

Harry Potter

**Away From  
the Sun**

*hgfan1111*

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# Away From the Sun

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Complete.

**Summary:** What do you do when your life is torn from you? You fight back, that's what you do. Ginny Weasley was always strong. But is she strong enough to survive when the world spins out of control around her?

# Preface: Away From the Sun

The faint chirping sound woke her from a wonderful night's sleep—something she hadn't had in a long time. Yawning, she looked up at the clock; red shining numbers proclaiming it three o'clock in the morning.

Whoever was on the other end was going to die, Ginny decided. She glanced around the room for a minute before slowly lifting the covers and sliding down to the floor. The jeans she'd worn earlier were crumpled on the other side of the room. Silently, Ginny moved over to them, still following the annoying little sound. She fumbled through the pockets until her hand closed over the small rectangle of plastic that was glowing and vibrating.

"Seriously," she whispered into it as she flipped it open, "someone had better be dead. Because if they're not—"

"Ginny?"

Ginny froze, hearing a voice she'd never considered would come out of her mobile phone. "Good morning, Hermione," she answered, sinking to sit fully on the rug. It was cold on the floor, causing her to shiver. "Or, it will be when it actually *is* morning."

"I'm sorry about that," Hermione continued on, although she didn't sound sorry. Not at all. In fact, she sounded rather...

"Do you know how angry I am right now?"

Brassed off.

Ginny fought the urge to roll her eyes, pulling her bare legs up into the large t-shirt she wore.

"Good to hear from you too," she quipped back, keeping her voice so low she wondered how Hermione was hearing it anyway. "How's the job, Ginny? How are things?"

"You can just stop that right now, Ginny," Hermione scolded. "You're the one that has completely disappeared. No one's talked to you, or seen you, for months."

A headache was beginning to form in her temples and Ginny pressed her thumb and forefinger there, rubbing in circles. Hermione continued her rant and Ginny tuned her out, for the most part.

"Do you know what I went through to get this number?"

Ginny's eyes narrowed and she glanced back over to the bed. "How *did* you get this number?" she growled, already fearing the answer. There was only one person who who actually *had* Ginny's number.

"Well..."

"Jasper," Ginny hissed, silently vowing several means of torture and death, then ruling them out as

not cruel enough for a wake-up call at three o'clock in the morning.

"You can't blame him, Ginny. He's worried about you."

"I'm fine," Ginny said, a bit more forcefully than she had planned.

Hermione took what sounded like a very controlled breath. "You need to come home, Ginny." Her argument ended there and Ginny was surprised. Usually Hermione was good for at least another ten minutes. Obviously, she was going to have to have a discussion with Jasper. It might just involve knives.

"I.. I can't do that, Hermione," she answered honestly, instead of lying. Her eyes traveled up the bed to the man laying there, sleeping peacefully. "Not right now, anyway."

Joe needed her. They needed each other, really.

"Why, Ginny?" Hermione pleaded. "Your family misses you. I know we haven't always supported you in what you've done... but we still love you."

"I love everyone too," Ginny said, finally standing. Her eyes didn't leave Joe. He looked so young, so at peace when he slept. "Please tell them that," Ginny said softly. "I just... I can't come home right now."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Ginny," Hermione warned, defeat leaking through the little speaker on the phone.

"I do," Ginny said, a fond smile turning one edge of her mouth up. "I do," she confirmed again. Joe's hand reached out for her in bed, sweeping across the spot that she had made into her own. "I need to go," she said quickly.

The little button she pressed to end the call made a sound in protest, and Ginny turned off the phone, slipping it between the mattress and the box springs before sliding back under the covers and into Joe's warm, sleepy embrace.

*I know exactly what I'm doing.*

# Chapter 1: Here Without You

*September 1998*

Ginny laughed as Demelza tossed a piece of toast at Richie's head. The noise of the Great Hall floated above her like a cloud, sometimes catching her attention, but often times simply existing there until Ginny felt the desire to let it in. It felt good to be back at Hogwarts again.

And yet, the normalcy of it all seemed surreal at times. She'd be walking through the corridors, laughing and talking, and then it would hit. She would realize that she was standing in the same spot where Fred had died, or she'd come upon Tonks' body. And the whole overwhelming weight of it all would press down on her chest until she almost couldn't breathe.

The only good thing about that, was that almost everyone at the castle was having the same kinds of sensations. So she wasn't alone. That thought helped, especially when all she wanted to do was rush home to check and make sure everyone was still safe and whole.

"Post!" Jack's call from further down the table made Ginny look up, searching the ceiling. Pig circled twice before he fell directly into her glass of pumpkin juice.

"Oh, Pig, you little menace," Ginny growled, rescuing the little owl from her drink and quickly removing the scroll he was carrying. She dried the parchment, but purposely ignored the owl, who seemed oblivious to his wet, sticky condition. He was happily scratching around in her left-over eggs and bacon.

Ginny shook her head at Ron's owl and turned her attention back to the letter.

"That from Harry?" Demelza asked, nudging her shoulder.

"Yeah." Ginny couldn't help the smile that spread over her face. She never would have thought that Harry would have been so good at writing letters—granted, sometimes he rambled on for whole pages about nothing, and he wasn't always eloquent in what he wanted to say... but he wrote. And that made all the difference to Ginny. He was very steady about making sure to include her in his life, which was what they'd talked about before she'd gotten on the train. There had been enough time apart. They could survive this separation by being strong together.

"Anything important in there?" Demelza asked again, hiding her smile behind her cup.

Ginny rolled her eyes. Her roommate was always digging for something juicy to gossip about. The fact that Ginny just happened to be in love with the most famous wizard in Britain right now, and the fact that he returned those affections, was just too much for her friend. At least she teased in a friendly kind of way, and didn't pester her like some people.

She shrugged, spreading the scroll out in front of her and glancing over the familiar, slanted writing.

*Dear Ginny,*

*I miss you. There, that's out of the way now, and I can tell you what's happening around*

here.

Ginny smiled at the way his silliness bled onto the pages. Harry rarely let his guard down enough around others for them to see this casual, smitten side of himself, but Ginny had a knack, it seemed, for being able to see it. She closed her eyes, remembering stolen moments where she would be able to tickle him into submission, or when they would be kissing and he'd get that sloppy, lopsided smile on his face. Those were the most precious moments to her.

*Training is going well, even though I'm not really doing the standard Auror training. Kingsley said I've done most of it anyway, just not in a formal setting. So he has me working cases beside him.*

*He's very glad the Ministry found someone to take over the Ministry. That really wasn't his idea to be Minister, even though he did a good job for those few months. He's much more suited to being out in the field, working with people. Like me.*

*It's been interesting to see how he works. He's a very dedicated Auror, and I think I can go far learning from him.*

*But, it's strange to be doing something and turn around to ask Ron a question, and have him not there. I went down to the shop yesterday afternoon. Things are going well there. They've got all the basics up and running again. Ron even said he was able to talk George into going back into the inventing room again for awhile this week.*

*He'll get there, Gin, just give him time.*

Harry's reassurance went far to help Ginny feel better about leaving George. And, really, he seemed to be handling Fred's death better than they'd all imagined. He hadn't broken down completely, nor exploded in fits of rage. He was still in mourning, yes, but he seemed to be dealing well with it. And Ron was there to catch him if he ever did stumble.

*Tomorrow I get to be on a full assignment on my own—well, Kingsley will be there, but I'm going to be in charge of this one.*

*The Minister wants a briefing on how we're working on recruiting the Aurors. He specifically asked for me to give it, since he feels that I'm an asset to the Ministry in that area. I know he's mostly posturing for my benefit, (Kingsley agrees with me) but it will be interesting to meet with him.*

*He seems a rather stiff and unyielding fellow, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. And I think Kingsley is just happy that he doesn't have to do the job anymore.*

*I do have to say, I miss Hermione, too. Writing this briefing would have been a lot easier if she was here to tell me what to say.*

Ginny laughed out loud, shaking her head. She'd tell Hermione that, but then Harry would get a letter in reply telling him that it was time for him to do his own work.

"Ginny?"

The red-head looked up to find Hermione standing next to her. "What?" she asked, realizing that her friend had probably been there for some time.

"It's time for class," Hermione shook her head, glancing at Harry's letter. "Harry again?"

Ginny smiled widely and nodded. "He says 'hi'."

"Well," Hermione said, tugging Ginny's bag out from under the bench she was sitting on, "when you write him back, instead of paying attention in Muggle Studies, you can tell him 'hello' for me."

Ginny laughed and tucked the letter in the inner pocket of her robes. She'd have to finish it later.

"Off to potions?" Ginny asked when they reached the Entrance Hall.

"Yeah," Hermione nodded. "I've got to work on my Exploding fluid. It's almost time to add the powdered Enrumpent horn."

"Good luck with that," Ginny grimaced. "All I can say is that I'm glad I'm not taking my N.E.W.T. in Potions."

"You really should, Ginny," Hermione scolded softly. "Professional Quidditch is a wonderful dream—"

"I'm going to make it, Hermione," Ginny responded with determination. She could feel it, literally humming through her veins—the need to prove that she could definitely fly with the best in the world.

Hermione's expression softened and she reached out, giving Ginny's arm a squeeze. "I know you will, Ginny. I just want you to keep your options open."

"I will, Hermione," Ginny promised. "You'd better go. Can't have Slughorn's favorite student late."

Hermione gave her a stern look, but it turned into a laugh. "Only because Harry didn't come back."

A group of students flooded out of the Great Hall and Ginny waived goodbye, moving with the flow of bodies to the Muggle Studies room.

Harry's letter itched inside her robes pocket all morning. There was still a fair bit of it to read and she wondered if she could grab a fast lunch and steal away to the secluded spot near the lake where she and Harry had spent those wonderful hours that seemed forever ago.

By the time Ginny made it all the way from Herbology into the Great Hall for lunch, the noise was overwhelming. The grounds were looking more and more inviting. Ginny reached for an apple and a sandwich, intent on making her escape when Professor McGonagall came into the Hall. Silence rippled across the students as the Professor slowly, but determinedly, made her way to the Gryffindor table.

"Miss Weasley, Miss Granger... would you please come with me?"

Ginny's heart began to pound in her chest, threatening to break out of her rib cage. The

Headmistress's eyes were red and swollen and her mouth was only a thin, tight slit across her face. Ginny's first thought was of George—something had happened to him, he'd finally had a break down.

"Gin," Hermione prodded her, latching onto her elbow and helping her move forward. McGonagall was already on her way back out of the Hall.

Allowing herself to be led along, Ginny's ears filled with the whispers of gossip and speculation. Her other hand ached and she glanced down to see an apple clutched tightly in her fist. Try as she might, she couldn't loosen her grip, and her knuckles were white, the tips of her fingers wet where the skin of the fruit was breaking open.

The ominous feeling of the situation pressed in on her, filling her head with a fuzzy sound that made it almost impossible to concentrate.

"What is it, Professor?" Hermione said, seeming a great distance away, even though Ginny could feel her hand holding onto her own robes.

'Please don't be George! Please don't be George!' Ginny repeated over and over in her head, shaking it to clear the buzzing away.

"I'm so very sorry to inform you of this..."

"Smidgen?"

Ginny started, looking up to see Bill standing next to McGonagall. She blinked, her brain too slow to piece together why he would be here at the school.

"There was an attack at the Ministry today," McGonagall continued, her voice low and full of emotion. "Mr. Potter—"

Ginny didn't hear anything more as her world spun around her. Her fingers dug even tighter into the apple, the juices running down her hand and dripping onto the flagstones.

Hermione's voice cried out and Ginny stumbled when the weight of the other woman pressed against her. Someone lifted her off, but Ginny didn't see who it was.

"He's—" she choked out, blinking up at Bill.

"I'm so sorry, Ginny." He shook his head and his voice cracked. The scars on his face seemed to stand out even more with the tortured look that he wore, and Ginny's eyes traced the deepest one, running down the side of his face and disappearing under his jawline. "He... he didn't suffer."

The buzzing was back and Ginny felt the apple slip from her hand, making a sick, squelching sort of sound as it bounced on the floor and rolled away. She stared at the broken, red flesh until it started to go black in her eyes.

\* \* \*

When Ginny opened her eyes again, it was looking up at the ceilings of the hospital wing. She'd

been there enough through the years that the buttresses and pillars were familiar. She just wished they weren't.

The truth of what had happened pressed in on her, making it impossible catch her breath.

*Harry...*

His face flashed before her eyes, grinning at her as they bantered back and forth, and then leaning down to press his lips against hers—NO! She had to focus on something else, because the pain was overwhelming, and Ginny knew she would drown in it if she let go.

Sitting up in bed, she blinked the haziness out of her eyes, looking around the room. Hermione was on the bed next to her, bundled up in blankets; only her bushy hair sticking out.

Another bed in the ward was occupied, and Ginny could tell by the boots sitting at the foot of it that Bill had stayed. Surely he should be with their family, not here babysitting her.

She slid back on the bed until her back was pressed against the stone wall behind her. The cold seeped into her skin, tingling until it was all she could feel.

*How could he be... dead?*

It didn't even make sense to her. Harry was... he was *Harry*./i The thought of him not always being there made her shudder. Flashes of pain from months ago, seeing his limp body in Hagrid's arms, and then laying on the ground... A sob welled up in her throat and echoed around the room when she released it.

It never really went away—the hurt from thinking he had died those short months ago. It just rolled and festered deep inside her until now.

"Gin."

She looked up through tear-filled eyes at her oldest brother, his clothing rumpled from sleeping in it, and his face haggard and worn. But Ginny couldn't make anything come out of her mouth; she opened it, but the breath wouldn't push the sound out.

In a second, she was cuddled into his side, wrapped in his arms and pressing to his chest. His familiar scent filled her and she focused on that.

"If I could change him places..." Bill started, his voice thick with emotion.

"No," Ginny shook her head against him. "He wouldn't want that." Her voice sounded foreign to her and she swallowed the sick taste out of her mouth.

Bill didn't reply, but his chest hitched under her head and the tears she had held back started to fall, slowly dripping down her cheeks and making wet spots on Bill's shirt.

"Maybe it's like before," she said quietly, the idea slipping out of her mouth before she could recall it. "And he's not really gone."

"Gin," Bill agonized, pulling her tightly into him, and pressing a kiss to her messy head of hair. "He's gone... I'm so sorry."

She nodded, clenching her throat around the hysterical feelings. Ginny didn't want to break down completely, although it was close—she could feel it creeping up on her.

"Harry and Kingsley were with the Minister when it happened." Bill's voice sounded hollow and from a far distance, even as it rumbled in his chest, right under her ear. "A man broke into the office... We don't really know all the details, but I heard he killed the two Aurors standing guard in the hall."

Ginny pressed her eyes closed, knowing she had to hear this, but not wanting the picture in her head.

"Kingsley wounded him, but took a blasting hex to the head."

She winced, sucking in a breath of air through her teeth, making them ache. But it didn't matter, because the rest of her hurt too.

"He's not dead," Bill continued, his hand absently brushing through her long hair. "At least not last I heard. They had him at St. Mungo's."

"And... Harry?" Ginny asked, her question soaking into his shirt, much like the tears that were still leaking out.

Bill cleared his throat and seemed to gather his thoughts. "The man tried for the Minister, and Harry was in the wrong place... he took the killing curse."

A small sob escaped her, followed by an even bigger one—and they kept mounting, rolling up her chest and washing over her, until she couldn't hold them back anymore.

