decided the drinks were tasty.

Long tables like those in Hogwarts' Great Hall filled the floor area. Harry and Ginny were directed to a table that was already about half full.

"Where are you two from?" a middle-aged woman asked as they sat down. "We're from Ohio, these folks are from British Columbia, they're from France, and this other couple is from Germany."

"We're from England," Ginny replied.

"Lovely! We have quite an international group here, then. First time to Hawaii?"

"Yes," Harry replied, helping Ginny get settled in her seat. He hung her lightweight cardigan over the back of the chair before he sat down.

The people around them chatted about various things, just getting to know each other. Most of them were much older than Harry and Ginny, who just sat holding hands and listening to the ebb and flow of conversation.

"We're here for our thirtieth anniversary," the lady from British Columbia said. "You two look like you're about our children's ages. You can't have been married for long. Are you on your honeymoon?"

Harry saw no reason to lie about it. "Yes."

Excited congratulations flowed around the table, and each couple shared how long they'd been married. The couple from Ohio had them all beat at 37 years. Harry felt his cheeks heat up a bit at the gentle teasing from the older couples. A glance at his wife made him forget his embarrassment. Her cheeks were suffused in a pretty blush that made her just that much more beautiful. He smiled and slid his arm around her back, playing with a tendril of her hair as they chatted to their dinner companions.

When they went through the serving line and chose their food, Harry and Ginny took some poi at the urging of the servers. Like the others who tried it, they soon found out that poi wasn't something they would miss when they left Hawaii.

Harry leaned toward Ginny and murmured, "Now we can say we've had it, so we never have to eat it again!"

Ginny laughed. "Good!"

The servers kept the guests glasses filled with whatever they'd started with. Harry began to feel warm and relaxed, which surprised him a little, given that they were surrounded by strangers who kept asking questions about him and Ginny that he might normally consider prying. Something about the drink made his head buzz, but it wasn't an unpleasant feeling. Maybe it was the fruit in it, he wasn't sure. It didn't seem to be any stronger than butterbeer, but he'd never had a buzz from butterbeer. The slight frown line that had appeared between his eyebrows eased as he gazed at his table companions. There was a general feeling of friendliness about these people, so he didn't feel a need to worry. Ginny seemed to be enjoying their attention, so he left her to deal with the social graces and just enjoyed watching her chat with the others with growing animation. But the next time the server came to refill their glasses, Harry did wandless magic to remove the alcohol from the drink, leaving it tasting like fruit punch. He smiled, pleased with his spell. He certainly didn't want to get drunk and forget about a single moment of his honeymoon.

Ginny leaned toward him and whispered, "You did something to the drinks, didn't you?" He nodded. She smiled at him and kissed the end of his nose. "You're a wizard, Harry. Well done!"

He laughed aloud, startled by her teasing comment. Before he could come up with a snappy reply, the woman from Ohio asked them a direct question.

"Where in England do you live?" she said. "My husband and I went to England to celebrate our thirty-fifth anniversary. We toured a lot of the country. It's just lovely there."

Ginny hesitated and looked at Harry, who picked up the conversational ball. "We live in London."

"Oh, we just loved London!" the woman enthused. "And what do you do?"

Harry smiled and gave the safest answer he could manage. "I'm in school."

"What are you studying?"

"Law enforcement," he said, grateful that he'd thought out his answers to such questions before the trip.

"So you'll be a police officer?" the man from Germany said in his thick accent. "I, too, am a police officer."

Harry just smiled, uncertain what to say next. Fortunately for him, the announcer came on the stage and began introducing the evening's entertainment. He was joined on the stage by Polynesian men and women in a variety of native costumes, some carrying musical instruments, others carrying what looked like gourds with clusters of feathers coming out of the small ends. These turned out to be rattles that they shook while dancing.

As the show progressed, the music went from throbbing, exciting rhythms to lovely tunes that Harry thought felt like a spell being cast around him. If it was a spell, it was a pleasant one, not anything scary. He soon changed his mind, though, when, after a few performances by the professional dancers, the announcer said he wanted some volunteers to learn how to hula. The British Columbians at his table waved and called out that their group included a pair of honeymooners, which prompted the luau staff to invite Harry and Ginny to join others who had volunteered or been offered the chance to get on stage and learn to hula.

"Uh, no, I don't dance well," Harry told the pretty young woman who invited him and Ginny to try the dance.

"Come on, Harry," Ginny said, getting to her feet and giving him a teasing grin. "How often do you get a chance to hula?"

"Not often," he admitted, standing up and following her and the young woman toward the stage. He leaned toward Ginny and whispered, "You're going to owe me for this!" She just glanced at him over her shoulder and gave him an arch look, then ran up the stairs onto the stage.

"And here we have our honeymooners, right?" the host said when Harry joined Ginny on the stage.

"Yes," Ginny said with a pretty blush.

"Married how long?" the host asked.

"Three days," Ginny replied.

The host turned to the crowd, which was already cheering and applauding in response to her answer. "Three days! And she already has him trained to do what she wants!" Hearty laughter greeted his comment.

The host held his microphone in front of Harry. "What are your names and where are you from?"

"Harry and Ginny, and we're from England," Harry replied.

"Aloha and welcome to Hawaii! We're about to separate you and your pretty bride!"

Harry looked at the man in surprise for a moment. The announcer grinned, clapped Harry on the shoulder, then stepped away from him and the other tourists, who were now surrounded by the professional dancers. The men were drawn to one side of the stage, the women to the other. The professionals showed each group the basic moves they'd be doing.

Harry watched the dancers in front of his group carefully, determined not to make a fool of himself in front of all these strangers. The moves weren't that hard. He just had to squat a bit, snap his knees apart and back together twice, make certain movements with his hands—sort of like thrusting a spear, he thought—then jump and turn and start the movements over. Okay, that shouldn't be too hard. Then the music started.

Harry was doing pretty well until he did the jump and turn bit. Then he noticed Ginny in his line of sight and lost track of what he was supposed to be doing. She seemed to be a natural at the hula. Her hips swayed in perfect time to the music, and her hand motions and the little steps she made were elegant and fluid, much like the professional dancers. She was laughing, her cheeks flushed a very fetching shade of pink. Harry gulped and remembered to do the knee snaps but lost track of his other motions until they jumped again. He managed to keep up with the motions until he chanced a glance at Ginny again. The laughter of the crowd reminded him that he was supposed to be doing something himself, not just staring at her. I was moving! Maybe not the right way, but I was in time with the music! He shook his head and laughed at himself, then got back into the rhythm of the dance. Fortunately, it didn't last much longer. Also fortunately, Harry noticed that the other tourists in the dance group were laughing at their own mistakes as well as his.

After several group bows, the participants were allowed to return to their seats. Harry noticed Ginny's cheeks were still pink. "Have fun?"

"Yes! You?"

"I was glad to be part of an entire group of incompetent dancers, rather than being the only incompetent one," he said with a grin.

"You weren't incompetent! I watched you! You really got that knee snap part."

He laughed. "That was the only part I got right, believe me! But you were brilliant! You're a natural!"

"No, I'm not, but it was great fun!"

"Don't argue with me, wife! Next thing you know, they'll be dying your hair black and putting a grass skirt on you so you can join the show!"

"I'll insist you be part of the company, or I won't accept the job," she said with a pert smile.

They sat down amid a round of compliments and teasing comments from their dinner companions. Ginny sat sideways in her chair to see the stage better, since the chairs were a bit crowded together. Harry pulled his chair even closer to hers and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back to lean against his chest. She turned and looked up at him and whispered, "You make a wonderful seat back."

"I'll add that to my résumé."

Harry sighed contentedly as Ginny relaxed against him. He rested his cheek against her head, drinking in the scent of her warm skin and the hint of sunshine and wind still wafting from her hair. He smiled at the thought that he didn't have to worry about who was looking at them or whether anyone would be annoyed by him enjoying his time with her. She was his wife. It was his right to enjoy her to his heart's content. He twined a length of her hair around a finger, enjoying its silkiness.

"Harry?" Ginny murmured.

"Hmm?"

"Are you paying attention to the show?"

"Mm-hmm." He ran his fingers lightly through the hair lying on her shoulder, then sat back when she turned to look at him. "What?"

She shook her head and smiled at him. "You paid a lot to see this show and you're not even watching it, you silly man."

"I have the best show in town right here." He kissed her nose and smiled at her.

"I love you too," she whispered, then turned and settled back in his arms. "Pay attention to the show! There will be a quiz later."

That startled him. "Huh?"

She giggled. "Gotcha."

"Yes, you do. Wrapped tightly around your little finger."

"Around every one of my fingers," she said with great confidence.

He chuckled and nuzzled her neck. "You noticed that, did you?"

"Yes. Now shush!"

He settled his arms around her comfortably and gave her a little squeeze, then tried to follow her instructions and pay attention to the show. He managed it at least part of the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in their room, Harry hung up his Hawaiian shirt and folded his jeans neatly before putting them back in the drawer. Ginny was humming in the bathroom as she got ready for bed. One of the songs in the show had caught her fancy and she'd hummed it all the way back to the hotel.

Stripping off his underwear, Harry tossed it in their laundry bag, then padded barefoot to the bed, unwrapped and ate the mint from his side of the turned-down covers and lay down. He sighed, realizing he should brush his teeth again, since he'd eaten the mint.

He glanced toward the bathroom, considering whether to drag himself out of bed to go re-brush his teeth, then shook his head. He could almost hear Ron's voice: Are you a wizard or not? With a chuckle, he pointed his wand at his mouth and cast a very light cleaning charm, then ran his tongue over his teeth, pleased with the results of the charm.

After taking off his glasses and putting them on the night table, Harry flicked his wand to turn out the lights, then magically opened the drapes, leaving just the sheer white curtains across the slightly open door to the lanai. The night breeze carried the scent of the flowers blooming in the hotel garden several stories below.

Harry set his wand on the night table, then lay back on his pillow with the covers still thrown back, enjoying the cool breeze dancing across his skin and the soothing sound of the ocean. Hawaii really was paradise. The weather was perfect, the scenery lush, and nobody recognized them anywhere they went. He wondered if he could convince Ginny to live here. Speaking of Ginny, what was taking her so long in the bathroom? She was still humming, so he supposed she was okay, but she would normally have joined him in bed several minutes ago.

He got up on one elbow and looked toward the bathroom door. "Are you okay in there?"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, I'll be out in a minute," she called, laughter in her voice.

He lay back on his pillow again, his hands folded behind his head. She's up to something. He grinned. When Ginny sounded that pleased with herself, he was in for a treat!

When the door to the bathroom finally opened, the bathroom light flashed out before he could see her. He saw the moonlight flash along the length of her wand as she cast a spell. The air in the room seemed softer now, sweet and fresh as a dewy early morning in Scotland. Quiet music began, the sound apparently coming from the walls themselves – Harry felt surrounded by it. Hawaiian guitars and ukuleles, some soft drum sounds and gently shaken rattles, then the sound of voices singing in lush harmonies joined the instruments. He grabbed his glasses and put them on so he could see what she was up to.

As the singing began, Ginny emerged from the bathroom, her body glowing with the faint luminescence of reflected moonlight. She moved across the room until she stood silhouetted in front of the glass doors to the lanai. Her hair rippled down her back. The orchids she'd been collecting from their meals had been conjured into a crown that circled her head. She wore only the sheer slip she'd worn under her dress, which was made nearly invisible by the moonlight streaming in through the window behind her. Her hips swayed gently, her hands moving gracefully in a hula to the music surrounding her.