How long they sat there, holding each other and crying, Ginny didn't know. Finally, the tears slowed and Ginny felt an achy tiredness seep into her bones.

"Is everyone else..."

"In shock," Bill said, sniffing. "I was supposed to bring you both home."

Ginny glanced over at Hermione, only to notice she hadn't moved at all. "They gave her something?"

Bill chuckled slightly. "Yeah. She was hysterical, and then you... falling to the ground like that... I thought McGonagall was going to have to stun Hermione. She was shrieking and... completely out of control."

The picture made Ginny smile wryly. They'd both done what they hated the most. Hermione hated being out of control; everything had to be precise and ordered in her world. But this... well, Ginny understood perfectly. This threw everything off kilter in the world.

And Ginny had given in to weakness completely. She'd shut down her mind—letting the pain win. It

was what she feared the most—no wonder it had won...

"Are you?" Ginny asked, "Taking us home," she continued when Bill was silent.

"In the morning," he said softly. His hand had returned to her hair and Ginny nodded against him. Somehow, the thought of the Burrow didn't bring her comfort... it didn't seem like home anymore. Home was... home was gone now.

Flashes of Harry's face, his eyes bright and glowing-green, kept intruding on her, threatening to break another wave of helplessness over her.

"Bill?"

"Yeah, Smidgen?"

"In my robes... there's a letter... Can you get it for me?" The letter had been nagging at her, not letting her go since she woke up. It was a constant presence in the back of her mind.

"Yeah," he said softly. Her robes flew at them from across the hospital wing, and Bill snatched them out of the air, rustling them around until he pulled out Harry's letter, wrinkled and mashed on one side. He held it out to her and Ginny slowly reached for the parchment, wondering if she could do this now.

She turned in Bill's embrace and flattened the letter against her thigh, pressing the creases out with her fingertips.

But when her eyes focused on Harry's writing... she only saw the slanted loop he made with his 'g's' and the way his 'H's' were lopsided, reminding her of his smile.

Her chest tightened like a vice and tears sprung up, blurring the words so that she couldn't even read them.

"I can't read it."

"It's alright, Gin," Bill soothed, reaching for the letter. "It's too soon."

"No," Ginny protested, turning her face up to him, "I can't make out the words—they're all blurry."

His brow furrowed in concern, but then he nodded, slowly taking the parchment and clearing his throat, preparing to read from it.

"I left off where he was telling me about..." Ginny trailed off, realizing that Harry had been excited for the opportunity to report to the Minister. That must have been where... She shook that thought away, terrified of breaking down again. "His meeting today," she choked out, swiping angrily at the tears that dribbled down her cheeks.

"Okay," Bill whispered, his eyes focusing down on the letter. "Erm... Gin, are you sure you want me to read this, it gets more... personal..."

Ginny chewed on her bottom lip, debating, and then nodded. She needed personal right now. It

might embarrass Bill, but he would get over it.

"Alright," he nodded, firmly setting his jaw in determination. "I do have to say, I miss Hermione, too. Writing this briefing would have been a lot easier if she was here to tell me what to say," Bill read, his voice low enough that only Ginny could hear it.

"I miss you all, but most of all you, Ginny," he continued. "I knew it would be hard with you going back to Hogwarts—which is where you need to be right now—but I didn't realize how hard not seeing you every day would be. Not hearing your laugh at the breakfast table, not bumping into you on the stairs and using it as an excuse to steal a kiss or two.

"Those moments were what I lived for this summer, Ginny. You really made everything alright for me, when I wasn't sure it ever would be again. You are everything to me, Ginny. My future—and I can't wait until we can be together every day."

Bill's voice broke on the last word and Ginny pressed her face into his shirt, breathing in the scent of him once more to ease the pain. He cleared his throat several more times and Ginny felt his chest tighten as his voice wavered.

"Did Hermione ever tell you about our third year, when she used the time turner? Some days I want one of those—to go back to the night of your birthday. Or a pensieve maybe. I play that moment over and over in my head, every day. Laying there in bed with you, feeling your skin next to mine..."

Bill trailed off and his hand dropped. "Ginny... I'm not sure..."

"Please, Bill," Ginny begged, tears thickening her throat. "I need this... I need to remember... to feel him close to me again."

He was silent for a minute before he nodded jerkily, his jaw squaring. He lifted the letter again and scowled down at it.

"Making love with you, Ginny, was the most important moment of my life. I want you to know that I love you more than anything and that I'm never going to stop. When you get lonely, or overwhelmed with all those N.E.W.T.'s and Quidditch—Did I tell you how brilliant watching you play professionally is going to be?—"

Ginny chuckled through her tears at Harry's enthusiasm. He had been her biggest fan at the games they played in the clearing at the Burrow on the hot summer days. He'd been the first she'd confided in that she wanted to play professionally. It was his face, cheering in the stands, that Ginny saw when she closed her eyes and thought about playing.

"Remember me holding you, and loving you, Ginny, because I'll never stop loving you—no matter what. I promise you that." Bill's voice broke again and he finished in a whisper. "All my love, forever and ever, Harry."

Surprisingly, the sadness crept in this time, rather than washing over her in a wave. Harry's promises... he'd never be able to keep them now.

"If I'd have known," Bill said, folding the parchment again and setting it aside, "I'd have kicked his

arse.”

“No you wouldn’t have,” Ginny said softly, looking down at her hands and picking at a piece of skin that was pulling away from her thumb nail. “You wouldn’t have said anything, because it was none of your business. It was something between Harry... and me.” Her voice hitched and she closed her eyes, seeing Harry’s face close to hers, his hot breath on her forehead and the scent of him filling her completely.

“Yeah, maybe,” Bill said, not sounding completely convinced.

Ginny pulled away from him when the pain in her heart began to be too much. She needed... well, what she needed, she could no longer have... but it wouldn’t have been Bill anyway.

“Ginny,” he tugged at her shoulder, sliding off the bed as she curled around her knees, burrowing into the scratchy blankets that always smelled of antiseptic.

“Just go, Bill,” she whispered in a tortured voice. The pain was surging up her throat now and flashes of Harry were playing behind her closed eyes. She knew it was torturing herself, but Ginny clutched at them, allowing herself to drown in the memories.

\* \* \*

The Burrow smelled the same, had the same warmth as when she’d left it weeks ago, but Ginny didn’t allow it to filter into her. She welcomed the squeeze of Apparition as they traveled home, because it made her feel... something.

“Oh, Ginny-love,” her mother greeted both she and Hermione at the door, wrapping them in hugs that began to cut off oxygen.

“Mrs. Weasley, is there anything I can do?” Hermione asked, her hands wringing together until her fingers were white.

“Oh, no, you go and sit down, dear—”

“Really,” Hermione interrupted, her cheeks turning pink, “I could really use something to do... it would help me.”

Ginny watched this all dispassionately, standing in the middle of the kitchen, swaying slightly in place. Her mother immediately put Hermione to work, chopping vegetables at the kitchen table. But Ginny had no desire for menial tasks to keep her occupied.

“Bill...” Her mother’s questioning glance at the brother who stood behind her, made Ginny scowl down at the floor. She knew what they were silently communicating. *Is Ginny alright? What can I do?*

She wanted to retort, scream at the top of her lungs that she wasn’t alright, and she would never be alright, because Harry was gone. Harry whom she had been in love with for longer than she remembered. Memory didn’t exist before he loved her too, it seemed.

Ginny lifted her hand, scratching her head and glaring at the floor, trying to remember the moment she'd understood that it really was love, and not some silly crush. It all blended together now and all she felt was a gaping hole in her heart that Harry had taken with him.

Harry's words in his letter echoed in her brain.... *never stop loving you... I promise...* She clung to them, stuffing them in the hole and hoping they would be enough.

Her head felt light and she held out her arm, reaching for something to brace herself on. Bill's firm grip found her.

"I'm taking this one up to bed," he said, his words echoing in her ears. Through glazed eyes, she watched the world turn sideways as Bill lifted her into his arms and left the room; her mother's concerned face, now streaked with fresh tears was the last thing she saw.

Bill laid her on her bed, tugging her robes off of her shoulders and making her roll so that she wasn't wearing them anymore. He moved to drape them over the chair, but Ginny's voice stilled him.

"Lay them over me," she asked. He stopped, held them aloft and narrowed his eyes at the fabric.

"Wouldn't you rather have—"

"They're Harry's," she explained, knowing he would understand perfectly. He studied her for a moment and then silently agreed, draping the black fabric over her body, leaving just the right amount for her to cuddle into at the top. She pulled her knees up so that her toes would slide under too, and wrapped her hand around the lapel.

"Do you need anything else?" he asked, brushing the hair back off of her forehead.

Ginny looked up at him with sleepy eyes. "Only Harry." Her voice cracked as she made the joke—half meaning it, yet understanding the morbidity of it.

"Ginny..." he sighed. His jaw set again and he stared at the white walls of the room.

"I'm fine," Ginny choked out. "Well..."

"You will be, one day," he promised before bussing her forehead and standing. "I'll check on you in a few hours."

The door made the same squeaking sound it always did when he closed it and Ginny stared at it. Shouldn't it be different now?

Shouldn't the Burrow be cold and smell of something putrid, rather than her mother's homemade bread and roasting meat? Why did the stairs moan and groan in the same places, and why was her bed just as soft as she remembered?

Everything was supposed to be different now. It was supposed to be harsh and hurtful and alone.

Ginny pressed her eyes closed against those thoughts, tears leaking out the corners. Her hand found a small hole in the robe, and she slid her finger in and out of it. This robe had been Harry's in his

sixth year—one that had survived the Horcrux hunt with very minimal damage. He'd been about to bin them this summer when Ginny asked if she could have them instead. Harry had gladly given them to her, along with a peck on the end of her nose.

She replayed the memory now in her mind; every word, every expression, every feel of his touch on her.

\* \* \*

Voices drifting up the stairs and slinking under the gap at the bottom of the door woke her. For once, Ginny's sleep hadn't been plagued with vague and fuzzy images of Harry. She hadn't dreamed at all—and it was a relief.

It sounded as if the whole family was downstairs, no doubt huddled around the kitchen table.

Ginny stood slowly, not even bothering to look in the mirror and assess her appearance before slowly walking down the stairs. She tried to avoid the squeaky ones, less out of stealth than for something for her to concentrate on.

Her progress halted on the first landing, when she heard her name. It was Ron's voice.

"... shouldn't we wait for Ginny? She... she needs to know this too."

"She was sleeping when I looked in on her," Hermione answered softly.

Ginny sank to the stair, pressing herself against the railing as she had when she was little and not allowed to be a part of a conversation. She felt little again now. Her hand trembled as it wrapped around the spindle.

"I still don't feel right about her not being here," Ron protested.

"Ron." Her mother's voice, quiet but firm, crept up the stairs. "I'm not sure how much Ginny can take right now... you didn't see her when she walked in here." Her voice broke and Ginny imagined that her father put his arm around her shoulder. "She looked like a ghost."

"She's stronger than you think," Bill interjected. Ginny cheered him on mentally, even as part of her knew she would never go down and sit at the table. She had a feeling what they were discussing would be important, but that she wouldn't want to participate. At all.

Hermione's voice echoed up next. "Why don't we just discuss it while she sleeps and then one of us can talk to her privately about it?" Agreement sounded around the room and Ginny sighed in relief. She certainly didn't feel up to discussing what she felt they were about to in front of everyone.

Ron cleared his throat, but continued being silent. Ginny wondered if it was all too much, and then rolled her eyes at herself. Of course Ron was overwhelmed. His best friend was just... murdered. The word caught in her throat, almost choking her.

Percy's smooth voice took over, but Ginny could still hear the emotion in it. "Here, Ron, let me." Silence answered him and Ginny wondered if Ron nodded his agreement or simply just buried his

face in Hermione's shoulder.

"Harry was in the Minister's office. He and Auror Shacklebolt were scheduled to give a progress report on recruiting Aurors for the Academy. Our numbers have been declining in the past years."

"Wonder why," George said, his tone holding no little sarcasm.

Percy continued, unfettered by his brother's comment. "They were in the office for perhaps forty minutes when the man entered the exterior office."

"Aren't there guards that stand outside it?"

Ginny was surprised to hear Charlie's voice added to the mix. The thought that he'd come all the way from Romania warmed her a small bit.

"I heard he killed them," Bill mumbled.

"Normally there are guards, yes. But Minister Winters asked that they not be there anymore. He said it portrayed the Minister as incompetent and showed weakness."

"Bloody foolish, if you ask me," George growled. "Any nutter can walk right in—obviously." His last word was said quietly and Ginny could hear the hurt in his voice. Poor George, losing a twin only months ago, and now a close friend; someone Ginny knew he loved like a brother.

"They were in the middle of their report... when the man burst in." Percy's voice vibrated and Ginny could only imagine the scene. She brought her feet up to the same step she sat on and wrapped her arms tightly around her knees.

"He... he killed the secretary, Miss Baldwin. She didn't even see him coming..."

"Kingsley heard the commotion," her father said, his voice rusty like an old hinge, "and barricaded the door. The man..."

"Used a blasting hex," Percy picked up the story again and Ginny shuddered at the image.

"They're not sure if Kingsley will even live yet," Bill put in. His voice was muffled and Ginny pictured him sitting with his face buried in Fleur's body. "Minerva flooded St. Mungo's this morning and they said it was still touch and go. He'll..." he paused, probably swallowing the taste of bile, like Ginny was, "he'll never be the same, anyway."

"Harry..." Percy's voice croaked and he trailed off.

Ron's angry voice interrupted. Ginny could picture him standing in the kitchen, his chest heaving and his face fierce. "Tell me Harry at least got off a spell."

There wasn't an answer and Ginny lifted her head.

"Four deep slices, right through the man's chest," her father said. Ginny had to lean forward and concentrate to hear the whispered words. "I don't know the curse..."

“Sectumsempra,” Ron affirmed.

Ginny knew that curse. It was the one Harry had used on Malfoy in his sixth year. She was torn between being thrilled that at least Harry had been able to defend himself, and sick at the thought of the spell.

“Harry stepped right in front of the curse meant for the Minister,” Percy continued, his voice very tight, as if he were speaking through his teeth. “The Minister... well, he finished off the attacker.”

Several sobs were heard around the kitchen and Ginny stood quickly, her legs wobbling precariously on the steps. She turned and ran back up the stairs, not caring who heard her. She didn't stop at her bedroom, but continued up one more level until she reached the bedroom where Harry had stayed. She burst into it, choking back her own tears.

The bed was unmade, the worn quilt and sheet rumped around the pillow that Harry always wrapped himself around. Her back pressed against the closed door and she looked around, not bothering to stop the tears that fell down, dripping onto the wooden floors.

A pair of jeans lay crumpled over the desk chair; coins littering the floor below them. The rubbish bin in the corner was overflowing with crumpled parchment—probably discarded letters to her, she realized.

Harry's scent was all around her as she took in the room through blurry eyes. It filled her lungs and pressed against her skin until she wondered if she would drown. Stumbling, Ginny reached for the bed, grasping the bedding and pulling herself into it. The blankets wrapped around her like a nest and Ginny curled inside. She pressed her eyes closed and drank in Harry's warm scent, even knowing that it just might kill her.

Right now, death would be welcome.

# Chapter 2: When I'm Gone

The day of the funeral, Ginny didn't say a word to anyone. It wasn't really a conscious decision on her part to not participate, but more that she really just didn't know what to say.

The numbness that had set in was welcome in some ways, but completely consuming. Nothing tasted right when she tried to eat it. Nothing sounded right when someone talked to her.

The only thing that was real was lying in Harry's bed, curled around his pillow. She hadn't slept in her own bed since that first night back at the Burrow. She knew her mother was tempted to say something, had even taken the breath to tell her how inappropriate it was for her to be sleeping in Harry's bed, wearing Harry's clothing around the house, clutching his belongings to her. Thankfully, someone had interceded. Ginny wasn't sure who, her back was turned.

But there, cocooned in everything Harry... in the place where they'd given each other the full gift of their love... it was okay for Ginny to cry and to dream of him. Outside... well, outside the world was moving on.

"It seems fitting that it's raining today," Hermione said, looking out through the window and watching the drops splatter on the panes of glass. "Don't you think?"

Ginny didn't answer. She was still in Harry's old t-shirt and track pants, her legs folded under her on his bed. Hermione had come in to try and help her get ready. Her hair was now shiny and pulled back away from her face with silver clips that Hermione had loaned her.

But she just couldn't bring herself to get into the dark green dress that hung on the outside of the wardrobe. It was lovely; and so dark that it was almost black. Fleur had found it in the back of her closet and, after a few of her mother's alteration charms, it fit Ginny well.

The fine quality of the velvet fabric soothed her and Ginny slowly stood, making her way to stand in front of it. Her fingers sought the edge of it and brushed the fibers one way and then the other.

"Do you need help getting it on?" Hermione asked, still looking out the window. Ginny glanced at her and could see the reflection of the rain on her face. Or maybe those were tears.

She shook her head, not caring if Hermione saw her or not, but still didn't move to get dressed. Her mother, or Fleur, or maybe even Angelina, would be up here soon, knocking on the door and telling them it was time to go.

Even if she didn't want to.

The public funeral was a joke, really. Anyone who really knew Harry would understand that. He would hate having hundreds of people crying and dabbing the corners of their eyes, pretending to be crushed by his death. It was the worst kind of hypocrisy.

She supposed she could refuse to go, just curl back into Harry's bed and read his letter once more. She didn't even need the parchment anymore—the words were engraved on her heart.

And, really, what could the press say about it? She and Harry had made no secret of their relationship, walking down Diagon Alley hand in hand, caught kissing and having the picture plastered all over the Daily Prophet...

Her fingers stroked the sleeve of the dress again and she sighed. It was people like Neville, and Luna, and Hagrid that Ginny most wanted to be there for. Yet, at the same time, she didn't want to see them at all. Then the hurt would resonate in her heart again and she'd be forced to feel.

With another sigh, Ginny gathered herself enough to tug Harry's t-shirt over her head and slide his track pants down around her ankles.

The dress went on smoothly, hugging her curves warmly. Once it was on, Hermione stood behind her and silently did up the small buttons on the back.

"You look pale."

The comment startled them both and Ginny glanced in the mirror to see that she really did look dreadfully pale.

"Oh, dear," Hermione worried, fussing with the ends of Ginny's hair. "Maybe we should have chosen something lighter."

Ginny didn't respond as she studied herself in the mirror. Dark circles were under her eyes and her freckles stood out like black spots against her skin. She looked like a ghost.

Which was rather fitting, because she felt like one too.

Her feet fumbled around for the matching shoes, which elevated her a few inches. Her robes—Harry's robes, with the hole in them—went on next. Her mother would be mortified, but Ginny needed to have something of Harry's close to her today.

Hermione lifted Ginny's hair out from the robes and lay in around her shoulders, tears filling her eyes again.

"You look lovely, Ginny. You really do. Harry would... he would..." She couldn't finish and Ginny reached up to pat her hand awkwardly before turning away. Ginny didn't want to think about that now.

The cars provided by the Ministry smelled horrible, Ginny decided as she watched out the window. Despite her mother's protests that Ginny sit in between her and Ginny's father, Ginny wanted to be by the window. She wanted to feel the cold glass under her fingertips when she pressed them there, tracing the rivulets of water as they raced diagonally down to meet the black of the door.

George tried valiantly to get her to smile. He even brought out some of Fred's old jokes, which were overused and completely horrible. Every time he gave one of the punch lines, it only made Ginny feel worse thinking of how Harry would have laughed at it.

"Two goblins, a werewolf, and a vampire walk into a pub..."

"George Weasley," her mother hissed, glaring at her son and then shooting a pained glance at Ginny out of the corner of her eye. "That joke is neither appropriate nor funny."

Maybe it was the reprimand, or maybe it was the joke, one Harry himself had chuckled over after he'd first heard it, but Ginny allowed the side of her mouth to quirk up just the tiniest bit, and lifted her eyes to George.

He winked at her, still trying to keep his face stoic as their mother hissed her belief that maybe he had, indeed, been raised by foul-mouthed, ill-tempered, wild animals.

Ginny went back to watching the rain.

The Ministry was draped all in black: black swags of fabric, black chairs, huge black stage covered with bright colored blooms that looked completely out of place in the monochromatic setting.

Escorts led the Weasleys to their chairs at the front of the service and Ginny melted into her spot, not interested at all in dealing with the hundreds of people coming up to greet the Weasleys as if they were long lost family.

She glanced around. Maybe hundreds was an exaggeration, as they were so early for the funeral. But it certainly felt like hundreds with the way they closed in around her, patting her shoulders, offering their condolences, and staring at her as if she were some sort of magical experiment gone wrong.

"She's still in shock, the poor dear," her mother excused Ginny with a patronizing pat to her cheek. Ginny gagged internally and turned away, staring at the flowers until her eyes couldn't avoid the one thing in the room they most wanted to not see.

Harry's coffin was in centered in the front of the stage, huge sprays of magical flowers surrounding it. The lid was open and from where she stood, Ginny could just make out part of Harry's profile.

Without even making the decision to do so, she moved forward, weaving through the crowds that gathered and dispersed like some strange ritual. Vaguely, she could hear her mother, and then Hermione call to her, but she didn't stop.

Step after step brought her to the red velvet ropes that created the barrier around the stage. She traced one of them with her finger, wondering if there was some sort of charm that prevented anyone from getting too close to the body. Deciding to chance it, she undid the clasp on the rope and walked through, letting it slide through her fingers to the floor.

Her teeth tugged at her bottom lip as her feet slid closer and closer. The scent of the flowers was overwhelming and Ginny's nose tingled and itched.

Her fingers reached out to brush the side of the coffin, the slick cherry wood feeling icy beneath them. Normally, Ginny would have pulled back from touching anything that cold, but today she pressed both hands to it, keeping her eyes glued on the wood, and not on what lay in front of her.

'You need to do this,' she told herself. And, logically, she knew that was true. She needed to see Harry this way, to disconnect herself from the fact that he was once a living, breathing, wonderful

person, and was now... this.

Clutching the wood tight enough that she was afraid it would leave marks, Ginny lifted her eyes, but only to his shoulder. It looked... normal... encased in his perfectly pressed Auror uniform. She blew out a breath.

So far, so good. You can do this, Ginny.

Her eyes traced his arm down to his hands—the first place she winced. Maybe one of her family had helped make the arrangements, Ginny wasn't sure. But she never would have chosen for Harry to be buried as he looked now. His hands were stiff and... white, and wrapped around his holly wand.

Her fingers itched and she hesitantly lifted her hand and reached out to run a finger along the wood. It didn't feel cold, which surprised her. Although when her hand absently grazed Harry's hand, she jerked back as if touching fire. The opposite was true, however. His skin felt... hard and rubbery. Not the warm, calloused hand that she remembered holding, remembered caressing her face when he kissed her, remembered touching her.

Her heart clenched even further and she sighed, lifting her eyes fully to take him in.

Logically, she knew this wasn't Harry. This was just his body... a shell of what he'd been. But even that thought, giving a little comfort to her, couldn't prepare her for what she saw.

"It's not him," she whispered. Her brain and her heart warred, taking in every tiny detail: the way one part of his scar jagged a bit down to the left, the small darker spot of skin near his right ear, the tiny lines around his mouth that Ginny had traced with her fingers. They were all there. But... waxy and... wrong.

Ginny forced a breath out through pursed lips and scrunched her toes in her shoes.

This was all wrong. It may have been his body... but it didn't feel like him. He wasn't warm and wiggly, like her Harry, tugging at the collar of his robes and making some acidic comment about the damned Ministry that would have Ginny chuckling.

"The bodies... they never look right."

Ginny gasped and clutched her mouth to keep in a scream when Neville surprised her.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly, his arm brushing her shoulder. *When had he gotten so tall?*

"I remember seeing my grandfather and thinking..." he trailed off and Ginny lifted tear-filled eyes to see a grimace on his face as he studied Harry's lifeless body. "I had a dream last night, that we were here, just like this, but Harry sat up and started talking. I... I almost didn't come," he added, his cheeks flushing a dark pink. "But now that I see him... I know that won't happen. This isn't Harry."

Relief spread through her that someone else felt the same way she did.

"I mean... it's him, but it isn't really," Neville clarified, awkwardly ruffling his hair like Harry used

to do. It was standing straight out in the back now, making Ginny want to smile. But she didn't.

"Come on," he said, gently wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "It's about time to start."

Ginny let him lead her to her chair in the front row, surrounded by her family. She wanted to protest, ask him to sit next to her and hold her up, when he moved away. Turning in her seat, however, she was impressed to find that all of Harry's closest friends, those who'd served in Dumbledore's Army, were right behind her on the second row. They were an imposing lot, really, when you looked at them.

Luna gave her a dreamy, small smile and then placed her hand back inside Dean's much larger one. That relationship puzzled Ginny, but she knew it wasn't serious. Seamus' large hand closed on her shoulder and Ginny startled.

"Anything you need..." he whispered awkwardly. Ginny only jerked her head in acknowledgment before turning back around and resting her head on her father's shoulder.

The service for Harry, the formal one at least, dragged on entirely too long. Countless Ministry officials gave long, dry monologues on nothing related to Harry. They made promises to the Wizarding world about reform and how tragedies like Harry's death could bring them all together.

Ginny stopped listening. Every once in awhile, someone from the DA would rub her shoulder or touch her in some way that let her know they were still there. It meant a lot to her, but she just couldn't acknowledge it right now.

Hagrid's nose blowing sent sniffs of disdain through the crowd, except for those who knew him, who felt horrible for the man. He and Harry had always been close.

When the Minister, Reginald Winters, got up, his arm still held to his chest, wrapped in a bright white sling, Ginny lifted her head. His voice was soothing and full of emotion as he explained how Harry had defended him. With a humility that Ginny didn't quite believe, he choked up as he presented an Order of Merlin, First Class. Harry's second one, although this one was posthumous.

When the service was finally over, her parents herded her to the front, directly to the side of Harry's coffin, and the mourners began to line up to pay their condolences to the family.

Ginny spun in her father's grip, trying to pull away, panicked at having to face so many people and deal with their emotions.

"Just a bit longer," he soothed, turning her back around.

She made it through most of the DA, hearing their promises; 'I'm sorry', 'whatever you need, Ginny', 'He won't be forgotten'. But she still couldn't respond at all more than nodding. She at least knew their promises weren't empty ones. Each of them paused by Harry's casket and spent a silent moment.

Ginny couldn't watch anymore, she fidgeted in place, and felt her father's grip tighten.

"Hang in there, Gin," he soothed, placing a kiss on her temple.

She nodded jerkily and turned back, feeling her chest compress as the crowd surged forward a bit. They'd be here for hours, Ginny knew, because no one was leaving yet.

"Hi, Ginny."

Her eyes focused in again and she was surprised to see a watery-eyed Cho standing in front of her.

"You're probably tired of hearing people tell you how sorry they are." She smiled and a single tear escaped, running down her perfect skin and dripping into her black robes. Ginny watched it fall. "I just wanted to take a minute and tell you thank you."

Ginny started, meeting her eyes again.

"For making him happy," Cho said, turning her head to glance at Harry's body. "I could tell he was, you know, in those weeks before the war. And... after."

Ginny's own tears, held at bay for so long sprung up fresh now, making her both embarrassed and angry. She couldn't break down now...

"So... thank you," Cho finished awkwardly. Ginny nodded jerkily, blinking the moisture away. She just wished Cho would move on, so that the old woman who stood behind her could have her say. Ginny didn't know the woman; her words wouldn't hurt at all because Ginny knew she didn't know Harry.

"What are you going to do now?" Cho asked quietly. "Back to Hogwarts?"

The question rang in Ginny's head, taking on a whole different meaning. *What are you going to do now?* For a moment, inside her head, it wasn't Cho asking, but Harry. His hands coming up to caress her cheeks as they lay together on his bed, completely innocently, talking about the future.

*What are you going to do now?*

And she didn't know. She didn't have an answer now. Going back to Hogwarts, playing Quidditch, studying with friends for her N.E.W.T.'s... breathing... It all sounded so... ridiculous right now. So naïve and... preposterous. Because how was she going to possibly live through this?

The ocean of people, draped in black just like the Ministry was, ebbed and flowed, threatening to overwhelm her. Faces that she didn't know, that couldn't have known Harry, leered and stared at her and Ginny felt her knees buckle.

But instead of falling, she stumbled away, knocking over the barrier around Harry's casket and upending some of the flowers before she was finally in an empty area, free from people and smelly flowers and... Harry.

She clutched at the wall, gasping for air and feeling her lungs tighten even further.

Behind her, she could hear her family calling for her, and then Bill's firm voice—'give her a minute.'

She'd have to thank him later.

Ginny gasped in deep, cleansing breaths, pushing away the emotion and tears that threatened to overtake. The air back here, in the deserted corridor, was cold and refreshing. She slid forward further, trying to escape the sounds of people whispering and mocking her. That might not be what they were doing, her logical side argued. But logic died quickly when Ginny remembered their faces staring at her.

She pulled at the collar of her dress, tugging in looser and squirming. Nothing felt right anymore.

*What are you going to do now?*

The question made her wince and Ginny moved further down the hall, wandering now, deeper and deeper into the Ministry. Bill would come soon. He'd wrap his arms around her and take her home where she could crawl into Harry's bed and let his scent sweep the questions away from her mind.

Her shoes made sharp, clicking sounds against the shiny, black stone floor and Ginny took them off, hating how hollow it sounded.

Her hand trailed along the wall as she walked, barefoot now. She passed her father's old office, staring at the closed door. Ginny had been lucky enough to visit him at work once, when she was little. It had all been so fascinating.

She stopped when the corridor ended in a massive blue door. The Auror Department. Where Harry worked—had worked. Ginny stared at the door, seeing people moving around behind the small window in it. It seemed strange to see people working there, today especially.

But the world went on, crimes were still committed, Aurors still did their jobs—even if Ginny's world was in ashes.

She hesitated, wondering if she could go in and find Harry's desk, see what he'd been working on and touch where he had last touched...

Ginny closed her eyes, imagining herself sitting at his desk, her fingers fiddling with his quills and staring at the picture that she knew he had of the two of them together. The noise of the busy office filtered out and she shuddered when his breath was on her neck and his arms wrapped around her waist.

*What are you going to do now?*

The dream disappeared, fading into nothingness as Ginny stood in front of the office. Her toes pressed against the cold floor and she turned, wandering away. Down one corridor and another. She felt it was a bit odd that no one had stopped her. And no one had come for her either.

She began to shiver once her feet hit nice, plush carpet. Strange.

"Oi!"

She kept moving, past the voice, her toes digging into the royal blue fibers on the floor.

"You can't be in here!"

“Stop!”

Vaguely, she was aware that someone was standing in front of her, his navy blue robes triggering something in her mind that meant *Auror*. But it didn't connect completely.