Harry's mouth went dry as he stared at his wife dancing so sensuously just for him. He recognized the song as the one she'd been humming, one of those from the show that night. He swallowed hard, the music flowing over his skin like the most tender caress of Ginny's fingertips, like the feeling of her hair lightly skimming his chest as she bent to kiss him.

As she turned, moonlight haloed her body, giving a soft glow to the shape of her breasts, the curve of her legs, the lovely swell of her hips. The light slid smoothly across the silky white slip, giving her body glistening highlights that shifted with her movement. Her hair shimmered with fiery highlights as she swayed. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

Harry felt the spell of the music drawing him to her. Slowly, slowly he rose to his feet and moved toward her. She was still dancing, gazing up at him, her hips swaying, her hands tracing graceful figures in the air. Harry put his hands on her hips, letting them move with her motion. She slid her arms around his neck, still dancing, still entrancing him with her every movement. Harry pulled her to him and kissed her, his hands gliding down the silkiness of her slip and back up again, slowly, sensuously, until she stopped dancing and stood gasping and trembling in his arms. Harry picked her up and carried her to the bed, where he rewarded her for that lovely dance in every way he could think of.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they floated near the ceiling, reveling in the afterglow of their lovemaking, Harry kissed his wife on the nose and gazed at her, glad she was in focus when she was so close to him. One or the other of them had removed his glasses at some point, which usually happened, but neither could ever recall who did it. "I have to ask – what took you so long in the bathroom?"

Ginny's deliciously wicked chuckle made shivers run down Harry's spine. "I was rehearsing."

He laughed and cast the spell to let them back down to the bed gently, tasting the hollow of her neck as they descended. As they settled back on the bed, he got up on one elbow and looked down at her, then gave the tip of her nose the lightest possible lick. "And what do you have prepared for an encore?"

She laughed again and slid her arms around his neck, pulling him down into a kiss. "I'll think of something," she murmured against his lips.

Harry lost himself in her once more, a happy man indeed.





# Now And Forever

## Chapter 31

After a day of sleeping in, lazing about the hotel and beach and browsing a few shops, the next day was another scheduled adventure.

“What’s a catamaran?” Ginny said as they carried their small tote bags filled with sunscreen and spare clothes toward a pier where a whole row of boats were docked.

“We’ve seen them – those are the boats with two hulls. I was told the ride is smoother, so I thought we’d enjoy it more than one that was rough,” Harry explained.

Ginny frowned. “I don’t know about this, Harry. Wizards aren’t supposed to do well on the water.”

“Merlin told me that’s an old witch’s tale,” Harry said with great assurance. “And I bought special wrist bands at a Muggle apothecary for us to wear that will help keep us from getting seasick. This is the best way to see the whales up close, and we’ll be snorkelling over a reef by Lanai, too. It should be fun!” He studied her face, noting the uneasiness still there. “If you don’t want to go, I’ll cancel it.”

Ginny chewed her lip for a moment, then blew out a nervous breath. “No, I want to do it. It would be a shame to go home without seeing the whales and the reef.”

A short time later, their ship left the dock. Some of the passengers looked eager, some looked a bit nervous, a few looked a wee bit greenish. The crew brought around snacks and told the passengers they would find ginger ale and ginger pills downstairs in the galley, either of which would help with seasickness.

“Do you need ginger pills or ginger ale?” Harry said, watching Ginny closely. He had his arm around her, holding her tightly to his side, hoping to make her feel safe.

When she turned to him, her smile had no signs of nervousness. “No, I feel fine, actually. These wrist bands seem to be enough. And it’s fun. I’m enjoying the ride.”

Greatly relieved, Harry kissed her forehead. “I’m glad.”

The boat’s captain, who introduced himself as Captain Mark, looked about ten years older than Harry and Ginny. He was energetic and funny and kept the passengers laughing with his stories. Whenever he’d see whale activity, he’d turn the ship toward the animals and point them out, but he was careful to keep at least a hundred yards of water between his ship and the frolicking animals. Each whale sighting was greeted with cheers and yells and lots of people trying to take photos of the momentary appearances of the giant beasts.

When the wind kicked up, the crew hoisted the sails and turned off the ship’s engines. The catamaran skimmed across the waves in silence and at a speed that had Ginny’s ponytail streaming out behind her.

“This is great!” she said. She and Harry were seated on the deck in front of the cabin, with the ship’s two trampolines sitting empty in front of them. The boat was bounding over big waves now, its bow dipping and lifting in an exhilarating rhythm. The captain emerged from the cockpit and ran out onto one of the trampolines. Every time the bow lifted, it threw him up in the air and he whooped with joy.

“Can I do that too?” Harry asked the captain.

Captain Mark looked at Harry’s athletic build and nodded. “If you promise to stay in the centre of the trampoline, sure. I’d hate to have to fish you out of the water.”

“You’ve got it!” Harry said, a huge grin on his face. He turned to Ginny. “D’you want to try it?”

“I suspect it’s safer if there’s only one person on the trampoline at a time,” she said. “You go on. I’ll wait my turn.”

“OK.” He kissed her on the nose, then stepped out onto the trampoline. The ship’s motion promptly threw him on his back, making Captain Mark laugh.

“You all right?” the captain called.

“Yeah, just need to find my sea legs,” Harry said, getting to his feet again. He watched the captain and noticed he rode with his knees slightly bent, his arms extended for balance. He mimicked that posture and soon found his balance. When the boat hit the next trough in the waves, he and the captain were both thrown up in the air. Harry shouted with delight, remembering just in time to keep his knees bent when he landed. He managed to keep his feet, earning an “All right, my man!” from Captain Mark and cheers from Ginny and the watching passengers.

After riding through several troughs with the captain, Harry turned to his wife. “Your turn!”

“Cool!” Ginny said. She ran lightly out onto the trampoline and watched the captain as Harry had done. Unlike Harry, she never lost her footing, but kept up with the captain as they rode the waves, earning cheers from the rest of the passengers and crew.

When the captain stepped off the trampoline, he offered Ginny his hand to help her get back to the deck safely. "You and your husband are quite the athletes," he said. "I've never had anyone who could stay on their feet the whole time before. Good job!"

"Thanks!" Ginny said, taking Harry's hand to get to her seat. "That was brilliant!"

"You're brilliant," Harry said, pulling her to him and kissing her as they slid down the bulkhead to their seats.

She leaned toward him and whispered in his ear, "Who says wizards can't cross water?" then giggled.

"Whale ho!" someone called. "Two whales astern! Six o'clock!"

Everyone moved toward the back of the boat to see what the whales were doing. Harry noticed that the normally cheerful Captain Mark now looked worried. The whales were close to the boat and getting closer, just following it with their backs showing above the water.

"What are they doing?" someone asked a crew member.

"I expect they want to see who we are. Since we're sailing, we're much quieter than boats usually are. Whales can be curious. They're just taking a peek at us."

While the crew member's voice was calm and reassuring, Harry noticed the man glancing nervously astern from time to time.

The captain called for the sails to be dropped. As the crew members clambered onto the top of the boat to lower and secure the sails, Harry watched the captain, who was keeping a close eye on the whales following the boat. The engines rumbled to life and the boat began to pull away from the whales, but they kept following it.

Ginny was watching the captain too. "He's worried about them, isn't he?"

"Looks like it." Harry asked a passing crew member, who looked frightened, what the problem was.

"No problem, sir. Everything's fine," the woman replied as she continued on her way, hurrying to do some task or other. She was unable to hide the tension in her face.

"You don't suppose they'll ram the boat, do you?" Ginny murmured.

Harry frowned. "I don't know why they would."

"Maybe they think we're an enemy of some kind."

"Maybe." Harry walked to the stern, staring at the whales still close behind them. He focused on the whales, tilting his head and frowning in concentration.

"What are you doing?" Ginny said, staring at him.

"I'm listening to them."

"Can you understand them?"

"Not really." He could feel something tingling in the ends of his nerves as he concentrated on the whales. Something was happening. Something was coming. It was imminent. What was it?

With a gasp of shock, Harry ran to the cockpit. "You need to turn the boat!" he told the captain.

"What? Why?"

"Turn left! Hurry!" Harry insisted.

The captain just stared at him. With a small push of magic, Harry twisted the wheel out of the captain's hands and spun it. He grabbed the wheel and held it there as the boat veered left. When he turned to look behind the boat, he saw the two whales blow through their spouts and dive.

Captain Mark saw this too. He blanched under his tan, took the wheel and held the wheel in the turn Harry had begun as he opened the throttle on the engines. The passengers held on as the boat flew through the water. A moment later, two whales appeared on the surface again, this time ahead of the boat, but off to the right.

"What just happened?" someone said.

"Dunno," Harry said, shrugging and backing away from the captain before anyone questioned him too closely. He and Ginny sat down on a bench on the starboard side deck.

What happened, Harry? Why did you tell him to turn?" Ginny said.

"I got an impression of . . . hang on." He stood up and gripped the rail, squinting into the distance. "Look there, Ginny!" Two whales swam along the surface, while two more followed a much smaller object that finally blew a tiny spout of water. "She just had her baby. They were trying to protect her, so she could get the baby to the surface to breathe."

"How do you—?"

He turned to her. "I just . . . I got an image of it in my mind, sort of. It was shadowy and dark, but I thought I saw a baby being pushed to the surface by a big whale. And then I sensed there was danger of some kind. I just knew we had to turn away."

"Why left?"

He shrugged. "Why not?"

Ginny wrapped her arms around his waist and gazed up at him, her eyes full of love. "You amaze me, Harry Potter."

Warm pleasure washed over Harry. No matter how often she told him she loved him or complimented him, it still gave him the same thrill it had the first time she'd done such a thing. He pulled her close and grinned. "Good to know."

A few minutes later, the captain walked by. "Sir, I have to say, your quick action was a help back there. But if you ever grab my ship's wheel again, I'll have to court-martial you . . . or something." He grinned.

Harry returned his smile. "I'll remember."

Captain Mark sat next to Harry. "Seriously, sir, why did you grab the wheel? How did you know what to do? Are you a marine biologist or something?"

"No," Harry replied. "I'm, um, a little bit psychic. I had a . . . a vision."

The captain clapped Harry on the shoulder and stood. "You may have saved us from a real problem. Thanks. But don't do it again—just warn me. If the warning's coming from you, I'll certainly listen."

"I'll remember."

\* \* \* \* \*

The bow of the boat swung toward Lanai. In a short time, Harry, Ginny and the rest of the passengers and crew were ashore, their things dropped in chairs on the beach while all the tourists were outfitted with snorkels, masks and flippers.

Harry was amazed that the crew had a mask with a lens that made it possible for him to see clearly without his glasses. He and Ginny paid close attention to the instructions of the crew, then walked into the surf, tightening the straps on their life vests before going into the deeper water. Before long, they were floating lazily above an absolutely gorgeous sight. Fish of all sizes and colours flitted below them, swimming around the beautiful coral formations of the reef. Harry held Ginny's hand so the current wouldn't separate them. Every so often, a crew member sitting on a surfboard passed by as they kept tabs on the snorkelers.