“It's alright, Stebbins.”

A soft voice answered and the dark body blocking her moved away.

“Miss Weasley, can I help you with something?”

It was only then that she realized where she was. The Minister's soft voice woke her from her trance and she looked around, horrified to find herself just outside his door.

Ginny opened her mouth to apologize, but only air came out. She blinked rapidly, not caring that tears were making her cheeks cold. *How long had she been crying?*

The Minister's hand closed around her elbow softly, guiding her into his office.

“Stebbins, would you mind finding Arthur Weasley for me? I'll bet someone is looking for this young lady.”

Ginny stared at the carpet, her toes digging into it. The Auror hesitated for a moment before nodding and hurrying away, his boots squeaking on the floor in the hallway.

“Come in, Miss Weasley.” The slight pressure he exerted on her arm was enough to move her forward, into the inner office.

Ginny froze at the door however, eyes wide. This was where...

“Everything has been repaired,” Winters said, his voice reminding her of her Grandfather Weasley who used to tell her stories when she was little.

“I'm sure you're tired of hearing people say how sorry they are.”

Ginny met his gaze finally, his muddy brown gaze penetrating her deeply.

There wasn't anything spectacular about Reginald Winters' appearance. He was not extraordinary, really, in any way. His features were pleasant enough, yet not memorable.

“I owe Mr. Potter a debt of gratitude that I can never repay.” Harry's name made Ginny wince and her head began to pound. Moments of their time together flashed in front of her and she wobbled, reaching out and clutching the Minister's arm, digging her fingers into his robes.

“If there is anything the Ministry can do, Miss Weasley...”

Ginny stopped looking; forced her eyes closed as a wave of pain and nausea washed over her.

“Ginny!”

Strong arms gathered her into a body even as her knees gave out. She knew that smell... knew the feel of the arms around her. Neville.

"Thank you, Minister. We'll be takin' her back to her parents now." Seamus was close by; Ginny thought maybe his hand was on her shoulder, but forgot to care as she clenched her teeth against the burning bile climbing her throat. She suddenly felt more tired than she ever had, and cold down to the bone.

"Thank you, Mr. Longbottom. Mr. Finnegan." The Minister's voice sounded much less friendly now. Something about seeing him, feeling his hand on her arm—it made Ginny's stomach roll.

But perhaps it was simply being there, in the last place Harry was alive, that made her sick. She hadn't been sleeping or eating well for days.

"Ginny, are you alright?" Neville's voice wiggled in past the fog her mind had become and Ginny winced, even though he was whispering. She both shook her head and nodded.

"I'm taking you home," he said. "Seamus, let them know."

"Sure enough." Seamus' rich accent made her head spin. "Feel better, Ginny," he said, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Neville continued moving, although Ginny couldn't feel much, held up against his chest.

"Hang on," he cautioned her. Ginny clutched his neck tightly in her arms, grimacing against the press of Apparition.

The rain dripped from the sky, blending with her tears. "Sorry," Neville said, "I've never been inside."

She nodded against his chest, loosening her grip on him. The weakness she'd felt in the Minister's office was starting to fade, leaving behind only exhaustion and confusion.

"Come een." The door opened in front of them and Ginny shuddered when a thick blanket pressed in on them. Fleur spoke in soft tones. "I came back 'ere jutz in case..."

"Good idea," Neville mumbled out. "Which room is hers?"

Ginny didn't realize they had even gone up the stairs, but the idea that she would be anywhere but Harry's bed made her struggle.

"In 'ere," Fleur said opening a door wide. "She 'asn't slept in 'er own room for days." Ginny relaxed when Harry's scent once again enveloped her. But it was fading, mixing with the smells from the rest of the Burrow.

"Do you want me to stay?" Neville asked when he set her down on the bed.

Ginny blinked, opening her eyes finally. She shook her head slowly. Relief flooded over Neville's face, making him look younger, if only for a minute.

"I'll wait downstairs then," he nodded.

Ginny wanted to tell him thank you... to show some measure of gratitude for what he'd done, but she just didn't have the energy. Instead, she lay on Harry's pillow and curled around the blankets, tucking her bare feet under Harry's cloak.

Two days later, Ginny was slowly putting her things into her trunk, which had been moved into Harry's room at some point in time—Ginny wasn't quite sure when.

The numbness and confusion that took over at the end of Harry's funeral had lasted, taking hold and rooting deep inside her.

"I still don't think going back to school now is the right thing to do," her mother said from the door. She was levitating a large stack of laundry, peering into the darkness of the room.

"I'm fine, Mum," Ginny said. Everyone knew it was a lie when she said it, but only her mother had challenged it.

"No, you're not. You hardly eat, you only sleep when you're exhausted." Her mother's voice wavered and then died out completely. Ginny watched as she set the laundry on the end of the bed and sat down next to it.

"I just... I just need time," Ginny admitted. Finally, the truth. She didn't admit, though, that there might never be enough time to get over this.

"It hurts," her mother said. "When Fred..." she choked back a sob and sat in silence for a minute. "And now Harry... we loved him so much, Ginny."

"I know," Ginny said, forcing her hands to fold another of Harry's jumpers and place it in her trunk.

"You'll never forget him," her mother continued. She joined Ginny, slowly folding clothing and finding places to put it.

Ginny wished that she wouldn't do this. It was just too fresh. She needed school. She needed routine and normalcy so that she could breathe.

"I won't," Ginny agreed. She winced, thinking of the grave out in the back garden, right next to Fred's. She'd looked at it from out of the window, but she hadn't been outside yet. She just couldn't seem to make her feet walk those fifty eight steps that it would take to get her out there.

"You'll write?" Her mother sighed, placing the last robe in the trunk.

Ginny nodded, knowing that her mother didn't approve of her going back to school soon, even if she understood Ginny's need to do so. "I will," she whispered. The top closed and the tarnished gold lock clicked into place.

They both stood, brushing their hands off and fidgeting in the stillness of the room. It was virtually empty now—most of Harry's things had been shrunk and were stored in Ginny's trunk.

"I..." Ginny started, stuffing her hands into her jeans pockets. "I need to go see Kingsley," she said

suddenly, the idea appearing in her mind like a shining beacon. Even though the thought unsettled her, Ginny knew it was the right thing to do. He'd been a good friend to Harry... and he'd been there...

"Are you sure, Ginny?" Her mother peered at her, worry lines etching deeper around her mouth and across her forehead. "Perhaps if you wait your father can go with you."

"I'll go alone," Ginny insisted, feeling stronger than she had in a few days. The goal of traveling by herself, of doing something important gave her something other than her own heartache to focus on. How could she convey that to her mother without opening herself up completely? She just wasn't ready for that right now.

"Ginny, I really don't—"

"I'll be fine," Ginny forced her lips to turn up, hoping that it passed for a smile. "Be back for dinner," she added as an afterthought. Ginny kissed her mother's cheek quickly. She gathered Harry's cloak and swiftly went down the stairs, ignoring Charlie's question as she passed him in the kitchen.

St. Mungo's smelled sterile and strange, burning the inside of her nose. Ginny didn't pause at the reception desk, but threw a look over her shoulder when the young witch working there called out to her. Nobody pursued her so Ginny moved toward the lifts.

Kingsley was in the same ward that Neville's parents and Gilderoy Lockhart were in, on the fifth floor. Ginny froze outside the door, trying to prepare herself to see something that she could never be ready to see.

"Miss Weasley," the nurse, probably recognizing her from the photographs in the Daily Prophet from Harry's funeral, called out to her. "Are you here to see Mister Shacklebolt?"

Ginny nodded jerkily, both yes and no.

The nurse's face softened and she nodded her understanding. "I'm afraid there's not been much change," she admitted. "He'll live, but we're not sure what his mental capacity will be, or if he'll ever fully recover. It's sad to see such a powerful man reduced to this."

Ginny swallowed thickly as the nurse led her to the door, opening it with her wand.

"It's hard to believe, seeing him lying there, that this man was once the Minister of Magic. I know it was only for a few months, but..."

Ginny nodded, not knowing what else to say. The stuffiness of the ward hit her like a wall and Ginny gagged.

"I can allow you a few minutes, dear." The nurse patted her on the arm and edged her toward the only bed that was closed off by privacy screens.

Ginny steeled herself once she was alone, weaving her finger into the hole in the robes.

"Hello Mister Shackbolt," she greeted, feeling extremely stupid for being here. There was no way that he would—

His shaky hand reached out towards hers, although his face didn't move. Ginny tentatively reached out and allowed him to take her hand, surprised at how warm it was.

She suspected there was some sort of immobility charm on his head and neck, as he didn't move. His one uncovered eye, dark and deep, however, found hers.

"I'm so sorry," Ginny mumbled, squeezing his hand, her eyes filling with tears.

His injuries were gruesome. One half of his face was covered by bandages, yet Ginny could still see the scarred flesh peeking out from the edges. His left side also looked immobile, the shoulder and arm not moving.

His eye filled with tears as well and he blinked it furiously. Cautiously, Ginny reached up and used the cuff of her robes to wipe it away.

"You were always so kind to Harry," she whispered. He squeezed her hand and his eye widened.

A horrific thought entered her head and she felt her stomach turn. "They told you," she whispered. "What happened? To Harry?"

He blinked, determinedly, one time.

"He was... he was killed," Ginny admitted past the lump in her throat. His hand tightened down on hers like a vice and he groaned, a low mournful sound that frightened Ginny just a bit.

"And I..." Emotion surged up in her, unchecked and she clung to his hand. "I just miss him so much. And I can't even think about going on without him. He was... he was everything..."

*What are you going to do now?*

The question sounding in her head was much harsher now and Ginny flinched, leaning forward on the bed. Kingsley tugged until she let go. His large hand covered most of the crown of her head—the only way he could comfort her.

"And I'm being so stupid coming here... because there's nothing you can do, and I shouldn't expect you to do anything..."

His fingers dug in just a bit and Ginny winced. She wiped her nose on the sleeve of her robes and reached up to take his hand again.

"When I was in that room..." Ginny said softly, tracing the lines in his huge hand with her fingertips, "with the Minister... I just couldn't—"

Ginny winced when Kingsley's fingers closed down on hers like a vice. She gasped as his arm shook. His eye was wide, frantically moving around. She had no doubt that if he could speak, his words would be angry and harsh, just like the guttural moans he was making now.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, prying his fingers away from her own. The nurse appeared around the screens, glaring at the both of them.

Ginny was finally able to break free and backed up until she was out of his reach. "I didn't mean to upset him."

"Mr. Shacklebolt," the nurse scolded, trying to calm him. "I'm going to give you a sedative."

Something nudged the back of Ginny's mind and she stepped forward, holding out her hand as if to stop the nurse from pouring the potion down his throat. But it disappeared as quickly as it came, leaving only confusion in its wake.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Maybe its best if you go," the nurse said once she'd finished administering the potion.

Ginny only nodded, feeling her heart beat wildly in her chest. Maybe coming had been a mistake. She was only searching for a bit of clarity, yet all she'd found was more questions.

Something about what she'd said had upset Kingsley horribly. It was probably being reminded of the attack.

Ginny's feet carried her forward, instinctively knowing where to go to get her home, while her mind replayed every word she'd said. It was no use, she decided.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she said to no one. It was raining again, and Ginny had been standing there long enough that even her innermost layer of clothing was soaked. Her hair hung limply on her shoulders, dripping more rain into her clothing. "I'm sorry I haven't come out to see you yet."

Standing in the rain, in front of Harry's grave, Ginny felt incredibly stupid. It had taken her days to get up the courage to be out here. But it was the last time she'd be able to for a long time.

"Nothing makes sense anymore," she mumbled, staring at the big, dark clouds that covered everything. "I can't seem to think anymore, and I don't really want to, because it hurts too much."

She closed her eyes, fighting the panic that was always only a few breaths away.

"And I don't know what I'm going to do now. You... you promised—" Her voice died out as she thought back to his letter. "You promised you wouldn't stop loving me. I need you, Harry. I don't know how to do this by myself."

The rain continued to fall, making Ginny shiver.

She'd finally admitted it. After days of feeling like this, she'd said it out loud. And... it actually, surprisingly, helped.

"What am I going to do, Harry?" she asked, her voice cutting through the rain as it picked up, pelting her skin so that it burned. "Everything... it's just wrong without you."

Thunder rumbled across the sky, Ginny saw lightning through her closed eyes.

"I can't stop loving you," she admitted, shaking her head when she stared at the stone with Harry's name on it. "You may be gone... but I'll still love you." Saying the words made her feel strong, so she repeated it over and over, finally shouting it at the skies as they thundered back.

Spinning around in the rain, out of control circles that made her feel dizzy, yet clear at the same time, she proclaimed it to the world.

She was stronger with Harry's love. Clinging to that was how she'd get through—just as he promised her.

# Chapter 3: She Don't Want The World

The days blended together in a sort of numb mix. Even flying didn't do anything to keep Ginny's mind from Harry. In fact, Quidditch was almost painful because she kept expecting Harry to call out some hint to her, or cheer loudly when she made an amazing goal.

She kept her feelings about it under wraps for the sake of her team. They were counting on her as Captain, after all, to do all that she could do to help them win over Slytherin in a few weeks.

Dreams and nightmares plagued her, making concentrating nearly impossible. Her marks in class started to decline and her professors asked her to stay behind several times. But Ginny just couldn't bring herself to care. She did the bare minimum on her assignments, just enough to pass.

Hermione watched her, commenting often on Ginny's lifelessness. But Hermione was also struggling, Ginny could see. She suspected that the older witch used glamour charms to hide the dark circles under her eyes and the weight she'd lost. Just as Ginny did.

"Ginny, I'm worried about you," Hermione hissed in the hallway as they both avoided the Great Hall. Seeing all the eyes turn towards her, just as they had at the funeral, was too much for Ginny.

"Hermione," Ginny sighed, avoiding meeting her friend's eyes. "We're both in the same place." Annoyance tainted her words and she clasped her books to her chest, wrapping her arms around them.

"It seems that way," Hermione nodded. "But, Ginny, I have Ron I can talk to. And you. You... you don't talk to anyone."

Ginny scowled as she continued walking down the hall. That wasn't true, she talked to... Well, alright, it might be true. But no one really understood. They may have lost a best friend, someone they viewed as a sibling, or a child, but... she'd lost... everything. Her future, her hope... everything.

"This is what you do," Hermione huffed, tugging at Ginny's arm until she turned. "You completely stare off into the distance or you glare down at your feet whenever anyone wants to talk to you."

Guilt surged inside her, but she selfishly pushed it away. "I don't mean to," she admitted softly. "But I'm just not ready to talk about it, Hermione. And I need you to understand that. I can't be like you. Or Ron... or anyone else. I'm doing everything I can right now to stay intact—to keep breathing and to find what it is I'm going to do tomorrow, and then the day after. I can't see much beyond that right now."

Her words must have struck a chord in Hermione, because she nodded jerkily and looked away. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I don't want to push you, but we just want to help. All of us."

"I know," Ginny said, softening her tone. "But, I need time."

"You know I'll be here when you're ready."

"I do," Ginny nodded, anxious to get to her class, rather than talk about the feelings that she held

under the surface.

"Come on," Hermione nudged her, "let's get to Charms."

\* \* \*

The noise in the Gryffindor Common Room was overwhelming. The first Quidditch match in more than a year—and one against Slytherin—and they had won. Ginny was very proud of her team. They had worked very hard, despite her melancholy.