Harry turned his head a bit so he could see his wife. Her hair fanned out around her, looking like flames with the sun behind it. He wished they could swim with their gills here, but he wasn't going to take a chance on making either of them ill on their honeymoon. They'd have plenty of chances to swim unfettered by worries about surfacing to breathe in the pool in their basement at Grimmauld Place.

Below them, a two-foot-long parrotfish munched on the coral, the sound travelling clearly through the water. Some small fish poked its head out of a crevice in the coral, nabbing something smaller. Harry was startled to see a man wearing a snorkel, mask and flippers but no life vest, swim by down near the coral. He's obviously a better swimmer than we are—or else he has saltwater gills. Harry almost smiled, amused by his thoughts.

Ginny tugged on his hand and pointed at a school of bright yellow fish swimming as if they were tied together, turning as one, their colour flashing in the sunlight filtering down through the water. The whole experience was simply incredible.

When they tired, they turned and swam for shore, stopping partway out to remove their flippers. They walked onto the beach hand-in-hand.

"What did you think of that?" Harry said.

"It was brilliant! I'm so glad we did it!"

"Me, too."

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Dinner was barbecued chicken, corn on the cob, baked beans and other delicious food cooked by the captains of the various ships belonging to the same tour boat company. The captains made quite a show of serving the food, telling funny stories and teasing each other and the rest of their crews as they distributed the meal. Harry and Ginny were grateful for the shade of the picnic shelter overlooking the beach. Their suntan lotion

hadn't protected them much when they were swimming, and both of them had slight sunburns.

Harry passed his hand behind Ginny's back, trying to ease her pain wandlessly. "Better?"

She rested her cheek on his shoulder and murmured, "A bit. I wish we hadn't left the essence of dittany in our room."

Harry sighed. They hadn't wanted to carry the potion with them for fear of breaking the bottle. The potion wouldn't keep well in a plastic bottle, and they'd been warned to not bring anything breakable on the trip. "We'll be back in a couple of hours. We'll use it then." He gently kissed the part in her hair, which was fiery red with sunburn. "You're such a redhead," he teased.

"And that's one of the many reasons you love me," she said with total confidence.

He laughed. "Right in one."

\* \* \* \* \*

As they traveled back toward Maui, the passengers were startled to hear what sounded like a cannon shot not far away.

"What was that?" Ginny stood at the rail next to Harry, staring across the water like he was, looking for the source of the sound.

"Dunno." Harry saw something moving on the water at a distance, just before another BOOM reverberated between the islands. He squinted and tried to make it out, then recognized the distinctive shape. "It's a whale! It's hitting the water with the flat of its tail."

Captain Mark throttled down the boat until it sat still in the water. "There's a mother and calf over there," he called, pointing toward the whale that was still hitting its tail on the water in a steady rhythm. Ginny counted twenty-three "booms" before the whale stopped and dove. When she came up and breached, much closer to the boat than before, her calf was right beside her. They leaped above the water side by side, crashing back into the waves together.

Harry chuckled. "That's something you don't see at home."

Ginny leaned against him. "You take me all the best places."

Harry felt her shiver. "Cold?"

"A bit."

"Come here, then." He wrapped both arms around her and pulled her close against him, rubbing her bare arms as he cast a wandless warming charm on her. "Better?"

"Mmm, yeah." Ginny sighed contentedly. "I love you, Harry."

He grinned. "Because I'm comfortable to lean on, or because I warm you?"

"Those reasons and loads of others."

"Do you have a list?"

She looked up at him. "I'm working on it. Remind me again how much I enjoy your kisses."

"If you insist." He slid his hand around the back of her head and pulled her to him, his light kisses warming to more serious ones before he remembered that they were on a boat in the Pacific surrounded by strangers. He kissed her nose and then her forehead and smiled at her. "Was that okay?"

"Not bad. You do need to practice though."

"I promise to do loads and loads of practice," he agreed.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 32

The days flowed by in happy succession. Harry and Ginny spent several hours each day at the beach, their pale English skin carefully protected by waterproof sunscreen but still acquiring decent tans. The sun felt so good to them, they tried to soak up as much of it as they could.

Harry had given up on using a Glamour Charm on his back and right hand. Between the strength of the sun and getting in the water from time to time, the Glamour Charm made his skin look odd, as if it were being seen through a piece of glass with waves on its cloudy surface. Just letting his scars show seemed to draw less attention, so that's what he did.

On yet another sunny, warm day, Harry was queued up at an ice cream stand on the beach. Ginny was dozing in the blue-and-white striped cabana he'd rented for them, only her freckled legs showing beyond its shade.

"Mister! What's on your back?" a small boy said. "You have lines all over!"

Harry sighed and turned to look at the child, a towheaded boy about six years old. "They're scars."

"I have a scar," the boy offered. He held up his knee, which had a small round mark on it. "I got it from falling off my bike on gravel. My dad has a scar on his arm from a cut. How'd you get yours?"

Harry swallowed hard, not wanting to lie, but not wanting to frighten the child, either. He knew staying close to the truth was the best policy when lying, so he blew out a breath and replied, "I was wounded in battle."

The boy's eyes widened. "My uncle's a soldier. My dad was too, but he's been out for a while. Are you a soldier?"

"I was."

"Maybe you met my uncle. His name's Rich Maxwell, from Oklahoma?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. "Sorry. I don't know him."

"We're meeting him here tomorrow! He's coming home."

"That's wonderful! I'm sure he'll be glad to see you."

"Bobby, are you bothering people?" a young man a few years older than Harry said. He looked up at Harry and grinned. "I'm sorry, he just outran me."

The child tugged on his father's shirt. "Dad, he was wounded in the war! But he doesn't know Uncle Rich."

The boy's father held his hand out to Harry. "Thanks for your service, man. I mean that."

Uncertain what to say, Harry just smiled and shook the man's hand.

"Whoa, what happened to your hand?" the man said as their hands parted.

Harry closed his hand, hiding the phoenix and griffin-shaped scars in his palm. "The war."

"I'm sorry! Did I hurt you?"

"No, it doesn't hurt anymore. I'm fine now."

The young man was obviously relieved to hear that. "That's good. What service were you in? I'm Steve Maxwell, by the way, from Oklahoma. This is Bobby."

"Harry Potter, from London," Harry replied. After a moment's quick thought, he added, "I was in the Army."

"Where'd you serve?"

Harry knew his battlefields in Scotland, England and France would make no sense to this Muggle. "I, erm . . ."

The man nodded knowingly. "Special Ops, eh? I understand. I was in the Army too, but I didn't qualify for Special Ops."

Harry frowned, confused. "Special Ops?"

"You know, secret stuff. I suppose you have a different term for it in England."

Oh. Yeah.” Since he didn’t know the English term, Harry just smiled. “Special ops” was a good term for the war he’d fought against Voldemort, since few if any Muggles had been aware of the horrors taking place all around them at the time.

They were interrupted by the server asking Harry for his order. When he tried to pay, Steve Maxwell reached past him and said, “His ice cream’s on me.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Harry said.

“Least I can do for a fellow veteran. Take care.”

“Thanks. You too.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry and Ginny were walking hand-in-hand down a boardwalk in Lahaina, looking in shop windows and enjoying a lazy afternoon. Ginny pulled her hat off and ran her fingers through her hair as she turned to look at a dress in a shop window. She gasped and turned to Harry.

“Someone’s following us.”

Harry had been daydreaming about Ginny wearing the pretty dress in the window, and how much fun it would be to take it off her. “Huh?”

“There’s a man behind us, Harry. I’ve seen him before, several times.”

Harry straightened as if stretching, glancing casually over Ginny’s head as he did so. A paunchy, balding man carrying a camera saw Harry looking and ducked into a nearby doorway. Harry frowned. “How long has this been going on?”

“I noticed him for the first time yesterday. I thought he was just going the same way we were, but I’ve seen him too many times now, always the same distance behind us, always with a camera in his hands.”

“Damn.” Harry sighed. “So much for our having privacy here.”

“Yeah, he must know who you are,” Ginny agreed.

Harry glanced down at her and grinned when he saw the light of battle in her eyes. “Ready for a fight, are you?”

“Yes! He’s spoiling our honeymoon.”

“No, he isn’t. He’s just an annoyance, but he won’t annoy us for long.” Raising his voice a bit so the man could hear him, Harry went on, “Let’s go down to the docks and look at the boats.”

“Okay,” Ginny said in a bright, happy voice. As they turned toward the docks, she whispered, “What’s the plan?”

Harry took Ginny’s hat from her hand and put it on her head, then spent some time adjusting it before bending down to kiss her and whisper in her ear, “He’s out and watching. Let’s see if he follows us. We’ll sort things out from there.”

Sure enough, the man followed them, always at the same distance. Harry turned his head a bit and concentrated on his glasses’ magical ability to see around corners to watch the man without being obvious about it. “He’s taking pictures of us whenever he can see part of our faces,” Harry said after a while. “Let’s give him a show.”

“You’re on,” Ginny said.

“That’s my warrior princess,” Harry chuckled as he took her hat off, smoothed back her hair and kissed her soundly, standing in profile so the man would have as good a chance at a great photo as possible. When he saw the man lower his camera, Harry held his hand toward him. “Accio camera.” The strap was around the man’s neck, so the camera coming to Harry’s hand brought the man to him, as well.

Harry gripped the man’s arm and marched him to a nearby table and chairs outside a small cafe where he, Ginny and the now-gibbering man sat down. “Talk,” Harry demanded. “Who are you, and why are you taking pictures of us?”

“Please, Mr. Potter, please don’t hurt me!” the man said, near tears.

“You brought this on yourself,” Harry hissed. “Stop blubbing and answer me.” He glanced at Ginny, then continued talking to the man. “If you don’t give me some honest answers quickly, my wife will hex you so you won’t walk right for a month. And if that doesn’t loosen your tongue, I have my own ways of doing it. Talk!”

“I’m, I, uh,” the man stammered, staring at Ginny with wide, frightened eyes. She glared at him, as if daring him to do something she could use as an excuse to hex him. The man looked back at Harry. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you.”

“Well, you did. Who are you, where are you from, and what do you want?”



A waiter came to their table, which silenced all three of them. "What can I bring you?"

"Three coffees," Ginny said, giving the man a pleasant smile.

"Right away, miss." The waiter looked at the man with Harry and Ginny a bit oddly, then shook his head and blinked hard before going back into the café.

"What did you do?" Ginny asked Harry.

"I made him think we were all laughing and having fun together," Harry said. "That's what he'll remember, not this bloke with tears on his face looking terrified."

Ginny smiled. "Full marks."

"Thanks." He turned back to the stranger. "Talk. I'll use the Imperius Curse on you if I have to."

The man put his hands up as if surrendering—which is what he proceeded to do. "No! No, not that! I'll talk, I'll tell you! I'm Amos McCann, from Cornwall. I came to Hawaii to get away from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"The man's dead. Surely you can say his name by now? It's Voldemort, you know," Harry said with disgust. "Why did you need to get away from him?"

"He was killing people for no reason! I wanted to get as far away as possible, and this was the best idea I could come up with."

"What does this have to do with you following us?"

"I'm running out of money. I thought I could sell the photos to the newspapers and . . . I'm sorry."

"Being sorry doesn't change the fact that you've disturbed our holiday," Harry said. His temper was beginning to boil now.

"Let's hex him, Harry," Ginny said, letting the tip of her wand show above the table. "I haven't hexed anybody in a while. And he's earned it."

"Which papers did you send pictures to?" Harry demanded.

"None! I was going to send some today. I wanted to get pictures of you in several changes of clothes so they'd buy more pictures."

Harry glanced at the camera in his hands. It looked like the one Dudley had been given for his birthday during Harry's last summer with the Dursleys. "This is digital, isn't it?" The man nodded. "Show me how to see the pictures." The man pushed a couple of buttons and soon Harry was scrolling through the pictures on the camera's memory card.

"Please believe me, Mr. Potter, I would never have done this if I didn't need the money. I saw you and thought I'd found a way to get home, now that You-Know-Who is gone. And thank you for killing him, by the way. I'm sure you had many awful experiences. You're a far better person than I am. I'm not a brave man, Mr. Potter. That's why I ran and hid rather than staying in England. I wish . . . well, it doesn't matter. I'll never be the man you are. I'm terribly sorry I disturbed your holiday."

Harry sighed and looked up at the man, who didn't seem to be evil, just misguided, in Harry's opinion. "You do know that what you did is wrong?" McCann nodded. "You need to find another profession. Paparazzi are lower than slug slime."

McCann hung his head. "I know. But when I saw you and Miss Weasley here—"

"That's 'Mrs. Potter,' creep," Ginny snarled.

"Oh, my apologies . . . oh my!" The man's eyes widened. "You're on your honeymoon!"

"Right in one," Harry said. "I did call her my wife earlier, you know."

"I . . . I didn't realize . . . I'm so sorry! If I'd known—"

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You'd have no qualms about taking pictures of us on holiday, but this being our honeymoon makes a difference?"

"Yes . . . no . . . I mean . . ."

Ginny was glaring at the man with her wand pointed at his heart. Harry put his hand over hers, trying to calm her. "He's not worth getting into trouble over. You can't hex him."

"We can't just let him go, either."

Harry thought a moment. "How about a Memory Charm? That would take care of the problem."

Ginny finally tore her eyes away from McCann and glanced at Harry. "Yeah. That could work."

A sudden movement from McCann made Harry pull his wand, but Ginny had already hexed him. As his wand clattered to the ground, bat-shapes came out of his nose and beat him around the face and ears.

Harry muttered, "Silencio," silencing the man's panicked cries, then sat admiring his wife's work for a moment. "I haven't seen your Bat-Bogey Hex for a while. Nicely done! But we can't be so obvious."

"I know," she said as she ended the hex.

"Clearly, we can't trust you," Harry told the man, "so Obliviate!"

"How have you altered his memories?" Ginny said, studying the now-slack face of the stranger.

"He won't recognize us or remember seeing us," Harry replied. He turned back to the man. "How do you get the memory card out of here?" Once the man showed him how to remove the card, Harry offered the camera to the man. "Here. Go and have a nice life."

The man took the camera, pushed back from the table and stood up. With a bemused, "Good day," he wandered away.

Harry held up the memory card. "One good thing came out of this."

"What's that?"

Harry grinned. "He got some lovely pictures of us. We can have them printed and enjoy them."

"Cool!"



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 33

The red Mustang hugged the curves as Harry drove into the mountains. He'd heard about a park with simply amazing scenery and wanted to see it. And he just wanted an excuse to drive up into the mountains anyway. He was enjoying driving the zippy little car.

Ginny sat with her head back against the seat, gazing at the peaks towering above them. She turned her head to him and studied his face for a moment before speaking. "You look happy, Harry. Happy and relaxed."

"I am." He reached over and squeezed her hand, then laced his fingers through hers. "You?"

"Happy and relaxed, as well. Where are we going? Or are we just driving?"

"I do have a destination in mind, but yeah, I'm having fun driving too," Harry replied. He hadn't felt so at peace with himself and the world around him in . . . well, ever, actually. He and Ginny were having such fun each day, and the atmosphere was so different from anything he'd ever experienced, sometimes he felt as if his past had happened to someone else. Harry couldn't remember ever having a grin on his face for days on end, but that seemed to be what he was doing here in Maui. Now he was taking Ginny to see the historic and scenic 'Iao Valley State Monument.

"Do you plan to share with me where we're going, or is it another surprise?"

"It's a park. The scenery is supposed to be spectacular, and they have a garden with the original native species of plants there." He glanced at her. "I know how much you like Herbology, especially with your interest in healing. I thought you'd enjoy seeing these plants. From what I was told by the travel agent, they've had to work hard to get rid of foreign plants and make it possible for the original ones to grow well."

"Native plants? Cool! I wonder how they differ from the others?"

"No idea. You're the one who's good at Herbology."

The road wound up the valley, the sky nearly hidden at times by the trees overhanging the narrow road. Finally, they came to the parking lot. When they got out and looked around, Harry shrugged. "This is pretty, but I don't see the fabulous view I was told about."

"Maybe we have to follow that path," Ginny said, pointing at a blacktopped trail that wound around a small building and off into the trees.

"Let's go!" Harry took her hand and they began walking, soon coming to a bridge that crossed a fast-flowing stream. Like many of the other tourists, Harry and Ginny stopped on the bridge and looked down into the gorge.

"There are people down there!" Ginny said, staring at the water at least twenty feet below the bridge.

Harry followed her gaze and saw what looked like native Hawaiians sitting in the water directly below the bridge. Some of them were climbing out, laughing and teasing each other as they did so. Harry felt a drip on his arm and saw that a young Hawaiian man, who was soaking wet and had multiple tattoos, had joined him at the bridge railing.

"Scuse me, man," the Hawaiian said. "Gotta get up here."

Harry stepped back from the railing and watched the young man climb onto the rail and teeter there until the stream below cleared of people. With a whoop, the Hawaiian jumped off the bridge feet first, landing with a huge splash. Harry, Ginny and the other tourists all rushed to the railing and looked down. The young man surfaced, shook the water out of his hair, and joined the queue climbing out of the gorge toward the bridge. Two young girls, their long black hair streaming down past their waists, climbed onto the railing hand in hand, then giggled and jumped off.

"Do you suppose it's some kind of native religious ceremony?" Harry heard an elderly woman ask the man with her.

The man removed his hat and scratched his head, looking as puzzled as Harry felt. "Dunno."

Another Hawaiian stood next to Harry, water still sluicing off his baggy shorts, his arms and back heavily tattooed. Harry cleared his throat, not wanting to disturb what might be some kind of ritual, but too curious to not ask the question.

"Why are you jumping off the bridge?"

The Hawaiian turned to Harry and grinned. "Because it's fun, man!"

"It looks like fun," Harry agreed. "How deep is the water?"

"I dunno, maybe fifteen feet or so. We dammed up the river here so we'd have this pool to jump into. The park has signs everywhere saying to stay out of the rivers, but hey, man, they're our rivers. We were here before the Park Police, and they just can't keep us out." With a laugh, the young man climbed onto the railing and jumped off, shouting as he fell.

"Harry, don't even think about it," Ginny warned.

Harry turned an innocent face to her. “Who, me?” She just laughed. “Yeah, I’d be the one the Park Police arrested,” he said with a grin, taking her hand and leading her off the bridge.

They followed a trail down into a valley and saw two elderly Hawaiian men standing in the stream. “Is it cold?” Ginny called.

“Yeah, it is!” came the cheery reply.

“I’ll bet it isn’t as cold as the streams around Hogwarts,” Harry murmured as he and Ginny waved to the men and kept walking.

“Too right! You’d have to be mad to stand in a stream in March at home!” Ginny agreed.

After climbing some steps cut into the side of the mountain, they came to an overlook with plaques that told the story of the ‘lao Needle, a tall, thin rock formation that rises 1200 feet above the valley floor. Sentries would stand watch there during wars. The plaques told of the numerous battles that took place in this valley.

“You’d think there would be ghosts, with all the people who died here,” Ginny said, glancing around.

“Yeah. Since Hawaii’s considered ‘paradise’ by so many people, you’d think it would be crammed with ghosts who refused to leave,” Harry agreed. He heard a sound in the distance and stilled, turning his head slowly to try to locate it. What was it? There was a soft booming sound, like the sound made when a whale slapped its tail on the water, but they were probably too far inland to hear such a sound from the sea. When he finally found the origin of the sound and faced that direction, he heard other sounds – men shouting and some erratic clattering noise. Finally, he saw it. Far down in the valley, a ghostly battle was taking place. Men with spears, knives and shields were engaged in endless combat. Harry’s face grew grim and he swallowed hard. He’d seen enough combat to last him a lifetime. How awful for these ghosts to have to do battle for eternity.

“Harry?”

Ginny’s voice started him. He turned to look at her. “Yeah?”

“What is it?”

He pointed silently, holding his arm up until he heard her gasp when she saw the battle.

“Do you suppose there’s any way we can stop it?” The sadness in her voice made Harry turn to her.

“I don’t know. Do you have any ideas?”

Her chuckle sounded more ironic than amused. “Where’s Hermione when we need her?”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, she’d know the right spell.”

“Or she’d spend the rest of her holiday looking for it,” Ginny agreed.

Harry continued to watch the battle, a terrible sadness washing over him as he considered the long centuries this battle had gone on. He pondered the situation and then relaxed. “I’ve got it.”

Ginny looked up at him in surprise. “You do?”

“I think so. C’mon, let’s Apparate down there and talk to them.”

“Talk to them? But we don’t know their language, and they’re trying to kill each other!”

Harry pulled her into his arms. “They’re already dead, sweetheart. They can’t hurt us.”

“They’re not friendly like Hogwarts ghosts. I don’t know if this is a good idea or not, Harry.”

He tilted his head and gave her the crooked smile he knew melted her heart. “We have to try, don’t we?”

She sighed. “I suppose. But if you get hurt—”

Harry held his hands up as if in surrender. “I won’t! I’m avoiding Muggle hospitals, remember? And I do have a really fine healer here with me.” He bent down and kissed her forehead. “But if you don’t want me to try—”

Ginny gazed down the valley at the ongoing battle, then sighed. “Someone needs to do something about them. Okay. What’s the plan?”

“Dunno yet. I’ll think of something.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Moments later, Harry and Ginny Apparated to the battlefield. The ghosts kept fighting with each other, ignoring the intruders. Harry pulled out his wand and held it loosely in his fingertips in case he needed it.

"Hello?" he called. "Could I speak with you for a moment?" A few warriors glanced at him, but their enemies took advantage of that and stabbed them with their spears or knives. The injured warriors gasped or grunted or screamed and fell as if badly injured or dead. A moment later, the injured or dead warriors stood up and joined the battle with renewed vigour.

"You can stop fighting now. Please!" Harry looked from warrior to warrior. "You lot don't have to fight anymore! The war is over!"

"I don't think they can understand you, Harry," Ginny said, her eyes not leaving the action before them.

Harry pointed his wand at the warriors and mumbled half of a language spell he'd read about but never used. Then he turned the wand toward his own throat and mumbled the second half of the spell.

"Hello!" he called, and was pleased to see a reaction from the warriors as well as a stunned look on Ginny's face.

"What did you say?" she asked.

Harry put his hand on her shoulder to reassure her, then turned back to the warriors, many of whom were now standing and staring at him while keeping a wary eye on their enemies.

"Can you understand me?" Harry said, studying the dark faces before him.

"Who are you, stranger? Why are you here?" a man with a magnificent feathered headdress and cape demanded, stepping toward Harry with an arrogant sneer.