'For Harry' had been their rallying cry—something Ginny had been both touched by, and annoyed with. Demelza had actually done more to Captain the team than Ginny over the past few weeks.

"You'll get back to it," she had confirmed with a soft pat on the shoulder before helping their young Seeker run his drills, and giving pointers to the new Keeper.

But Ginny wasn't so sure. Every movement up there on the broom had been labored. She'd needed to force her mind to focus on each roll, each turn, each pass. It wasn't fun anymore. Not when her mind pictured Harry dressed in Gryffindor red and gold, cheering alongside her classmates. Not when she heard his voice in her mind urging her onward, making each play they'd practiced together painful.

"Here, Ginny," Dennis Creevey held up a cold bottle of Butterbeer and it took her a minute to focus on it. "You should be celebrating."

She forced a smile and a quiet 'thank you' before taking the drink.

Sitting in the Common Room, hearing people talk and laugh around her, watching as they smiled and joked around—Ginny had never felt more alone.

Tears sprang to her eyes and she shivered imagining Harry's arms around her, longing for those old moments. The memories festered inside her like an open wound, hidden from the world. But the pain was real. It was something she could hold onto when nothing else made sense.

The Butterbeer was tasteless in her mouth and she set it down, feeling the sadness and anger press in on her. Silently, she slipped out the portrait hole and down to the lake, shivering in the November wind.

\* \* \*

"Ginny, are ye... are ye sure?"

Ginny only nodded to Hagrid's question and held her Quidditch uniform, the shiny Captain's badge perched on top of it, out to the Head of Gryffindor House.

"I just can't do it anymore," she admitted softly, turning her head to stare out at the snow flurries beating against Hagrid's windows. "I'm behind in my studies and... I just... can't."

Hagrid took the small bundle, his fingertip caressing the metal of the badge. Ginny couldn't watch him slide them away from her.

"It'll get better, Ginny," he said softly, reaching out to pat her on the back, but pulled away at the last second. "I know its hard righ' now."

She nodded jerkily. "Demelza would be good for Captain," she said, willing the emotion to stay out of her voice. "She's... she's good about things like that."

"I'll think on tha'," Hagrid nodded. "Ya won' even stay on tha team?"

Ginny shook her head, her heart clenching at the thought of playing Quidditch again. It wasn't anything that she wanted to do again. Possibly ever. There were just too many reminders there.

"I need to get to class," she mumbled, buttoning up her robes tightly, wrapping Harry's scarf around her and lifting the heavy hood over her face. They both knew it was a lie. Ginny had a free period on Friday afternoons. Thankfully, Hagrid didn't push her.

"Thanks, Hagrid," she said quietly, turning sad eyes to her friend.

\* \* \*

"I heard you quit the Quidditch team."

Hermione's hissed words over the table that Ginny had spread her revision on made her jump. She hadn't even heard her friend approach.

"I'm too far behind in my studies," she explained, not lifting her eyes from the book she was taking notes from.

"Since when do you worry more about class than Quidditch?"

"It's a game, Hermione," she answered dully, her quill scratching out one more fact for her Transfiguration essay.

"Ginny—"

"What do you want from me, Hermione?" Ginny asked, her voice raising enough that others were beginning to stare. "Just last week you were badgering me about not revising enough."

Hermione wore a shocked look, her face reddening as people began to whisper. "Ginny, you know I didn't mean for you to give up something that you love."

"I didn't," Ginny shrugged, closing her book and gathering her notes.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, narrowing her eyes. "You love Quidditch..."

"I can't, Hermione." The pain reared up again, threatening to break loose, but Ginny swallowed it. "I need to do this."

"Where are you going?" Hermione demanded, ignoring Madam Pince who hissed her chastisement at the two girls, and chasing after Ginny who was headed out of the library.

"I have to meet someone," Ginny explained. Hermione kept up with her, matching her strides as she continued to try to convince Ginny to talk to her.

"Who are you meeting?"

"Emma," Ginny shrugged.

"Emma."

"Yeah," Ginny said, giving a little smile—forcing the foreign feeling onto her face. "You can come if you want."

Hermione kept up, speechless as Ginny climbed each flight of stairs up to the Gryffindor Common Room and then up to the dorm for the seventh year girls.

Emma Dobbs was laying stomach-down on her bed, flipping through something.

"Sorry I'm late," Ginny apologized.

"It's no problem," Emma said, tossing her magazine to the side and standing, summoning a chair to the middle of the room. "Hi, Hermione."

"Hi," Hermione greeted the girl, sinking slowly onto her own bed.

"You're sure about this?" Emma asked as Ginny perched on the chair and sighed deeply.

"I am," Ginny nodded, the first genuine smile in weeks quirking her mouth. This was one of the best decisions she'd made in a long time. It was simple, but she was content with small steps right now. "I trust you."

"Okay," Emma nodded.

Hermione gasped when Emma combed through Ginny's hair and used magical scissors to clip a large chunk of it off.

"Ginny—"

"It's fine, Hermione," Ginny soothed her. "It's just time for a change."

"I tried to talk her into leaving it a bit longer," Emma said, her tone apologetic. Ginny watched with satisfaction as another eight inches of hair fell onto the stone floor. "But she's determined."

"If you didn't cut it, I would have," Ginny assured her, a thrill coursing through her when more hair fell, red splashed on the dull grey.

"That's why I agreed," Emma said dryly.

Ginny glanced over to see Hermione's eyes full of tears. "I think I understand," Hermione nodded.

"Cut your hair, Hermione," Ginny said impulsively. Hermione's jaw dropped and she finger the

ends, wrapping a piece of hair through her fingers.

"You think so?"

"Yeah," Ginny said, "live a little."

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip before smiling slowly. "I just might."

"I'd be glad to do it for you, Hermione," Emma offered. "I've been doing my mum's and my sisters' for years." She moved in closer and Ginny closed her eyes, concentrating on the feel of Emma's fingers gently scratching her scalp, letting those memories overcome the ones where Harry would bury his hands in her hair.

"Ron will be mad," Hermione said, but the small giggle that escaped convinced Ginny that she really didn't care.

"He'll get over it," Ginny said.

"It'll grow again," Emma pointed out, moving to Ginny's side and clipping more hair there. Ginny shivered, feeling the cold metal of the scissors along her now-bare neck.

Fifteen minutes later, Ginny stood in front of the mirror, hardly recognizing the person looking back at her. Any resemblance to who she had been an hour ago was hard to see with the short hair. It barely reached her chin now and was the shortest that she'd ever had it.

"Please tell me you like it," Emma pleaded, reaching up to straighten a small piece.

"I love it," Ginny breathed. "It feels... right."

"Alright," Hermione cried, leaping forward onto the chair. "Do mine too, but not so short... maybe up to my shoulders?"

Emma smiled softly, taking in both of them. Ginny caught her eyes in the mirror and had to look away at the knowing look. "Okay," Emma agreed, reaching for the scissors again.

Once Hermione was done, the two girls stood in front of the mirror together, both staring at the changes.

For Ginny it almost wasn't enough. Reality was beginning to settle in again and the little bit of normal she'd gained with the haircut drifted away.

\* \* \*

The days blended into each other again while Ginny drifted about the castle. The winter was cold outside, wind howling and snow piling up. Many days found Ginny staring out at the whiteness of the world out there, both hating and loving it. Each day she rolled over and blinked awake in her bed meant one more day she'd survived. One more day without Harry.

"Miss Weasley, will you please come to the front?"

Ginny jerked her face away from the bitter cold glass and turned to find her Defense Professor, Jasper Doell, standing at the front of the classroom, looking directly at her. Her face flushed from the attention of her classmates. For weeks her professors had avoided calling on her, probably realizing that Ginny didn't need the added attention.

"What?" she asked, completely shocked.

"Come to the front," he repeated, adjusting his already perfectly-straight robes. Doell had been a decent Defense instructor—a rather mysterious Auror on loan from the Ministry—and the students had generally accepted that he knew his stuff. "You're going to do a demonstration for me."

Ginny's jaw tensed and locked. She had no desire to get up there and make a fool of herself.

"Your passing mark depends on this," Doell snapped, glaring at her.

Her shoulders rose an inch, determination flooding her. This... prat... was threatening to fail her if she didn't duel him? Not bloody likely. An older part of Ginny, one that she hadn't allowed out for too long, started to move forward. She could definitely handle herself in a duel. She wouldn't beat him—he was a trained Auror, after all—but she wouldn't be humiliated. At least, she hoped not.

Ginny shot a glance at Hermione as she walked by, seeing that her friend was both hesitant and curious.

"Take your stance, Weasley," Doell called out, lifting his wand in a dueling position. His dark eyes glittered with determination.

Ginny took a deep breath, discarded her robes and lifted her wand. She automatically corrected her grip, thinking of Harry's instruction in the DA and again this summer.

"Show him, Ginny," Demelza called out softly, a sly smile on her face.

Ginny's feet slid apart just a bit more, bracing herself just as Harry had always done.

"You can do it, Ginny!" Jack Sloper's voice called out.

"Concentrate, Gin," Hermione added her encouragement.

Ginny heard them all in the back of her mind while she concentrated on Harry's instructions, playing through her head like a film. *Feet braced, knees flexed, wrist locked...*

Doell began first, silently sending a stinging hex toward her. Ginny quickly side-stepped the spell and returned with a yelled blasting hex to the floor in front of the Professor. His robes blew up and he stepped back, allowing her to silently try to disarm him.

The spell made a ringing sound when Doell summoned a shield. "Very good," he cheered. "Mr. Potter taught you well."

A gasp sounded around the room and Ginny narrowed her eyes.

"That was a compliment," Doell called out as he sent a blue hex her way. Ginny winced when it

caught her calf as she spun out of the way. A shallow cut appeared there but Ginny refused to allow it to stop her.

Her teeth hurt from grinding together as she cast an illusion charm on herself, moving to the left and forward just a bit. Doell conjured a thick fog between them and Ginny suspected he was using it to sneak around to her side. She dropped to a crouch and shot a string of jelly-legs jinxes all around her. He started to move again; she could hear it in the fog.

Ginny reached for the edge of the platform, trying to orient herself. Casting a wind charm, she directed the fog toward the classroom, keeping to her crouch so that she could defend herself.

"Impressive," Doell called out. Unfortunately, he was behind her. Ginny rolled as he cast several jinxes toward her, firing off her own stunning spell.

Doell dodged it, but was forced to turn around as he'd advanced himself into a corner. Ginny dropped off the platform and scrambled down two feet before diving back up and swinging her leg out to sweep him off his feet. She got one leg out from under him and he tipped, still firing spells off.

"Ahh," she hissed as another slicing hex caught her shoulder, ripping her shirt. She could feel a trickle of blood drip down, making her more furious.

The Professor got his feet back under him and scrambled away from her, rolling his wand hand. Apparently, she'd forced him to land on it when she swept his legs, jarring the joint.

"Give up yet?" Doell asked, a nasty smile spreading over his face.

"Not bloody likely," Ginny growled, advancing with a punching hex. Doell caught the edge of it on his shoulder but spun in the process, firing off a disarming spell which just caught Ginny, causing her wand to fly out of her hand.

She growled in frustration and anger, launching herself at him and landing a very quick jab to the nose. Satisfaction spread through her when blood erupted. The students all gasped and Ginny shrunk back, chest heaving and face burning.

"Enough," Doell called out through the blood that poured down his face. *"Episkey."* His broken nose healed right away and he leaned over to spit a mouthful of blood on the platform. "Very nicely done, Weasley," he complimented, smiling lopsidedly.

Ginny's face burned as she gathered her wand and quickly moved to her spot near the back of the room, refusing to meet everyone's eyes. She felt utterly humiliated for losing control like that. But he'd taken her wand—the one thing she kept with her at all times.

"Bravo," Doell stood up, robes still stained with red, and clapped. "You didn't let yourself be beaten by giving up. You fought back, even when the odds were against you."

She lifted her gaze to him, confused that he wasn't punishing her, but showering praise instead.

"We can't let our guard down at any point," Doell continued, speaking now to the entire class. "Can

anyone think of what else could have been done in any of those situations?"

Ginny tuned him out, trying to decide what she was truly feeling. The embarrassment was quickly fading, leaving room for something else... a strange feeling that Ginny had to struggle to identify. There was anger, lots of anger, but behind that was... determination and... life.

The realization that she truly felt alive made her suck in a deep breath, feeling the air fill her lungs for the first time in what seemed like years. Harry's voice was still there in the back of her mind, giving encouragement and praise, reprimanding in his sharp tone when needed... but she wasn't clinging to it like she had been lately.

A small part of her felt horrible for that thought. *Was she slowly forgetting Harry?* No. That would never happen. Even if a hundred years went by, Ginny could never forget the force of nature that Harry Potter had been.

"Miss Weasley, please stay after class."

Ginny started, realizing that the rest of her classmates were noisily gathering their things. Hermione stopped beside her seat for just a moment.

"Are you alright?" she hissed, sending a cautious glance up toward Doell.

"I'm fine," Ginny said, actually meaning it. She gave Hermione's hand a quick squeeze. "I'll catch up."

"Do you want me to wait?" Hermione offered, peering closely at Ginny.

"No," Ginny shook her head, letting a small smile quirk. "I'll be fine, I promise."

Hermione nodded and cast one last glance at the Professor before following the last student out of class.

"What are your plans for after school, Weasley?" Doell asked as he sat on the edge of his desk.

Ginny was forcibly reminded of how young he really was. The same age as Bill, actually, from what Bill told her. "I... I'm not sure, sir," Ginny answered truthfully, tugging her robes back on over her shoulders, wincing at the injuries.

Doell beckoned her forward. "I could mend those for you, or you could go to the Hospital wing."

"I hate the hospital," she shuddered. Doell laughed, holding out his wand and performing the healing charms. Her shoulder and leg tingled a bit, but the pain ebbed away. "Thank you," she said softly.

"I heard you were being scouted for Quidditch," Doell continued, peering closely at her, his eyes boring into her.

Ginny fidgeted in place and shrugged a shoulder. "I was..."

"And then I heard you quit the team."

"I've gotten busy with school."

"Bullshit," Doell barked out, startling her. "Your marks were always at the top of the class, and now they're lurking near the bottom. Your essays were always insightful and well-thought out, now they're just dry, manual reciting of the facts. You've let yourself die right alongside him."

"How dare you—" Ginny hissed out, raising her wand. Doell only grinned, throwing his arms wide.

"Do it. Curse me if it will make you feel better." He leaned forward and Ginny's arm tensed. "Right now you need the anger, Weasley. It feels good, doesn't it? It's better than the pain, or the numbness. The anger gives you purpose."

Ginny glared at him, lowering her wand and moving away. He was getting too close, guessing at what she was feeling and it unnerved her.

"I didn't get a chance to work with Harry personally. But I saw him a few times," Doell continued. "And I know he'd be disappointed in what you're becoming, Ginny. You're stronger than you've let yourself be. You want to play Quidditch? You're damned good enough, that I know. Then play. You want to be a Curse Breaker like your brother, then do it. You want to be a damned owl groomer... do it. Find something you love and do it, because you're wasting away doing what you're doing."

Ginny bit her lip, confusion and anger warring inside her.

"You felt alive up there dueling me, didn't you?" His dark eyes peered at her and Ginny turned away. "I could see it in your face—just like Harry always looked. You're a natural at this, Ginny. Don't waste it."

An idea popped into her head, one she'd never fully explored before. "I... I don't have the N.E.W.T.'s," she said quietly, latching onto the excuse.