Harry thought this must be one of the chiefs of the warring tribes. He bowed to show respect. When he straightened, he said, "My name is Harry Potter. I come from a land far across the sea. Why are you fighting?"

"They came to steal our land and our women!" the chief said, throwing a hand out in an angry gesture. "This we cannot allow."

Harry swallowed hard, hoping what he was going to say would make sense to the men glaring at him. "I don't know how to tell you this, sir, but your war was over long ago. You're all ghosts. You've been dead for centuries. It's time to move on to the next adventure."

The expressions on their faces varied from startled to disbelieving to enraged. Harry pointed at the cars in the parking lot up the valley from their present location. "Can you see those cars?" The men followed his gesture, but frowned in confusion. "Those coloured boxes that bring people into the valley. Can you see them?" The men nodded. All of them were now watching Harry intently, the battle forgotten for the moment. "You didn't have such conveyances in your time, did you?" He didn't wait for them to answer, but carried on. "Many years have passed since your time. You can be at peace now. Your war is over."

The men stirred restlessly, looking at each other in confusion.

The chief glared at Harry. "Our war is not over until one tribe has won!"

Harry shrugged. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you who won, but Hawaiians live in peace with each other now. Tourists like my wife and I come to visit your beautiful islands on holiday. Things are very different now."

At the mention of Ginny, the ghosts' attention turned to her. Their faces showed shock at her appearance. Some in the muttering crowd touched their own hair as they stared at the bright red tresses spilling over her shoulders.

The chief tore his eyes away from inspecting Ginny and turned back to Harry, still suspicious. "Harry Potter? What kind of name is that? What is your tribe?"

Harry shook his head. His vague idea about how to help these ghosts move on apparently wasn't working. He simply didn't know how to explain the present world to these men. "My name is English. I come from an island on the other side of the world. My tribe is, erm, wizard." When he said the word "wizard," they gasped.

"You . . . you are a shaman? From an island across the sea?" the chief said, frowning in concentration.

The man actually thinking about what Harry was saying seemed to be progress in Harry's opinion. "Yes. That's how I can speak your language. I cast a spell to learn your language quickly so you'd understand me."

The men began muttering among themselves. Harry took a step toward Ginny, wondering if these ghosts actually could hurt them. Had he made a terrible mistake?

"Please," Harry said, "think about your families. They wouldn't want you to fight forever. You can move on to the next plane and see them there. You just have to decide to go, and it will happen." He crossed his fingers behind his back, hoping he was right.

Harry heard Ginny gasp. A quick glance showed him she was okay, but she was staring at the warriors with her eyes wide in shock. Harry turned

back to the group and saw that, one by one, slowly at first, but more quickly as time passed, the ghosts were fading from view.

"It worked!" Ginny breathed as she reached out and took his hand. "Harry, you did it!"

He gave her hand a squeeze but kept watching the ghostly warriors. Some still seemed eager to fight, but when they turned to look at their opponents, more often than not, the other man was either already gone or faded as they watched.

The chief whirled around, his feathered cape flying behind him. He shouted at his men, but they kept disappearing until only a handful remained. The chief turned back to Harry, his face contorted with rage.

"Where are my tribesmen? What have you done to them, Shaman?"

"They chose to leave," Harry said, not knowing how else to explain things.

The chief turned back to his men and saw two of them fade away right before his eyes. He turned back to Harry. When he spoke again, his voice was tired and hesitant. "What you say is true? Our battle is over?"

"Yes. You can join your loved ones on the other side now."

The chief slowly took off his headdress and bowed, placing his headdress at Harry's feet. "I honour you, Shaman, and your flame-haired woman." He straightened and gazed at Harry for a moment, then faded away.

Harry stood staring at the spot where the headdress lay, its colourful feathers swaying in some ancient breeze. Soon it, too, faded away.

"Wow. That was brilliant," Ginny murmured. "Well done!"

Harry grinned and started to say something, then remembered to remove the spell from his voice so she could understand him. "Thanks. Ready to resume our honeymoon?"

Ginny wrapped her arms around his waist. "Absolutely!"

Harry held her close to him and Apparated, taking them back to the path they'd been on when they saw the ghostly warriors.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry and Ginny climbed down off the overlook and followed the trail deeper into the valley. Around a bend in the trail, they came to a place where a tall, thin waterfall fell into a narrow pool, the water flowing noisily over rocks below. Harry glanced at the scene, then felt the world tilt. Suddenly he was no longer in Maui, but battling enemies on a cliff in France. Ginny was shot out of the air and fell, disappearing beyond the cliff's edge. "Ginny!" he cried and tried to run to her, but something was in the way. Something was holding him back. "Ginny!" Something tripped him and he fell. He started to get up but was slammed to the ground, then rolled over onto his back. What was going on? All he could see was Ginny being shot out of the air and falling beyond the cliff, then Ginny, somehow back on level ground, being thrown over the same cliff by Voldemort. These things kept happening over and over, and he couldn't save her! "Ginny!"

Something pressed against his mouth, something warm and soft. Something tickled his nose. Something silky brushed his cheek. Something firm and determined held him down while he was being attacked this way. He struggled to move, but he couldn't! He had to save Ginny, he had to—wait a minute. Those were lips pressed against his, very familiar lips. Something warm and wet and lively was being pressed between his lips. Ginny! He gasped, then returned the kiss with all his heart. His vision finally cleared and he saw her beloved face just above his, her brow furrowed in concentration, tears in her eyes.

She pulled back, wiped away her tears and gave him a tremulous smile. "Are you okay now?"

At his nod, she released him from whatever spell she'd used to hold him down, then helped him sit up.

Harry sat with his face in his hands, shaking with nerves. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not."

When he looked up at her, he shivered a bit. "Did I hurt you? Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. What happened?"

Bits of phantom images chased each other in his mind. He shook his head, trying to clear it. "I don't know. Something—"

"Is he all right?" a man's voice called from the trail. The running Harry had done during his flashback had taken him and Ginny halfway between the trail and the river's edge.

"He'll be fine," Ginny said.

Harry straightened and tried to organize his face into a pleasant expression, but he knew he must still look ill.

The man waved his friends on and crossed to where Harry and Ginny sat on the ground. “I don’t mean to intrude, but I may be able to help you. I’d like to try, anyway.”

“Help us how?” Ginny said.

The man was probably in his early thirties, with a military haircut and bearing. “You’re the man with the scarred back, aren’t you? I saw you on the beach. Someone told me you were a soldier and got hurt in battle,” he said, standing next to Ginny and looking at Harry with concern in his eyes. “Did you have a flashback just now?”

Harry gaped at the man in shock. How did he know? He glanced at Ginny and saw the same surprise in her eyes.

“Erm . . .” Harry said.

“As I said, I don’t want to intrude, but I’m a Navy doc. I deal with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder all the time. You look as if you’ve seen a ghost, which I wouldn’t expect on a bright sunny day on Maui.”

Harry swallowed hard and shook his head, but didn’t say anything.

“May I sit down? My name’s Mike.” He offered his hand to Harry, who shook it.

“I’m . . . I’m Harry. This is my wife, Ginny.” He shivered again, still not quite over the flashback.

“What did you see in your flashback? If you talk about it, perhaps we can find a way to deal with it,” Mike said as he sat down cross-legged near them.

Harry shrugged and dropped his eyes. “Just a battle.”

“I heard you were Special Forces,” Mike offered. At Harry’s startled look, he continued. “The little boy who questioned you is my buddy’s nephew. We heard all about you when we got here.”

“Oh. Uncle Rich,” Harry said, remembering his encounter with the child at the ice cream stand.

“Yeah, I supported Rich’s platoon. We’re here on R&R.”

“Welcome home,” Ginny said. “Or are you home?”

“My home, yeah, but my parents are in Illinois. I’ll be going to visit them soon.”

Ginny looked at Mike’s group of friends, who were still visible on the trail, some of them looking back at their friend. “Is one of those ladies your wife? You shouldn’t interrupt your holiday for us.”

“I’m not married,” Mike answered. “Haven’t met the right girl yet.” He glanced from Ginny to Harry and back at Ginny again, then chuckled. “D’you have any sisters?”

Startled into a small smile, Ginny shook her head. “Sorry, just four brothers.”

“My loss then.” He looked at Harry, who’d had time to calm down somewhat during this exchange. “Now that the pleasantries are over, how’re you doing, Harry?”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. But if you give it enough time, and get some help, you will be. PTSD isn’t something to ignore. It’s a serious problem.”

Harry sighed. “I haven’t been ignoring it.”

“I’m glad to hear that. If you don’t mind my asking, what kind of therapies have you tried so far?”

“Something to help me sleep. I have nightmares.”

“There are a lot of other kinds of therapy in use today. You should talk to your doctor or psychologist about it,” Mike offered. “Do you have any idea what triggered this episode? It could be something you saw, a smell, a sound—or nothing at all. But if you can identify the triggers for these episodes, it may help you.”

Harry pressed his lips together, frustrated that he’d had a flashback on his honeymoon, and embarrassed that it had been witnessed by this Muggle, well-meaning though he seemed to be. Mike just sat there waiting. Harry sighed, then decided to cooperate. Maybe the man knew something that would help him.

“I, um, I dunno. I looked around and just . . . flashed.”



"Is this area similar to someplace you served?"

"No."

"There's nothing here that reminds you of the place you flashed to? No scent or sound or—"

Harry gasped, then looked at Ginny. "The waterfall. I think it was the sound of the waterfall. Maybe that was it."

"Good, Harry. And what brought you back, do you know?"

He flashed a brief grin at his wife. "Ginny knocking me down."

"Well done, Ginny," Mike said with a smile, then turned back to Harry. "Have you tried any other therapies?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you talk with anyone about your flashbacks, nightmares or whatever else is bothering you?"

Harry swallowed hard. "No. It's too hard to talk about." He looked at Ginny and chewed on his lip a bit. "Everyone I'm close to was there, too. I don't want to bring up bad memories for them."

Mike looked at Ginny. "You were there?" She nodded. "Do you have similar problems to Harry's?"

"I wasn't in the middle of the fighting like he was. My nightmares are usually about him getting hurt. As long as he's next to me, I manage. And I don't have daytime visions like he does."

"I'm surprised they let a husband and wife serve together. That wouldn't happen in our military. Must be a British thing, then, right?"

"We weren't married then," Harry explained.

"Oh, I see." Mike turned to Ginny. "What did you do, Ginny? Were you a clerk, a driver, what?"

When she hesitated, Harry answered for her, knowing she was uncertain of the proper Muggle terminology. "She was a medic. She cleaned up after us."

"Huh," Mike said with a shake of his head. "Tough duty, young lady. But it helps you understand what Harry's going through to some extent, right?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Then, Harry, you could talk to Ginny about your flashbacks."

Harry blew out an impatient breath. "No."

Ginny took Harry's hand and leaned toward him. "But I want to help you, Harry!"

Harry squeezed her hand and smiled at her. "You do help me, all the time."

"It might be helpful to her with her own nightmares if the two of you talked about your experiences together," Mike offered.

Harry shook his head. "No!"

"Why won't you let me try?" Ginny said, sounding a bit desperate now.

Harry knew what was going through her head. This man was suggesting something that might help him, and Harry was refusing! She didn't understand that he was trying to protect her! He nearly growled in frustration.

"What is it, Harry?" Mike said. "What's holding you back?"

The horrors he'd seen nearly overwhelmed Harry for a moment before he tamped his feelings down again. "She's been through enough. We're going to have a happy life together." He went on, his voice shaking with tension. "She lost two brothers in the war. She doesn't need to bear my burdens."

"Ginny, I'm so sorry," Mike said, reaching across to squeeze her shoulder briefly. "It sounds like you two have been to hell and back. And look at you. In spite of everything you've been through, you've survived and found each other. You have a lot of positive things in your lives, don't you? When I see you on the beach, you both look very happy."

"We're on our honeymoon," Ginny said with a shy smile.

other and waited for them to reply.

Harry sighed and finally looked at the man again. "I know I'm a lucky man. I'm happier than I've ever been in my life most of the time. But sometimes I remember friends dying, or things I did . . ."

Mike nodded. "And you have a flashback or nightmare. Right?"

"Yes."

"I know it may sound stupid, but one thing that may help is for you to forgive yourself, Harry. I imagine you did things in battle that you would never do in normal life, but you did them because you had to, right?" Mike waited for Harry to respond.

Harry sat and thought about that for a moment, then shrugged and nodded.

"And you did the best you could, the only thing you could in those situations. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"If you had no other choice than to do what you did, you didn't do anything wrong, Harry. It's time to forgive yourself." Mike's voice was quiet and reasonable.

Harry felt like a drowning man reaching for a rope to save himself. He wanted to accept what Mike was saying. It made sense. Harry knew he wasn't a murderer. He'd killed, yes, but he'd done it to protect those he cared about. Could he forgive himself? Was it possible? He sighed and dropped his head in his hands again. Forgiving himself for the things he'd done in the heat of battle was harder than he would've believed, but maybe if he managed it, he'd get better. He'd love to stop being haunted by his past and be able to enjoy his life. If forgiving himself would help, he'd give it a try. He finally glanced up at Mike, who'd been watching him.

"I don't expect you to recover from this today or even this month, Harry. How long since you were in battle?" Mike said.

"Last May. Ten months."

"And of course you had to recover from your wounds and grieve for your lost friends.." Harry nodded. "It will take time, but I think you'll get there, Harry, especially with Ginny's help. Tell you what. I'll be here for a few days. If you want to talk, call me." Mike pulled out a card and scribbled a phone number on the back. "That's my cell phone. You can reach me any time on it, or you can use the email address on the front of the card to contact me after I leave."

Harry glanced at the card, then put it in his pocket. "Thanks."

Mike stood up. "I doubt you'll call me, but if you need help while I'm here, please don't hesitate to call. And when you get home, try some other forms of therapy, okay?"

Harry stood up and offered his hand. "Thanks a lot. I appreciate your time."

"I appreciate what you did in the war effort. Take care of yourselves. I hope you have a long and happy life together."

Harry looked at Ginny and took her hand in his. "Me too."



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 34

“Which way?” Ginny said when they got back on the path.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not go any closer to the waterfall.” Harry regretted skipping that sight, but he’d rather miss it than trigger another flashback.

“That’s fine with me! I remember that waterfall in France,” Ginny said with a sudden shiver. “I don’t need to see any more waterfalls up close.”

Harry looked at her. “That’s what I flashed on. France.”

“When I went sailing over the cliff and you jumped off to rescue me from the lake, right?” He nodded. “I remember that.” She shivered again. “It was awful. But then I remember being kissed underwater. I liked that.”

Harry frowned. Could she really have forgotten what happened to her? “I was trying to save your life, Gin. You’d drowned!”

She squeezed his hand. “I know.” Her voice was so soft, he had to bend down to hear her. “I prefer to remember it my way.”

He straightened and studied the expression in her eyes. She looked nervous, somehow, maybe even frightened. He swallowed hard, hoping he’d be able to help her. “Do you need to talk about it? I’ll listen if you do.”

“I’ll talk if you will.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Harry nodded. “OK, that’s fair. You first.”

They moved off the path again and sat down facing each other. Harry held both of Ginny’s hands in his, nervous himself about what they were going to do, but determined to see it through.

“So I have to go first, huh?” Ginny said, looking even more uneasy than before. Harry nodded. “OK, then. Erm, my nightmares about that battle . . .” She swallowed hard, then continued. “They usually start with me being nose to noseless with Voldemort.” A tiny smile tickled her mouth as she watched Harry’s reaction.

Harry laughed. “Nose to noseless?’ That’s brilliant, Ginny, really! Go on.”

“Well, you were there. You were amazing! And I was so angry that you wouldn’t let me help and I had to find ways around you to shoot spells at the Death Eaters!”

“I was trying to protect you—”

“I know, but I’m perfectly capable of fighting, and I wanted to protect you!”

They sat and stared at each other for a few minutes. “If I ever need help fighting someone again,” Harry said, “I’ll let you help. OK?”

She smiled. “Yes. Thank you.”

“What else?”

“Falling off the cliff was awful, but you saved me both times. Somehow I knew I wasn’t going to die, even when I hit the lake. My nightmares aren’t about that, though, although the Voldemort memory is terrifying. But the worst parts of my nightmares are about you being hurt, and Dad and Ron. I saw all of you get hit at one time or another and it was awful, so awful.”

Harry wrapped his arms around her and held his now-trembling wife. “We’re all fine now, Gin. And you helped keep us safe. You were so brave and fought so well. I was proud of you, and terrified for you at the same time.”

Ginny relaxed in his arms for a few minutes, then sighed, but Harry thought it sounded more relieved than anything else. She pushed out of his arms and looked up at him. “You know what?”

“Mmm?”

“I feel a little better. Your turn.”

“Oh.” Harry bit his lip. He really didn’t want to talk about the things that troubled him, but maybe, just maybe it would help. And he knew Ginny would understand and forgive him, even if he couldn’t forgive himself.

“Go on, Harry,” she said in a gentle voice. “Nothing you say can upset me. We’ve already survived all that stuff. We just need to put it behind us.”

He blew out a nervous breath. "You're right. We did survive it. OK." He swallowed hard, then plunged into it. "That battle in France was the first place I deliberately killed people. I'd killed three men by accident the night before, when they attacked Ron and me on Buckbeak, but during the battle, after you lost your wand in the lake and I gave you mine, I decided those blokes were better off dead. I used the Killing Curse and the Bone-Removal Curse, knowing exactly what I was doing. I killed Bellatrix by accident, just an Expelliarmus that was too strong and smashed her head against a rock, but the others? I had every intention of making them dead as quickly as possible." He shook his head. "I talked to Remus about it afterwards, and he said I didn't need to worry about turning dark like Voldemort, but still, I worried about it through the whole war, and even after it. I dream about doing horrible things, some that I really did, some that I didn't. I see our friends dying." He shuddered. "I know they chose to fight, but they followed me, Ginny. I led them into combat. They . . . they died for me, Ginny, and that weighs on me terribly."

"We talked about that before—"

A shudder ran through him. He shook his head like a wet sheepdog, trying to clear his mind so he could go on. He glanced up at his wife and saw her waiting patiently for him to continue, her brown eyes warm and trusting, her face filled with love for him. He blew out a nervous breath and forced himself to go on.

"I'm glad we talked about it, and I don't have those dreams as often as I did." He dropped his eyes, his guilt nearly overwhelming him. He couldn't admit this while looking at her. He knew he should tell her everything. Maybe then he'd start getting better. But the things he had to confess . . . He blew out a nervous breath and told her the worst thing, the crux of the whole problem. "Most of my dreams now are the ones where I'm worried about turning into a Dark Lord myself."

She gasped. "You could never do that! You're too good!"

Harry looked into those beautiful eyes, now full of indignation as well as concern for him. "You're wrong. I'm a really good liar and I snuck around Hogwarts loads more than anyone but Ron knew—well, more than he knew, too, actually. I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of. I'm not an honest person or a good person. I'm just not."

Ginny tilted her head and grinned at him. "Sneaky you may be, but that's one of your good qualities!" At his frown, she continued. "Sneaking around is what's given us time together all this term, Harry. It wasn't a bad thing. It was just getting around rules that got in our way." She gave him a saucy look. "And if that makes you a bad person, I'm just as bad as you are! I'd do it all again in a heartbeat!"

The hint of a smile crossed Harry's face. "You're not a bad person, and you know it."

"And the same is true of you!"

He blushed and ducked his head a moment before answering her. "If you say so."

"Oh, you're such a well-trained husband already!" Ginny said, moving into his arms again and lifting her face for a kiss. "I love you, Harry Potter."

"And I love you, Ginny Potter." He kissed her, then tucked her head under his chin and just held her for a few minutes.

"Feel better?"

He pulled back and looked at her. "Yeah, I think maybe I do."

"Good! This talking to each other thing could work, don't you think?"

"Maybe so."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry and Ginny walked back to the native plant garden and studied the labels on the plants.

"I've never heard of some of these!" Ginny said, delighted with the garden. "Do you have any parchment? I should make some notes and drawings for Madam Sprout."

"No parchment," Harry said, patting his pockets, "just a receipt from lunch. I do have a pen. Maybe that can get you started. I'll go to the car and see if I can find anything else you can write on."

"OK, thanks!" She took the pen and paper from Harry and bent over a plant, then giggled when she heard Harry whistle. She straightened up and turned around, laughing at his cheeky smile. "What?"

"The plants are pretty, but the view from here is spectacular," Harry said, teasing her.

"You're silly."

Harry's crooked grin lit up his face. "Silly over you, sweet girl. Be right back."

A few minutes later, he returned and offered her the only paper he could find—the ticket envelope from a show they'd attended. "If I'd known you wanted a notebook, I would've bought you one, you know."

"I didn't know I'd need one, or I would've brought some parchment from my book bag," she said, taking the paper and turning back to her task.

"Parchment would definitely attract the wrong kind of attention," Harry said, "as would a quill." He looked at the variety of plants in the garden, then took the paper back from Ginny. "Hang on, I think I can fix this." He glanced around to see if anyone was watching, then turned his back toward the tourists who were nearest, cupped his hand over the paper and muttered a soft incantation. Satisfied with his work, he handed Ginny a notebook the size of the ticket envelope, but with numerous pages.

"Thanks! That's more like it!" she said, taking the notebook and turning back to study the plants.

"Anything to make you happy, love," he said as he settled down on a bench behind her. A satisfied sigh escaped him, which caught Ginny's attention.

She turned and looked at him. "What are you doing back there?"

"Enjoying the view. Those shorts certainly do look nice on you. Please continue with your work, dear lady."

"You're so funny," she said, then got back to work.

A group of people came up the path by the garden. "Hi, Harry!" Mike called. "What's this place?"

"A garden of native plants," Harry replied. "Ginny's into plants, so she's making some notes."

Mike waved at Ginny when she turned around, then looked at Harry again. "You look better."

Harry smiled. "I feel better, thanks. We talked. I think it helped."

Mike beamed at him. "Good! I'm glad to hear that." He glanced over Ginny's shoulder to see what she was doing. "You draw very well."

"These are just to help my professor recognize the plants," she said with a shrug. "We've always had to draw the plants we study."

"Your professor?"

Ginny gave Harry a panicked glance. "Erm, yes, I'm taking a class."

"She's always been interested in herbology," Harry said, trying to help. "You know, the basic plants medicines come from, that kind of thing."

Mike turned back to Ginny. "Oh, you're interested in herbal medicine?"

Ginny nodded and chuckled, while Harry laughed out loud.