"You don't have to sit the classes," Doell shook his head. "And what are you missing?"

"Potions," she shrugged. A slow smile spread over the Auror's face.

"And you can't think of a way to take that exam?"

"I doubt I'd pass," Ginny excused, gathering up her things and shoving them into her bag.

"Cling to that excuse." Doell nodded, hopping off of his desk and sweeping past her. "You remember those words, Weasley, because they'll be with you your whole life. Only, they'll change. Over time they'll start to sound like 'I didn't try' and 'I failed'."

He swung the door opened wide and stopped, with his back to her. "But if you want it bad enough, you'll figure out a way."

Ginny slumped into her seat in the abandoned room, her heart clenching almost as much as it did when she thought about Harry.

Ginny thought about Doell's suggestion for two days before doing anything about it. She pushed aside Hermione's questions, claiming that Doell simply wanted to talk to her about her work slipping. She could tell that Hermione didn't fully accept the answer, but she let it go anyway.

Every moment she wasn't in class, she found a quiet corner of the castle to think about her future.

"Is this what you have in mind for me, Harry?" she asked the harsh wind that stole her breath while standing on the Astronomy tower. "Is this what I'm supposed to be doing?"

There was no answer save the bitter cold and Ginny wrapped Harry's robes tighter around herself before wandering back through the castle and climbing into her bed.

Harry came to her dream that night. She stood in the middle of the Quidditch pitch, bewildered by the roaring of the crowd and the players whizzing and diving over top of her.

"Are you going to play?" he asked. Yet, Ginny knew it wasn't him. He was... different. He didn't smell like Harry. His glasses were broken on one side, the lens cracked in a spidery pattern. His eyes weren't the green they normally were, but dark—colorless.

"I don't remember how," she said, shaking her head slowly. She wanted to run to him, wrap her arms around him and stay here forever with him.

His hand slid inside hers, making her shiver at how cold he was.

"You're so far away," he whispered. "I miss you."

"I don't remember," Ginny shook her head, glancing again at the game taking place in front of them.

"Then don't," Harry told her. His cold fingers traced her jaw and she leaned into his touch. "Do something you *do* remember..."

Harry faded away and Ginny watched the game as it turned brutal. The Quaffle lay forgotten on the grass as players became people fighting, colored spells flying left and right—blue and red, green and orange. The opposing team's robes turned dark as night and their faces became obscured by masks.

"Ginny, we need you!" Richie Coote yelled from his broom, using his Beater's bat to block a spell and firing one back with his bare hand.

She gaped at the destruction around her, several of the Quidditch stands were on fire and students ran left and right, screaming and trying to escape.

"Do something you *do* remember..." Harry's words echoed around, sounding like a crack of thunder in her ears.

Ginny sprang into action, her wand a blur as she defended the students on the ground, blasting foe after foe out of the air. Her fellow Gryffindors started to fade out as she focused, completely alone in the middle of the field, fighting with everything she had.

She awoke with a start, gasping for air.

"Are you alright, Ginny?" Hermione asked. The other girls in the dorm were peering at her from the low dawn-lit room.

"Nightmare," Ginny choked out, swinging her legs to the side of the bed. They all nodded jerkily and turned away.

"If you want to talk about it—"

"No, really, Hermione, I don't." Ginny rubbed her face harshly. "At least not right now."

Hermione stared at her and Ginny flinched at the hurt that she saw in her friend's face.

"I appreciate it," she said lamely. "I just... I don't even know how to explain it."

"Alright," Hermione conceded.

Ginny felt bad. Hermione was trying so hard to include her, to make sure she had someone to talk to, and Ginny had been brushing her off.

She sighed, vowing that if the idea taking form in her mind was possible, she'd ask Hermione to help. That should mend some of the bridges that Ginny hadn't realized she was burning.

Fumbling on the table next to her bed, Ginny's hand lifted the watch that her family had given Harry for his seventeenth birthday—the one that had once belonged to Fabian Prewitt.

The Ministry had sent a box of Harry's things to Ginny, including his watch, the framed photograph he had kept on his desk, and a few other odds and ends weeks ago. There was also a letter from Gringotts, stating that Harry's entire estate had passed onto Ginny. She wore the key to his vault on a chain around her neck.

Seven in the morning.

It wasn't too early, she told herself. Doell would already be up and preparing for his classes.

Quickly making the decision, she changed into her clothing for the day and ran a brush through her hair, then a toothbrush across her teeth.

The castle was just beginning to show signs of life as she walked swiftly to the Defense Professor's office. Ginny hesitated a moment before knocking.

"In!" Doell barked from somewhere inside.

Ginny peeked around the door. "Professor?"

"Weasley," Doell greeted. His customary perfectly pressed robes were tossed over the back of his chair, revealing his trousers and plain shirt, making him look a lot younger, and much more approachable.

"Professor... I was wondering, what would I have to do to take the Auror Entrance Exams?" The question seemed to take forever to reach him across the room and Ginny was just about to flee—

pretend she'd never said anything—when Doell cleared his throat.

"The exam is in May," he explained, moving to stand near the window where the warm sun was just starting to stream in.

"What about my N.E.W.T.'s?" Ginny asked, chewing her bottom lip.

"With the recommendation of a licensed Auror, one can take the test without them. Your scores are considered later, of course." He cracked a small smile and glanced at her. "That's your Harry's doing, by the way."

Ginny pondered that for a minute before deciding to simply ask her question. "Would you... recommend me?"

Doell glanced at her and Ginny's heart pounded in her chest. "Is that what you intend to do?"

She nodded. "I know how to do it—I've been fighting a lot of my life."

"And you think you owe it to Potter?"

She flinched at his question. "I owe Harry a lot," Ginny said softly. "But that's not the only reason. I... I need to make a difference. And Quidditch... it just *doesn't* right now. It's not important enough right now."

"How important is this to you?" he peered at her and Ginny locked her jaw, determined not to recoil under his gaze.

"It's everything to me," she admitted, not knowing how true that was until she said it out loud. The way she'd felt during the duel the other day, and then in her dream last night... it was the most alive she'd felt for months.

"You understand how hard this is going to be?" Doell asked, walking slowly back to his desk. "You're behind in most of your classes and you're not even taking potions."

"I can be ready," she affirmed. "I have five months."

"Five months to cover everything that should have been taught last year, but wasn't. Five months to raise your current level of work up from beyond just passing to top of the class."

Determination flooded Ginny and her heart pounded even further.

"I'll give you eight weeks," Doell said. "You show me you can be who you're supposed to be. Show me that you can turn your life around and make it into something to be proud of. Bring me your application and paperwork, all filled out, and I'll sign it for you."

A million questions flew into her head, filling it with too many things to even pick one to ask. How was she supposed to get the paperwork? What, exactly, were the requirements? How was she going to manage this?

She opened her mouth to ask one, but then shut it at Doell's sharp look, realizing that this might be

one of his tests. If she wanted this bad enough, she'd find the answers somehow.

"I'll have it to you in six," she affirmed, lifting her rucksack higher on her shoulder and turning to leave. She could have sworn that he smiled at her, but maybe it was just her imagination.

"Six weeks," Ginny whispered to herself, "what have you gotten yourself into now, Ginny?"

She was almost to the Great Hall before she realized how short a time she really had. Spinning on her heel, Ginny almost ran to the library.

\* \* \*

The dungeons were just as dark and dank as she remembered and Ginny shuddered. Last year, with the Death Eaters running the school, had been hell. Ginny had lost track of how much time she spent down here in detention, certainly more time than she spent in class. At least Slughorn had been sympathetic and had volunteered much of his time to supervise detentions. That kept away the Cruciatus curse at least.

And now here she was again, standing in front of the Potions classroom, putting herself in a position to be in Slughorn's debt. She didn't even know what she was going to say to convince him to help her achieve what she wanted. But there wasn't anything to lose. If he didn't agree to help her, she'd just do it on her own. Granted, she may fail spectacularly, but she'd do it anyway.

"Professor Slughorn?" she called out, knocking on the closed door as she opened it.

"I'm in my office," the robust voice called from the back corner of the lab.

Ginny shuffled forward, grimacing at the acrid scent in the room. Potions was never really her thing, despite the fact that she had been talented at it. Last year, when every student had been forced to take Potions, Slughorn had even complimented her, saying that she and Harry shared talent. Ginny had only smiled smugly, remembering Hermione's issues with Harry's 'talent'.

"Miss Weasley!" Slughorn gushed, pushing his massive form out of his chair and wobbling forward a few steps, grandly admitting her to his plush office. "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

Ginny pretended to blush, tucking a stray bit of hair behind her ear. "I just wanted to say hello to my favorite professor," she lied.

Slughorn laughed mightily and waggled his finger at her. "Now, now, none of that, young lady. If I were actually your favorite, you would still be in my N.E.W.T. Level Potions. Please, have a seat. Would you care for something to drink? Wine? Mead?"

"No thank you," she excused, sinking slowly into the rich velvet chair. "I actually have something to ask you... a favor."

"Oh ho!" Slughorn brightened as he perched himself on the edge of the chair. He looked like a very eager budgerigar—a very well fed one, at that—as he watched her with interest. "And what may I do to help you?"

"I know you were disappointed when I didn't continue on with Potions," Ginny said, steeling herself for whatever he might ask. She knew his help wouldn't come free, but the question was if she was willing to pay the price or not.

"Well, Quidditch players seldom need Potions," he admitted with a nod in her direction. Ginny shifted in her seat.

"Well, unfortunately, my career in Quidditch is no longer an option."

Slughorn narrowed the already small space around his eyes and nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I'd heard that you resigned from the team. Admittedly, not soon enough for my poor Slytherin House."

Ginny forced a small smile and shrugged. Gryffindor had really trounced Slytherin in the first match.

"I've been talking with Professor Doell," Ginny pressed on, her palms becoming sweaty. "And I'm planning to take the Auror Entrance Exams in May."

Slughorn's eyes went wide and he rocked back in his chair. "Is that so?" Ginny nodded, holding her chin up proudly. "You'll need your Potions N.E.W.T. then," he nodded thoughtfully.

"I will," she admitted. "And I would like your help to catch me up."

The scrape of his chair along the floor startled her and she watched as he paced back and forth, his hands clasped behind him.

"I don't think you realize how much work is involved in this, young lady. What you're asking... it's just not possible. Even the students who were with me all last year and this year are struggling to keep up." He continued to walk, muttering and shaking his head back and forth. Ginny refused to let doubt creep in; what she was doing was going to be hard, yes, but it was the right thing.

"I'm sorry, Miss Weasley, I just don't believe I have the time to tutor someone quite that extensively."

Ginny nodded, swallowing the lump that tried to settle in her throat, and stood. "Thank you for your time, sir."

"Miss Weasley..." he trailed off, looking like he was suffering from some sort of gastric pain, his face was so screwed up. "What do you plan to do now? You know I could always arrange for Gwenog Jones—"

"I'll do it myself," Ginny said plainly, interrupting his offer.

"I don't see how that's possible," Slughorn defended.

Ginny set her jaw and rose up to her full height, not all that impressive, she knew, but Slughorn at least seemed shocked. "I will do it, sir. I'd hoped you would help me, in Harry's memory, but I understand if you don't have the time." She felt a bit sick using Harry's name like that, but she also knew that behind her back Slughorn was now squirming at the words.

"Alright," he called out as she opened the door to leave. "I'll help you." Ginny smiled inwardly, but

forced her face to remain still as she looked back over her shoulder at him. "But I warn you, Miss Weasley," he cautioned, his finger wagging at her once again, "you've never worked so hard in your life."

"I enjoy a good challenge, sir," Ginny said, allowing the first genuine smile to come on her face in a long time.

She hurried out of the dungeons, sighing inwardly. Now she had two Professors on her side. Hermione was next.

Ginny found her in the library, bent over a scroll and scribbling feverishly.

"Hermione," she sighed as she sank into the chair next to her friend. "Remember when you offered to help me with what it is I'm working on? And I told you I'd tell you when the time was right?"

Hermione lifted curious, although suspicious eyes. "Yes."

Ginny bit her bottom lip and held out the Auror Registration Papers, sliding them across the table to rest under Hermione's gaze. "I could really use your help..."

# Chapter 4: Be Somebody

The snowflakes falling outside the window were enormous, puffy masses drifting slowly down from the white sky. Ginny looked up and focused on one huge clump as it swirled and danced down to earth.

"You'd better decide what you're taking," Hermione scolded from across the room. She was lying back on her bed, her already-packed bag sitting on top of her trunk.

Ginny glanced at her with a small smile and then at her own bed which was still heaped with clean laundry, parchments and various odds and ends. It looked as if her trunk had vomited its contents all over the room. She grimaced at the thought and flicked her wand, separating out the rubbish. The clothes she began to fold by hand, not taking much care to get them perfect—she could always freshen them up later.

"I know you don't really want to go home," Hermione said, her voice quiet. They were the only two in the room, something Ginny had been avoiding lately, seeing Hermione's piercing looks.

"Its fine," Ginny protested. "It's just a little annoying because I have so many things to do."

Hermione sighed and set aside the novel she was reading, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "You've been working yourself to the bone, Ginny. You need a break."

Ginny scowled down at the jumper in her hand and stuffed it into her rucksack. "I'm fine," she protested.

Hermione didn't respond but did begin helping her find her bed again, slowly folding clothing, stacking parchment and books to the side.

Ginny refused to meet her friend's eyes. Hermione was right. She'd been doing nothing but revising, and reading, and training for weeks. But it was paying off, in Ginny's mind at least, because her marks were some of the highest in her courses now and she'd been able to turn in her application to Doell just this morning.

"Harry used to say that all the time," Hermione mused as she sank down onto the edge of Ginny's bed, her fingers rubbing lightly over one of Harry's faded jumpers. "I'd be so worried about him and he'd say 'I'm fine, Hermione,' in just the same tone you used."

Ginny swallowed thickly and reached for the jumper, pulling it over her head and tugging at it until it fully covered the t-shirt she wore.

"And it was rarely true," Hermione said, her empty hands going slack in her lap. "I'm worried about you, Ginny. You can't use this to hide your emotions."

"I'm not," Ginny protested, banishing the mess still on her bed back to her trunk now that her rucksack was full. "I'm still dealing with it, Hermione. I... I think about him every minute of every day. But I really am fine. I'm doing what I need to do to move on." She sank down onto the bed next to Hermione, tucking her stocking-clad feet up underneath her. "It still hurts every morning

when I wake up, and every night when I go to sleep. But... when I'm focused on training, I can set aside the pain for a bit. And I can breathe just a tiny bit more."

"I understand," Hermione said, nodding. "I just don't want to see you get sick because you're not taking care of yourself."

A slow smile spread across Ginny's face. "Are you telling me I need to revise less?"

Hermione opened her mouth to protest and then shut it when she realized that Ginny was teasing her. "No. I'm not. I'm telling you that you need to take breaks. You need to be with your family. You need to take care of yourself."

"I'll pay more attention to it," Ginny promised. And Hermione was right, to an extent. Ginny was wearing down a bit. The last six weeks had been very tough. But she'd made it.

"What did Doell say when you gave him your application?" Hermione asked.

"He was pleased," Ginny admitted and then chuckled. "I don't think he actually expected me to make the deadline."

"Did he sign it?"

"Right in front of me," Ginny said. "He did warn me to keep up the progress or he'd write into the Academy and retract it."

"That makes sense," Hermione nodded. "Are you all ready to go?"

"Yeah," Ginny sighed and stood, surveying her bed. "I think I've got everything I'll need."