"What?" Mike said.

"Nearly the whole time we've been here," Harry explained, "we've been discussing how different our English is from American English. For instance, we say 'herbology' and you say 'ur-bology,' but there's an 'h' there, so it should be 'herb'!"

"And 'aluminium' for us, 'aluminum' for you," Ginny added.

"I think one of the funniest is 'pissed,' which to you means 'angry,' but to us means 'roaring drunk.'" Harry laughed again, absolutely delighted that he felt like laughing so soon after a flashback.

Mike joined their laughter. "Yes, we do have some funny differences in our so-called 'common' language."

"That's the truth!" Ginny said, nodding at Harry. "I'm finished."

"Ready to go?" Harry said, getting to his feet.

"Yes."

Harry held his hand out to Mike. "Thank you for talking to us. I think you helped us a lot."

"I'm glad to hear that. Take care." Mike shook hands with each of them, then rejoined his friends, who'd been browsing the garden while he chatted with Harry and Ginny.

"Did you have enough paper?" Harry said, glancing at her notes.

"Only just! I'll redo this on parchment when I have a chance. Professor Sprout will enjoy seeing these notes."

Harry wrapped an arm around her neck and pulled her close, then kissed the top of her head. "I'm sure she will, sweet girl." He dropped his arm to

her shoulders and spent the entire walk back to the car counting his blessings that he'd married this very special woman.





# Now And Forever

## Chapter 35

As they'd done many times during their honeymoon, Harry and Ginny sat on their lanai working on their holiday assignments. The balmy Hawaiian afternoon air felt wonderful but was also distracting. And Harry couldn't help looking out to sea, hoping to see some whale activity. He certainly wasn't concentrating well on his work. It didn't help that Ginny had a habit of running her foot up his leg and tweaking the hairs there with her toes, as she was doing now. Good thing I don't wear shorts at home much or I'd never get anything done! He put his bare foot over hers, pushed it back to the floor and just kept his foot on top of hers, which seemed to satisfy her for now. He smiled, knowing it wouldn't satisfy her for long. He wondered briefly what she'd do to distract him next, then smiled in anticipation and made himself get back to work.

"Rats," Harry muttered a short time later. He threw down his quill and dug through his bag looking for a book.

Ginny looked up from her parchment. "What's wrong?"

Harry sighed and dropped his bag back to the floor. "Nothing."

"Not nothing. What's the problem?"

"I left a book at home that I should have brought with me."

Ginny leaned toward him, her elbow on the table, her chin in her hand. "Harry?"

"Mmm?" He was still distracted, trying to think of another way to get the information he needed for this essay.

"Let's go home."

That got his attention. "Huh? Why? Aren't you enjoying yourself?"

"I love it here, but we both have assignments to finish, studying to do, and it's just so beautiful here, it's hard to concentrate. We've had ten days here. Let's go back to Grimmauld Place and not tell anyone we're home. We can continue our honeymoon there and get our work done at the same time." She hesitated a moment, then continued. "And everything's so expensive here—"

Harry reached across the small table and took her hands in his. "Money is not now, nor will it ever be a problem for us, love. You don't need to worry about that. But if you really want to go home, we can do that."

She grinned. "I think it will be fun to be in our own house for a few days with nobody knowing we're there."

"Then that's what we'll do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry miniaturized the bags containing the things they'd purchased and stuffed them into his backpack, then helped Ginny put it on from the front. They'd checked out of their hotel, turned in the red convertible, and were now on the hillside where they'd arrived ten days ago.

"Ready?" Harry said as he fastened the strap across her back securing his backpack to her.

"Yes."

"Keep your eyes closed this time, OK?"

She laughed. "Don't worry, I will!"

Harry changed into a phoenix, grabbed the straps lying across her shoulders and flashed. They arrived in the entry hall of Number 12 Grimmauld Place a short time later. Harry changed back into himself, helped her remove the backpacks and sat on the steps to catch his breath.

"Harry Potter, sir! Miss Ginny!" Dobby said in shock. "You is home early!"

"Hi, Dobby!" Ginny said with a smile. "We decided to finish our honeymoon here. How are you and Winky?"

"We is fine. We needs to get food to prepare for you. We wasn't expecting you so soon."

"Don't worry about us today, Dobby," Harry said. "We'll be sleeping off the time-change until tomorrow, I expect."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir! Welcome home!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry rubbed his eyes, wondering what had awakened him. Then he wondered where he was, but a quick glance around told him he was in his own

bed at Grimmauld Place. He noticed Ginny's warm body was curled up next to him and smiled as he wrapped his arm around her more snugly. She was his wife. They were in their own home. Why was he awake, though? What had broken through his pleasant dreams?

More alert now, Harry tried to remember what had awakened him. There it was again! Someone was downstairs, someone much heavier than Dobby. Harry slipped out of bed, put on his glasses and grabbed his wand, pulling on his dressing gown as he crossed the room to the door. He opened the door slowly and listened as hard as he could, then remembered Ginny's ever-present store of Extendable Ears. He glanced around the room, trying to remember where she'd put them, then saw she was already up and coming toward him, two Extendable Ears in hand.

"What's going on?" she murmured.

"Someone's downstairs besides the elves." He took the Ear and pushed it into the hallway, feeding out the line until the Ear was at the edge of the stairs.

"We just want to decorate the house for a welcome home party," Harry heard Hermione say.

"You is very kind, Miss Hermione," Dobby said, "but my master—"

"I thought Harry didn't let you call him 'master'," Hermione said.

"Dobby calls him 'Harry Potter, sir,' but Harry Potter, sir, is Dobby's master."

"We won't be long," Ron said.

"You don't need to do anything, Dobby," Hermione added. "We'll take care of everything."

Harry looked at Ginny, his eyebrows raised in question. "What should we do?"

Ginny giggled. "Hide?"

"Works for me. I hate to leave Dobby having to cover for us, though."

"Yeah."

Harry looked at Ginny. "It's just Ron and Hermione."

She shrugged. "OK."

Their decision made, they moved to the head of the stairs. "Hi," Harry said.

Ron dropped the box he was holding, which made a shattering sound when it hit the floor. "What the bloody hell are you two doing home?"

Harry shrugged and grinned at his best friends. "We live here."

"Yeah, I know, but—"

"Welcome home!" Hermione was blushing furiously. "We're so sorry! We didn't mean to intrude. We just wanted to bring your wedding gifts over." She looked at the box Ron had dropped, then pointed her wand at it and said, "Reparo!" Once the box was back in its previous shape, she looked up at Harry and Ginny again. "Ron's parents brought all the presents from the wedding over the day after the ceremony, but once the wedding story hit the papers, more presents came in. That's what we're bringing now. The Aurors have checked them, so they're all safe."

"What were you telling Dobby about decorating?" Ginny said, starting down the stairs.

"What happened to you two?" Ron exclaimed when the hall light hit Harry and Ginny's faces.

Harry glanced at Ginny, then back at Ron. "What do you mean?"

Hermione was laughing now. "They have suntans, Ron! They went someplace warm and sunny for their honeymoon."

"Yeah, we did!" Ginny said, beaming at them. "It was brilliant!"

"So tell us everything," Hermione said eagerly.

"We'll tell the whole family everything at once, how's that?" Harry said. "We want everyone to come to dinner two nights from now. You'll get an owl about it tomorrow."

"Hermione," Ginny prompted, "decorating? What were you talking about?"

"Oh, we were going to hang a 'Welcome Home' banner and do a few other things, but I guess we won't now. We'll just leave these presents and get out of your hair."

Harry and Ginny helped Ron and Hermione carry the presents into the living room. Harry stopped and gasped at the huge pile of beautifully wrapped boxes. "What is all this stuff?"

"Wedding presents," Hermione said, setting her load down carefully.

"But so many!" Harry said, shaking his head. "And you're sure they're safe?"

"Yes, they've all been checked thoroughly. You're getting some pretty nice stuff!" Ron told him.

"It's like Christmas and a birthday and a bunch of other holidays all rolled up together!" Ginny said, kneeling by a huge box with a big glittery silver bow on top. "This one's from Minister Bones! And there's a note here, addressed to you, Harry." She handed him the note.

Harry opened the envelope while Ginny unwrapped the present. He shook his head and smiled, then handed the letter to Hermione. "I think you'll like this."

"What is it?" she said, then started to read, then burst into tears.

"Mione! What's wrong?" Ron said, pulling her into his arms.

Hermione was laughing and crying at the same time now. She pushed against Ron's arms. "I'm fine, really. It's just such a surprise!"

"What?" Ron said, totally flummoxed.

Hermione turned to Harry, waving the letter excitedly. "Harry, this is brilliant! However did you do it?"

"Do what?" Ron said, sounding more impatient.

"Listen to this," Hermione said, then began reading aloud.

Dear Harry,

It took some doing, but I've managed it. House-elves belonging to the Ministry of Magic may now marry and have children if they choose, and those in the breeding-stock program may leave the program and marry if they wish to do so. I think you're right - this new policy will result in happier house-elves. I wish someone had thought to question the system before. We're still working on how to deal with the children of the house-elves from the breeding-stock program, some of whom were bred to a variety of partners, so the children's custody is a difficult matter to settle. But we're working on it.

As for freeing the house-elves, I have discussed this with several of them, and they were horrified at the idea. So I'm working on a policy that will allow them to choose if they want to be free or want to remain enslaved. Those who want to be free will be given a salary, as you suggested. Your Dobby is an excellent example of how successful a free house-elf can be at finding and keeping a job.

Speaking of Dobby, I have looked into his conviction, and I'm sorry to say, I can't commute his sentence. He will have to remain enslaved as his punishment for killing the house-elf Kreacher. But I agree, his children being born free is a good idea. I am adding this idea to the one of freeing the house-elves mentioned above in the policy changes I'm attempting to push through.

You need to understand that changing the marriage and breeding policies in the Ministry was quite difficult. It is going to be even more difficult to get actual laws passed that will give house-elves their choices about freedom, marriage and breeding throughout the wizarding world. But I think your idea is both kind and sound, and I will pursue it to the best of my ability.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. If you have other concerns, please know that my door is always open to you.

With my very kindest regards,  
Amelia Bones, Minister of Magic  
Order of Merlin First Class, etc., etc.

"Harry! You did it!" Hermione squealed, then threw herself at him, hugging him fiercely. "You're brilliant!"

"Whoa, Harry, that's amazing," Ron said. "Too bad about Dobby, though."

"What does you mean, Master Ron?" Dobby said, entering the room with a tray filled with drinks.

Ron's ears flamed. "Uh, nothing, Dobby."

"Not nothing, Dobby," Harry said, squatting in front of his house elf. He held his hand out to Hermione, who gave him the letter. Harry handed it to Dobby. "You should read this."

Dobby read the letter, his eyes getting wider and wider as he read. When he finished, he gazed at Harry with pure adoration in his eyes. "Harry Potter tries to free Dobby again! Harry Potter is too good, too kind!"

“But I didn’t succeed, Dobby. I’m sorry.”

“Harry Potter helps the Ministry house-elves,” Dobby said, his huge eyes glowing, his hands clasped tightly as he nearly vibrated with joy. “Harry Potter gets Ministry to consider freeing house-elves! Harry Potter is a great success!”

“But I didn’t get you freed,” Harry said. Failing at that was a huge disappointment to Harry. He thought he’d managed it. At least the Ministry’s elves would have improved lives now. And he’d make sure Dobby and Winky had the happiest lives he could manage.