"Good," Hermione nodded. "We've still got time before we need to start walking down to Hogsmeade, but it's better to be ready."

"Yeah," Ginny agreed, noncommittally, stuffing her feet into her trainers. "We could go down early, you know. Get a Butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks." The idea surprised her just as much as it did Hermione. Ginny hadn't even considered it before it was there in front of them.

"I think that would be fun," Hermione agreed quietly.

They both gathered up their traveling cloaks and bags, chatting softly as they walked down to the Entry Hall.

Professor McGonagall was waiting when they reached the landing on the second floor.

"Miss Weasley, I wonder if you might give me a few minutes."

Ginny glanced at Hermione who looked just as puzzled as she felt.

"I'll walk ahead then," Hermione offered. "You can meet me there."

"Okay," Ginny nodded, turning back to the Headmistress. "Is there something you need, Professor?"

McGonagall's mouth pinched down tightly and Ginny swallowed thickly, her mind racing to remember if she'd done anything to get in trouble lately. Nothing came to mind... and then her heart began to race.

"Professor..." she started, swallowing the tightness in her throat. "It's not... my family, is it?" Surely, McGonagall wouldn't have dismissed Hermione if it was something with the family...

"As far as I know, Miss Weasley, your family is fine," McGonagall said. "Would you follow me to my office?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Ginny agreed, falling in line behind the stern Headmistress.

Ginny hadn't been inside McGonagall's office since it had belonged to Snape last year. The transformation was remarkable. The portraits were beautifully restored and the furniture was covered in rich gold and red.

"Please have a seat, Miss Weasley," McGonagall said as she settled behind the organized desk. "Ginger newt?"

"Thank you," Ginny said, accepting a small biscuit from the tin that McGonagall had offered. "Professor... is there—"

"I asked you here to discuss this with you," McGonagall said as she lifted a familiar sheaf of papers from a drawer. "I wasn't aware that you were planning on being an Auror."

Ginny relaxed a bit. At least this wasn't like the last time McGonagall had asked to talk to her. "I wasn't, Professor. At least... not until..." She trailed off, not wanting to say the words. *Not until Harry died.* It didn't need to be spoken out loud to be heard.

"I understand," the Headmistress continued, her face relaxing from the tense look she wore just a few minutes ago. Her fingers traced the edge of the top paper, running along Doell's signature and then over Ginny's own. "I know I'm not your Head of House anymore, Ginny. But I know you've been having a rough time. I was disappointed when you resigned from the team—"

Ginny opened her mouth to protest but McGonagall held up her hand. "But I understood why it happened. Mr. Potter was always... a particular favorite of mine," she continued, her voice breaking. "I've been watching you, Ginny. And I was only a few days away from pulling you in here to talk to you about your marks, when, surprisingly, your professors informed me that you had engaged again.

"And now I understand why."

They trailed off into silence, but it wasn't awkward.

"I once offered to help Mr. Potter become an Auror no matter the obstacles," McGonagall continued, her voice softer than Ginny had ever heard it. "I'm going to extend the same promise to you, Ginny. Some may call it favoritism, but I'll do anything I need to do to get you past your exams." The fierceness in her tone startled Ginny, and for just a second, she was able to see the strong, resolute woman under the aged, Headmistress persona.

"Thank you, Professor," Ginny said sincerely.

McGonagall quickly composed herself and stood, brushing out the perfect pleats on her robes. "Of course, Miss Weasley. I'd be happy to assist you with your Transfiguration if you need it."

Ginny smiled slowly. "I just may..."

"You'd better hurry on, then," McGonagall said, back to her stern self. Her mouth did turn up at the corners as Ginny opened the door. "And enjoy yourself this holiday, Ginny. You'll need the break before the term starts again. Because none of us is going to let you fail now that you've committed."

Ginny grinned and, uncharacteristically, leaned forward and wrapped her arms around the Professor. McGonagall seemed flustered, but she returned the quick hug before ushering Ginny out the door.

"Do not miss the train."

"I won't," Ginny promised.

\* \* \*

Ron was waiting for them as they came off the Hogwarts Express and Ginny averted her eyes as he gathered Hermione to him, kissing her in front of the whole platform.

'Couple things' still made Ginny uncomfortable.

"Hello to you too, Ron," she said dryly, slinging her rucksack over her shoulder. "Can we get going soon?"

Ginny's good mood had slowly faded as the train got closer and closer to London, being replaced with irritability and discomfort at the idea of being back at the Burrow. She really should go through Harry's things, pack up his trunk and find a place for everything. Her mother had offered to do it for her and Ginny had asked that she wait until Ginny could do it herself. There wasn't exactly a rush to fill the room.

"Wow," Ron grimaced, leading Hermione toward the Apparition point. "Someone's a bit tetchy."

"Leave her alone, Ron," Hermione scolded gently. "This holiday isn't going to be easy on any of us."

Ginny bit her lip, biting back a sharp comment. It was going to take everything she had to make it through these two weeks; a nasty attitude wouldn't help.

"You cut your hair," Ron said bluntly, no emotion at all in his voice. Ginny lifted her head, thinking he was probably commenting on Hermione's new look. But Ron was staring at her, his eyes wide.

"Yes, I did," she forced a smile.

"I think it looks brilliant," Hermione added in a supportive tone. "I cut mine as well, Ron."

He glanced at her and then turned back to Ginny. "Harry liked long hair."

Frustration welled inside of Ginny, making her feel like she was suffocating. "Harry's dead, Ron," she bit out. Hurt flashed across his face and Ginny felt guilty.

"I know he's dead," Ron ground out, his whole body tensing.

"I can't go on living my life for him anymore," she growled back, knowing it wouldn't do anything but make him angry. "And neither should you." It was harsh and horrible, but she pushed that thought out as she focused on Apparating away.

The kitchen was stiflingly hot when Ginny walked in the back door. The scent of biscuits and mince pies and roasting ham assailed her.

"Ginny, dear," her mother greeted, quickly moving to give her a hug. "Oh, your hair looks..." she trailed off, stopping the forward motion, her hands hovering in air with her uncertainty.

"I know," Ginny shook her head. "Ron already mentioned how much Harry would have hated it."

Her mother's jaw set determinedly and she gathered Ginny to her. "I was going to say I like how it looks on you."

Ginny flushed and shrugged a shoulder. "I'm sorry, I'm just..."

"It's going to be hard," her father joined the hug, "for all of us." Ginny closed her eyes and nodded, accepting the comfort that they gave. For the first time since the funeral, Ginny felt the tiniest bit of the pain ease, here in her parents' arms.

But she couldn't stay there forever.

Ron's huffing entrance into the back door, Hermione in tow, broke the mood.

"How dare you!" he roared, his chest heaving and his face bright red. "You think you're the only one who loved him?"

"Ronald Weasley!"

Ginny took a deep breath, putting her hand on her mother's arm. "No, it's alright, Mum," she soothed. "I said something very stupid. Ron has every right to be angry with me."

"You're damned right I'm angry," Ron continued. He started pacing the room, bumping into chairs and ignoring his mother's scolding for his language. "You walk around Hogwarts like a damned zombie for weeks, Ginny!" Ginny turned her gaze on Hermione, who looked like she wanted to protest the fact that she'd written him about his sister. Betrayal rose up in Ginny, but she swallowed it back.

"How do you think I feel, Ginny?" Ron continued, his face turning more purple than red now as he ran his hands through his hair. "You think I can even live with the fact that I was selling jokes and trick wands while he was there, doing something important... and he *died* because of it..." His voice trailed off into an agonized sob. Hermione darted forward to wrap him in a hug, but he brushed it aside. "I wasn't there when he needed me. And I'll never forgive myself for that."

Ginny swallowed her own tears back. "Ron, I'm sorry. I know how much Harry's... death cost you. And I shouldn't have said what I did. I said it to pick a fight." She stopped speaking, shaking her head. "I'm glad you weren't there, Ron, because if had... you probably would have died too. Have you seen Kingsley?"

Ron stopped his pacing and stared at her through angry, watery eyes. "No," he admitted, guiltily shifting from foot to foot. "I... I just can't," he whispered.

Ginny nodded, silently vowing to visit the Auror again. "He's almost unrecognizable," she said, turning her head to look out at the bleak day outside the window. "They almost killed him too."

"Harry wouldn't blame you, Ron," Hermione said. "He'd... he'd be happy that you're safe."

Ron nodded jerkily and then quickly left the room, Hermione right on his heels.

"He's so angry about this," Ginny's father said to the still room.

Her mother sniffed and wiped her wet eyes on her apron. "We all are."

Ginny sighed and sank down to the table. "Can I have something to do?"

"Oh, Ginny, you just go rest—"

"I need something to do," Ginny pleaded. "I..." She stared at her hands, rubbing the calluses that used to be from holding her broom, but were now more from exercise and holding her wand for dueling practice for hours at a time.

"I'm just about ready to start the vegetables," her mother said, nodding knowingly. "You can start with the carrots." She placed a small knife next to the cutting board. "Sometimes I don't charm it when I need to... do something with my hands."

Ginny nodded, picking up the knife and turning it over and over in her hands. It was thicker than her wand and didn't feel right against her palm. The first carrot was a blur as Ginny concentrated on making each cut clean and even.

George and Bill came in through the back door, both greeting her with kisses on the crown of her head, making complimentary remarks about the haircut. Ron and Hermione returned at some point.

But Ginny kept slicing. Cut after cut of perfectly measured pieces. Every time she would reach for another carrot, one would be there. She didn't know who was conjuring them for her, but it helped to focus on one task, instead of letting the warmth of a normal situation take over.

"How is Fleur feeling?" her mother asked Bill. "Has she gotten over that nasty flu?"

"Better," he shrugged. "She'll be here after she gets off work." Ginny looked up to find his cheeks pink and a playful smile on his face. "Might as well let everyone know... we found out we're expecting."

Ginny's knife slid across the carrot, digging deeply into her finger when her mother squealed.

"Damn it!" she hissed, immediately sticking the cut to her mouth.

"Ginny," her father jumped up, trying to see how deeply the cut had gone. "That looked deep, we may need to get you to St. Mungos"

No one else seemed to have noticed, however, as they were all still congratulating Bill.

"I'll be fine," she protested quietly, trying to focus on the pain in her finger, instead of the empty pain in her heart. She should be happy for Bill and Fleur... life went on. But the thought of a baby—anyone's baby—just made her feel hollow inside. 'Focus on the drive,' she told herself. 'Hold onto the determination.'

"Ginny," her father protested when he finally managed to get a look at it. "That's deep... down to the bone."

"Ginny!" her mother gasped, finally spotting the blood soaked flannel that Ginny had wrapped around her finger.

"It's fine," Ginny protested, trying to pull away from their concern. If they would all stop hovering, she'd be able to heal the cut simply and be done with it.

"Look," she said, pulling her wand. "I can heal it right up."

"Not something that deep, dear," her mother scowled at her. "We'll just take you right to St. Mungo's."

Ginny sighed and did the complex movement, silently casting the spell and watching as the tissues knit back together perfectly. On the surface of the skin there was a faint scar, but Ginny rubbed her finger over it. That would probably be only one of a hundred scars she was in for being an Auror. "There, it's gone," she proclaimed with a satisfied smile.

"You... you shouldn't be able to do that," her mother chastised. "It's... that's a Healer's spell."

"Or... an Auror's," Ginny said softly, glancing up to see Hermione's face. She gave a small shake of her head, signaling that she hadn't said anything to the family about Ginny's new career plans. "I... I'm applying to the Auror Academy," she said after taking a deep breath.

Her mother sucked in a deep breath and turned away. The back door slammed and made Ginny jump as her mother disappeared out it. Her father quickly followed.

"Wow... Er..." George ruffled his hair. "That's quite the announcement."

"Yeah," Bill agreed. "I think you actually beat my news, Ginny."

She forced a smile. "I knew you wouldn't be happy about it," she shrugged. "But it's my life."

"Is that what you really want, Ginny?" Ron asked, looking away from her. Ginny stared at him, willing him to look at her—if she could see his eyes, she might be able to guess what his real reaction was. If she had to guess, she'd say he was furious. But he might just surprise her.

"Yes, Ron, it is. And before you ask me if I'm doing it only for Harry, the answer is no. Not completely anyway."

"Then why are you doing it?" Ron demanded in a harsh, but low voice. "Because you're going to kill mum."

"Ron!" Hermione hissed.

"I'm doing it because it's the right thing for me, Ron," Ginny said, standing and tucking her wand away. "I'm doing it because I'm damned good at it."

"Harry was good at it too," Ron said quietly.

"I know," Ginny said, biting her lip. "And I can't promise that everything will be fine. But... you have to trust me that I know what I'm doing, Ron."

"What about Quidditch?" George asked. "Angelina heard that Jones might be coming to see you play."

Ginny's chest constricted at seeing how concerned they all were about her. "I can't play Quidditch, George. It's... it's a game." She shrugged when George's eyes widened in disbelief. "It's not as important as doing what I need to do."

"Now you even sound like him," Ron grumbled, laying his head down on the table. "I don't think he told anyone, but he was offered starting Seeker positions."

"I knew about them," Ginny nodded. "He and I talked about it. In the end, being an Auror was what he wanted. I supported him in his choice. And I know he'd support me." She finished in a strong voice, feeling the conviction of her words—that little bit of Harry that she carried around, the voice in her head that pushed her during long hours of study and grueling dueling practice, reassured her now.

"He would," Ron nodded.

"I think it's a good idea," Bill nodded firmly. "That doesn't mean it doesn't scare the shite out of me."

Ginny tried to smile at him, but her tiredness was starting to bleed through. "I guess I need to go track down Mum and Dad."

"Be... be gentle, will you?" Bill cautioned. "She's liable to go back to bed for three weeks."

Ginny stood, stunned and staring at them all. No one had mentioned that her mother had spent three weeks in bed over Harry's death.

"It wasn't pretty," George shook his head. "I didn't think it could get worse than with Fred. But... I think it hit her twice as bad with Harry."

"That's probably because it was supposed to be over," Hermione suggested, rubbing Ron's back gently.

"And because Harry... he never really got his shot at happiness," Ginny said, staring out, once again, at the bleak day. Taking a deep breath and grasping Harry's voice of confidence, Ginny slipped outside to the garden. There was a light on in the shed and Ginny wrapped her arms around herself, taking careful steps through the snow so that it didn't fall down into her shoes.

Once at the door, she peeked into the window to make sure she wasn't interrupting anything. Her brothers always told stories of walking into intimate situations and then needing to gouge out their eyes.

"I can't bury another child, Arthur." Her mother's words, amid sobs and sniffles, made Ginny's throat close and her chest tighten.

"She's a good girl, Molly," her father protested. "And... what happened to Harry, Molly... there are rumors that this man was actually *looking* for him... it wasn't an accident."

Ginny gasped just as much as her mother did. She spun around on her heel, processing the information as she rested her head back against the rough wood wall.

Her parents continued talking in low tones that Ginny couldn't hear. Finally, she collected herself enough to go inside.

"Ginny." Her father greeted her with a worried glance at where her mother sat on an upended crate.

"I'm sorry I told you this way," Ginny shrugged. "I really am good at it. Professor Doell signed my application and everything."

"Perhaps I ought to go up there and talk to *Professor* Doell and teach him that he shouldn't encourage young girls into dangerous professions," her mother said, although her tone was soft, betraying the harshness of her words.

"Jasper Doell is a fine Auror," Ginny's father protested, taking his glasses off and cleaning them on his robes. It was a nervous habit that he had, and it made Ginny smile.