Dobby stood straight and tall, his ears fully erect, his eyes quite serious. “Dobby is proud to work for Harry Potter. Harry Potter is kind and good. Dobby is happy here, even if Dobby isn’t free!”

Relieved by the elf’s acceptance of the situation, Harry patted Dobby on the shoulder. “Thanks.”

“No, thank you, Harry Potter, sir!”

When Harry stood up, Ginny wrapped her arms around him and hugged him, then leaned back against his arms and smiled. “You never cease to amaze me.”

He chuckled. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“The best!”

\* \* \* \* \*

When Harry closed the door after Ron and Hermione left, he sighed. “I’m going to set different wards on the house.”

“What kind of wards?” Ginny said.

“I don’t want people just coming in whenever they feel like it. I want us to have our privacy. I’ve talked to Grandfather about this to some extent already. I think you’ll like the changes.” He pulled out his wand and aimed it at the door while deciding which spell to start with.

“So who can get in, once you’re finished?” Ginny said.

“You, me and the elves. That’s all.”

“Are we going to be Secret-Keepers or something?”

He nodded. “Or something.”

Harry proceeded to cast several spells on the house while Ginny and the elves watched. When he was satisfied, he turned to them and smiled. “That should do it.”

“What did you do? I’ve never heard of most of those spells.”

“For one thing, our house is hidden between the neighbouring houses again. It won’t show up for anyone but us unless we tell it to. Paparazzi, fan girls, nosy neighbours, intrusive relatives—none of them will hang around if the house can’t be seen.”

Ginny clapped her hands in glee. “Privacy at last!”

“Yeah! Also, nobody can unlock those locks but the four of us. I’ll write down the counter-spells and give a sealed copy to Ron, Remus and Grandfather, in case of emergency, but they should never need to use them.”

“That sounds great, Harry. Well done!”

He pulled her into his arms. “I’m glad you approve! Now, then, wife, it seems to me we were asleep when Ron and Hermione’s arrival woke us.”

“Yeah, we were.” A spark of mischief was in her eyes.

Harry grinned at her, then looked at Dobby. “We’ll be in our room. We’ll come out for lunch later.” With that, he picked up his wife and carried the giggling woman back up the stairs.



# Now And Forever

## Chapter 36

Two nights later, Harry and Ginny stood in their doorway, watching their guests arrive. The twins were the first to Apparate to the path in front of the house. They approached the door with twin grins.

“What have you done to yourselves?” Fred said in mock horror when he looked at them more closely. “Is there a hex on you, or a pox or what?”

“It’s called a suntan, you great prat!” Ginny said, pulling her tall brothers into a group hug.

“Where do you buy those? We could market them as a great prank! Imagine, a redhead waking up with dark skin one day. What a horrible shock!” George said, holding his sister at arm’s length and studying her face.

She shook her head and laughed. “It’s not horrible at all!” she said, shoos her brothers inside as Remus and Tonks arrived with baby Matthew in Tonks’s arms.

“Look at you!” Harry said, kissing Matthew as he hugged Tonks. “You’ve grown so much since I saw you last!”

“Babies have a way of doing that,” Tonks said. “And you! You look so well-rested! And the tan suits you, Harry! Where did you go?”

“We’ll tell everyone at the same time, all right? Come on in.”

Molly, Arthur, Ron, Hermione and Dumbledore arrived in quick succession. Molly gasped when she saw the colour of her daughter’s skin. “What happened?”

“It’s a suntan, Mum, don’t worry. It will fade soon,” Ginny said as she led her parents inside.

“Ah, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “I see your holiday agreed with you.”

Harry beamed. “Yes, it did.”

“Wonderful. I want to hear all about it!”

“At dinner, OK?” Harry said as he closed the door behind his grandfather.

When everyone moved into the dining room, Harry hesitated. It was his house. He should sit at the head of the table! But there were three older men here, any one of whom deserved the seat at the head of the table. And if he sat in that chair, Ginny would wind up at the far end of the table away from him. He didn’t want that. He looked at her in confusion.

“Come on, love,” she said, taking his hand and leading him to the head of the table. She sat down in the chair to his right, which made him smile. She leaned toward him and murmured, “I didn’t want to sit at the far end away from you.”

She hasn’t learned Legilimency, has she? He gave her a grin as he sat down.

“And no, I can’t read your mind, but I can read your eyes,” she said with smug satisfaction. “I was right, wasn’t I?”

He smiled and said with great deliberation, “Yes, dear.”

She giggled. “Oh, well said!”

Fred groaned. “George, did you hear that? The hero of the wizarding world has surrendered to our sister!”

George started to make some cheeky remark, but held his hands up in surrender when Ginny turned to him with an eyebrow raised, almost daring him to say something rude. He cleared his throat. “Better her than someone else.”

“True,” Fred agreed. “Ron, pass the potatoes?”

Food was soon being passed around the heavily-laden table. Bits were tossed to Hedwig, who was perched on the back of Harry’s chair, and Ginny’s cat, Trouble, who prowled under the table from person to person, rubbing against their legs until he was given some little treat, which he always accepted with great delicacy. Merlin sat on his perch observing everything, but taking scraps from the table didn’t interest him.

“So where did you go?” Hermione had an eager light in her eyes. “You said you’d tell us over dinner.”

“We went to Maui,” Harry said, sharing a grin with his wife.

Molly frowned in confusion. “Maui? Where’s that?”

"That's in the middle of the Pacific!" Arthur said at the same time. "However did you get there?"

"It's one of the Hawaiian Islands, Mum," Ginny explained, "and Harry flashed us there."

"I didn't know a phoenix could flash that far," Hermione said, looking at Harry in wonder.

"He was exhausted. He collapsed when we got there," Ginny said. "Scared me half to death!"

"And she kept refusing to look round to see where we were," Harry said, grinning at his wife. "She was so worried about me, bless her."

"I didn't want my shiny new husband to be damaged just hours after we were married!" Ginny patted his hand. "But he was fine," she told the others. "He just needed to catch his breath."

"Why Maui?" Hermione said. "What's it like?"

"We went to Maui because nobody there had any idea who I was," Harry said.

"Except for that one bloke," Ginny corrected.

Harry grinned at his wife. "Yeah, well, he didn't bother us long."

"What happened?" Remus said, leaning forward to see them better.

As Harry told them about the man who'd recognized them and taken their pictures, he got up and retrieved a fat envelope from the sideboard. "The only good thing about that was that he got a lot of nice pictures of us." He passed the photos around. "I'm going to ask Trent or Colin if they know how to make them move, but even if they can't do that, they're nice pictures."

As the family ate dinner and looked at the photos, Harry relaxed, enjoying both the food and the company immensely. Ginny had taken up the story of their trip, telling the family all about the sights they'd seen and the adventures they'd had there. When he'd finished eating, Harry passed around the pictures he and Ginny had taken as she continued talking about their trail ride, snorkelling, the whales. Eventually, she got around to talking about the things they'd seen in the shops, which was Dobby's cue to bring in the gifts Harry and Ginny had brought for the family.

"Thanks, Dobby," Harry said, taking the packages from the elf. He handed half the stack to Ginny to distribute. "We knew it might be a long time before you lot got to Hawaii, so we brought a sampling of the islands to you."

Fred and George held the matching t-shirts Harry had handed them and looked at the pictures on the front. "Erm, Harry? You want to explain this, mate?" Fred said, frowning at the strange image.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other and laughed. "The state fish of Hawaii has a long, complicated name. This fish, with all his Muggle name badges, is showing how his name is pronounced." He looked at Ginny again and together they said, "Humu-humu-nuku-nuku-apu-a-a," which made everyone laugh.

Fred and George looked at each other and grinned, then pulled the shirts on over their robes. They stood up and read aloud, "Humu-humu-nuku-nuku-apu-a-a" over and over until the rhythm of the word started them dancing, their hands above their heads, silly grins on their faces.

"I knew they'd like those," Harry said with satisfaction.

"What's this, Ginny?" Molly said as she, Hermione and Tonks each unfolded lengths of beautiful cloth. Each was a different colour, but all had patterns of gorgeous flowers or brilliantly-coloured parrots.

"These are sarongs. You can use them when you're at the beach, or when you get out of the shower, or wear them around the house on hot days," Ginny said, pulling hers out of a nearby drawer and demonstrating several ways of tying it around her body. "Or you can just use it as a decoration if you want. We knew Hawaiian clothing wouldn't be something you'd wear often here in England, but they were just so beautiful . . ."

"I love it!" Tonks said, wrapping hers around herself and tying it awkwardly over one shoulder.

Ginny laughed. "If you tie it like that, you won't be covered at all. Let me show you."

"It's beautiful!" Hermione, of course, had tied her sarong successfully on the first try.

Ron looked her up and down and grinned. "Yeah, you can wear that around the house, but nowhere else!"

"Ha-ha," Hermione said, walking around with her hips swaying, enjoying the swing of the gorgeous fabric.

Ron's eyes widened. "Hermione, if you wear that someplace else—"

She glanced at him over her shoulder and giggled. "I'll just wear this for you, love."

Ron relaxed visibly. "Oh. OK."

Remus and Dumbledore were given packages of Kona coffee, along with the warning that it was much stronger than what they were used to. Dumbledore was also given a silly hat with an embroidered image of a man with a long white beard sunning himself on the beach.

“I thought you might like the inspiration,” Harry said as he handed the hat to his grandfather.

Dumbledore studied the old man on the hat and chuckled. “He seems to be having quite a nice time. Thank you, Harry!” He put the hat on his head and beamed. “A perfect fit.”

Harry handed Tonks a little t-shirt for Matthew that said, “My brother went to Maui and all I got was this t-shirt!” Tonks smiled and gave it to Matthew, who hugged it, then started waving it around.

“He likes it!” Tonks said.

Harry smiled and took his seat again while Ginny showed the family how the Hawaiians dance.

“Harry can do the men’s dance!” Ginny said suddenly. “C’mon, Harry, show them!”

“I’m no good at it, Gin,” he protested. “It looks silly!”

“And your problem with that is . . .?” Ron’s eyebrow quirked up in a teasing expression.

Harry sighed. “OK. You just do this.” He stood up and bent his knees, then did the knee snaps and hand motions he could remember, jumped to do a quarter-turn and repeated the motions. Fred, George and Ron mimicked him, laughing hard the whole time.

“Harry, you rock!” Tonks said, her hair flaring to a brilliant shade of turquoise to match the sarong draped around her shoulders.

“It’s a fun dance to do,” Harry admitted. “Shall I teach it to Matthew?”

Tonks laughed. “He already knows the bouncing-on-bent-knees part of that dance,” she said, offering the baby to Harry.

“C’mon, little bro, let’s work on it.” Harry took Matthew in his arms and sat down, then held the baby’s hands and pulled him to his feet. Matthew laughed and cooed as Harry held him in strong, gentle hands while the baby “danced” in Harry’s lap. When Matthew finally grew tired of dancing, everyone applauded.

Harry cuddled his little brother and watched his wife, her hips still swaying in a lovely hula as she taught Hermione, Tonks and Molly the dance. Harry glanced around the table at the rest of his family. His family. He smiled. He was married to the love of his life. The war was over and he was finally beginning to recover from it. And he had a big, rowdy, loving family. Harry Potter was a happy man at last.

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The End

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