"Mum," she said as she crouched down in front of the woman, looking up into her tear-stained face. "You and Dad always raised us to fight for what we believed in. And I believe in this. I believe in myself."

"You always were the most strong willed child," Molly cried, blinking back more tears.

"You're not angry?" Ginny asked, looking between her parents.

"Angry?" her father asked, scowling at the question. "No, not angry. I think we're mostly scared."

"I am too," Ginny admitted. "A little bit, anyway. I think it's natural. Harry was scared all the time," she admitted with a small shrug.

"You don't have to do this to remember him, you know?" her mother said, smoothing her fingers over Ginny's face.

"I know," Ginny said. "Part of me is, but... the rest of me knows this is the right thing to do, Mum."

"I hate the idea, Ginny," she protested, shaking her head. "But you're old enough to make your own decisions."

"You can trust me, Mum," Ginny whispered. "You raised me to be somebody. And that's all I'm trying to do."

"Does it have to be an Auror?" her mother asked with a small upturn to her lips.

Ginny sighed. "Right now, yeah."

"Okay then. I still hate it."

"I know," Ginny nodded, giving her mother a hug. A part of her hated the idea as well, but it was being buried by the part of her determined to make her way in the world. "I know."

\* \* \*

Ginny had been to St. Mungo's twice on Christmas. The first time was when her dad had been injured by the snake and Harry had saved him.

And here she was again, carrying a tin of homemade biscuits and fudge, standing at the door that led to Kingsley Shacklebolt's room.

He'd been moved from the Permanent Spell Damage Ward and now resided in a simple, high security wing of the hospital.

"Happy Christmas," she greeted him, a wide smile pasted on.

He sat up in his bed, still wearing some bandages where his head and face were healing. Ginny tried to stifle a gasp when he turned her way. Last time she'd been here, his face had been swollen and covered in gauzy whiteness. Now it was thinner than ever and the right side of his face was almost concave with pale scars criss-crossing over the whole area. His eye was missing, but, mercifully, they'd sealed his eyelid shut so there was no gaping hole.

"I didn't know if you'd be allowed sweets," she said, holding up the tin a bit. "If not, then sneak a bit now and again. I'll charm them to be invisible."

He grimaced at her and Ginny stopped, not sure if that was a good sign or not. His one eye fixed on her and he gently lifted his arm to waive her forward, indicating the chair on the side of his bed.

"How have you been?" Ginny asked. She was relieved that the seat was on his left, where she didn't have to stare at his mangled face.

Kingsley grunted and then lifted his hand, wiggling it back and forth.

"That well?" Ginny said, forcing a small laugh. She glanced around the room to notice a few dismal holiday cards and a pale tree that tipped precariously to one side and was decorated with little paper chains.

"Did Andromeda bring the tree for you?" Ginny asked as something in her mind clicked. Mrs. Tonks had been to the Burrow twice during the holiday, bringing little Teddy with her. She'd mentioned something about taking a tree to the hospital, but Ginny hadn't made the connection then.

Kingsley grunted again and bobbed his head once.

Ginny stood and made her way over to it, scowling at the pitiful little thing. It was apparent that no one had bothered to water it.

"I'm sorry to say, King, but your tree is beyond hope," Ginny sighed. Kingsley grunted once more, this time sounding a bit like a laugh. Taking a chance, Ginny picked up the cards and tree and brought them closer to him, setting them next to his bed where he could see them, instead of across the room.

"I could go and get you another tree," she offered, gazing at the pathetic little thing.

Kingsley shook his head again and motioned toward the chair, his eye wide.

"How about I just charm it green again?" Ginny offered, raising her wand. He grunted once more, this time it was definitely a laugh. She smiled and performed the charm, watching the dead foliage turn a rather bright shade of green. It looked very unnatural, but had a kind of comedic beauty that made it fun.

Kingsley's eye wandered to the cards and Ginny picked them up, intending to read them to him, but he quickly snatched one out of her hand. She jumped back like he'd bitten her, and then saw him roughly tracing his finger along it, almost as if writing something.

"You want me to write?" she guessed. He shook his head. "You want to write?" His shoulders relaxed and he nodded once. "I'll find a quill," she promised.

It took a trip to the nurses' station to find one, but she returned and Kingsley grabbed it from her, making a frustrated sound when he couldn't get it to work quite right. Ginny silently reached over and held the card while he scratched something out.

Very roughly, she could make out a 'G' and what looked like two 'N's with a line down at the end.

"Ginny?" she nodded, smiling at him. "Yes, I'm here."

Kingsley sighed, sinking back into his bed and looking up at her. Suddenly, his disfigured face didn't matter anymore. This was a friend. Someone who had suffered greatly, trying to protect Harry. He had been Harry's mentor and friend as well.

Ginny gently took the quill and card and slid them onto the table next to him. She slid onto the bed and popped open the tin, taking out a small bit of fudge and placing it in his hand, sliding another piece into her mouth.

"Don't worry," she said, savoring the flavor. "Mum made it, not me."

Kingsley held up the candy to his eye and then slowly, his tongue came out, tasting it.

"Always a pessimist," Ginny scolded. "I didn't poison it. There are no love potions in there either."

Kingsley grunted a laugh again and placed the fudge on his tongue, sighing greatly when it melted in.

"Good, yeah?" Ginny asked.

They sat in silence, enjoying the chocolaty heaven for what seemed like a long time.

"I packed away Harry's things today," Ginny finally said as she snapped the lid on the tin. "Part of me didn't want to, but... it feels like I need to move on."

She started when his large hand clumsily closed over hers. Looking down, she wove their fingers together. "I still miss him every minute of every day," she admitted. "But I can't keep living those minutes for someone who's not here."

Kingsley squeezed her hand and shifted in the bed so he could look at her fully.

"We have to move forward, don't we?" Her question was so soft, she was afraid he didn't hear it. But he nodded slowly. He lifted both of their hands, and thumped them against his chest clumsily.

"He'll always be in my heart," Ginny said, blinking back tears. "There won't ever be a breath I take that I don't think of him." Kingsley nodded and then melted back into his bed, exhaustion showed on his face.

"I'm applying to the Auror Academy," Ginny said suddenly, just as the thought hit her to share with him. She kept her hand in his larger one, understanding that he was taking comfort from her simple touch. Imagining that there wasn't anyone here who touched him out of actually *wanting* to do so—she knew he didn't have any family—made it easier to look at him, hold his hand and tell him about her life.

His one eye fixed on her and a swirl of emotions reflected in it. Ginny's first impression was that Kingsley wasn't comfortable with that statement. He shifted in place and almost shook his head 'no', but then he nodded once instead.

"Jasper Doell, I don't know if you remember him... Well, he's been teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, and he's signed my application.

"I'm really nervous about doing this," she admitted for the first time, really. "But I think it's important."

She could still see the concern in his face, and patted his hand to reassure him. "Don't worry about it, yeah? The chances of me actually passing the exams, let alone getting admitted are probably next to nothing."

He yawned widely and Ginny glanced around the room, shocked to see the growing darkness.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I'll let you get some rest. I'm going to disillusion your tin of sweets so the nurses don't steal them all, alright?" Kingsley's face twisted again, grimacing into a sort of

smile. Ginny performed the spell and impulsively leaned over to place a kiss on his cheek. "Would you mind if I write to you? It might be nice to have someone to talk to. Don't worry about writing back yet, unless you want to try. I can wait until you're all better."

Kingsley nodded once and Ginny fussed about him for a few minutes, making sure his water glass and wand were within reach, adjusting the decorations on the small hideously-green tree and setting up the few cards so that he could see them. By the time she was finished, he'd drifted off to a light sleep.

"Goodbye, Kingsley," she whispered, looking back at him from the door, the loneliness of the room swallowing the large man up completely. "I'll be back when I can."

Ginny walked slowly down to the nurses' station, waiting for one of the bustling employees to notice her.

"Excuse me?"

"What can I help you with?" an older witch asked. She looked tired and a bit frazzled, her frizzy hair peaking out from the silly white cap that sat on her head.

"I was wondering what the status of Mr. Shackbolt is?" Ginny asked. "What they're doing to treat him and such."

The woman stared at Ginny for a long moment before moving closer. "We're not supposed to release that kind of information. I know you're not with the press... or just some... person out to hurt him." Her eyes darted over toward the others who were busy with their paperwork and gossip. "I saw you in with him just now."

"He's a friend," Ginny defended softly. "And I know he doesn't get visitors often."

"No, he doesn't," the nurse replied, her gaze softening. "And it's a shame too; he's such a dear. Never puts up a fuss with anything we make him do."

Ginny waited while the nurse decided how much to tell her. "Medically speaking, he would be fine to release now," she whispered. "But the Ministry has paid for all of his care, and... it would be best if someone could be there with him, to attend to his needs. There is no family."

Chewing her bottom lip, Ginny wondered who she should talk to about that. Why had the Order not stepped up to take care of one of their own? She mentally ran through the names of those left, and realized... there weren't many. Perhaps it hadn't even crossed their mind that Kingsley needed help.

"If there were someone," the nurse continued, "just to make sure potions were being taken, and to help him perhaps regain some of his speech and motor skills..."

"Would a house-elf work?" Ginny blurted out as the idea came to her.

The nurse stopped abruptly and nodded. "I think that would work well. You could always petition the Ministry to see if they would support that."

Something about that idea rankled and Ginny scrunched up her nose. "What about if it was provided privately?" she asked.

The nurse eyed her thoughtfully. "If arrangements like that could be made..."

Ginny nodded, energized as the idea began to fully form in her mind. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Miss Weasley."

Ginny started, her mouth opening to ask how the nurse knew who she was. "We all know who you are, Miss Weasley. I... I'm sorry for your loss." Ginny nodded quickly, looking away. She hated it when people who didn't know either she or Harry said something like that. Although, this woman had treated her very kindly.

"Thank you."

"I think it's a good thing you're trying to do," the nurse continued softly. "If a house-elf were to be found... I'd be glad to assist any way that I could."

"I'll be in touch," Ginny nodded, reaching out to squeeze the nurse's hand gently.

She hurried through the corridors, glancing at a clock she passed and deciding she still had time to make her stop before her mother started to get frantic with worry.

\* \* \*

The door that materialized in front of her was covered in black paint, although the edges were worn and chipped with use.

She blew out a breath and raised her hand to knock. The sound echoed behind the wood for a moment before footsteps were heard.

"Ginny?"

"Mrs. Tonks," Ginny greeted, nodding toward the kind woman. Her resemblance to Bellatrix Lestrange always threw Ginny for a moment when they first saw each other. However, the slow smile that spread over Andromeda's face, and the way she welcomed Ginny into her home softened the look.

"I hope I'm not intruding," Ginny continued. "I wanted to see Teddy for a few minutes, if he's awake... or even if he's not," she said. Guilt at not trying harder to be a part of Teddy's life lately ate away at her a little. She'd written one letter since seeing Andromeda at the funeral, but how did you write a letter to a baby? "And... I have a favor, of sorts, to ask."

"Not at all," Andromeda smiled. "Teddy's just in the lounge. He's discovered the Christmas tree and likes to try and taste all the presents beneath it. I've had to charm it all to levitate so that the little scamp can't get to them all." She motioned Ginny ahead of her, chuckling at the thought of her grandson.

Ginny grinned. "I'll bet he's gotten so big since the last time I saw him. I feel horrible for not being

here more often."

"Nonsense," Andromeda scolded softly. "You're still in school. And Teddy doesn't know the difference much right now."

"Still," Ginny protested as she entered the room. She was met with a giggly smile from Teddy, who was crawling lightning fast across the rug toward his grandmother, his little knees sliding across the carpet steadily.

"Ooo, come here, little man," Andromeda greeted him, picking the baby up and presenting him to Ginny. Teddy, however, had different ideas, he shyly cuddled into his grandmother's embrace, peeking from around her neck with wide eyes at Ginny.

"He has grown," Ginny said, a hint of regret in her voice. She'd do better, she vowed. Harry would want that.

"Miss Ginny!" Kreacher greeted her with a low bow. He stood in the middle of a mass of toys, some Ginny was sure Harry had purchased. "Welcome to the Tonks house. Shall I take your cloak?"

"Kreacher," Ginny greeted. "You're looking well. Helping Andromeda and Teddy suits you."

She could have sworn the old elf blushed in his haste to take her cloak from her.

"Kreacher has been a god-send," Andromeda agreed as she motioned for Ginny to take a seat. "I'm not sure what I would have done without him in those first few months." She settled next to Ginny and handed a now-curious Teddy over to her.

Ginny gladly took the baby and set him on her lap, bouncing him up and down and made faces at him, earning a small smile.

The ancient elf moved back into the room, levitating toys and various items back into their places.

"The favor I have to ask actually involves Kreacher," Ginny admitted, holding her hands out a bit. Teddy held onto both of her thumbs with his chubby hands and tried to put one of them in his mouth.

"Miss?" Kreacher asked, peeking around from the side of the sofa. "You have need of Kreacher."

"I do," Ginny smiled gently. "Come and sit down, Kreacher. I would like to talk to you about doing something for me."

"Of course, Miss," Kreacher said, struggling to climb up onto the sofa. He sat far away from them, and looked a bit uncomfortable, but attentive.

"I don't know if you remember Kingsley Shacklebolt or not," Ginny said, addressing Kreacher directly.

"Kreacher remembers," he nodded. "Mister Shacklebolt was always polite to Kreacher."

"He is a nice man," Ginny nodded, glancing at Andromeda to see only agreement and mild

amusement on her face. "He was severely injured in the same attack... when Harry was killed, Kreacher."

The elf's ears drooped noticeably and he nodded.

"He's still in hospital, but..." Ginny stopped, looking at Andromeda again. "He's healthy enough to be released; however, he would need assistance to live on his own.

"My idea was to see if you would be willing, Kreacher, to help him when you could. I don't want to take you away from your duties here," Ginny protested, feeling her face heat a bit. "But I think Harry would very much appreciate you helping his friend."

Kreacher considered that for a minute before his dark eyes met Ginny's. "Kreacher supposes he could help both Master Teddy and Mr. Shackbolt." He reached up and tugged on his ear thoughtfully. "He could spend time with both."

"Nonsense," Andromeda scolded. "Kingsley can come here." Her sure pronouncement startled Ginny. "I have more than enough room. And Merlin knows I owe that man more than I could ever repay."

"I didn't mean for you—"

Andromeda cut Ginny off, holding up her hand. "We can all take care of each other. And, with... Harry gone," she sighed heavily. "I'd feel safer with someone else in the house as well."

Ginny nodded, biting her bottom lip.

"If I'd realized that he was ready to be released..."

"I'm not sure what he's going to say," Ginny shook her head, glancing down as Teddy strained to reach for her shirt. "I didn't really talk to him about this before I came here. I'd ask my mum, but... she's still not really adjusting to having Fred gone... and now Harry."

"You're a good girl, Ginny," Andromeda complimented softly. "It really is no trouble at all to have Kingsley here."

"Kreacher will work, Miss. He will do his best," the little elf promised, his feet sticking straight off the sofa where they couldn't reach the floor.

"I know you will," Ginny said, releasing a sigh of relief. She felt as if a weight had been lifted off of her shoulders. A weight that she hadn't realized was even there.

Deep down, somewhere near her heart, she swore she heard Harry say, 'Thank you.'

# Chapter 5: Changes

Ginny rolled her shoulders and tried to prepare herself to enter the classroom. This wasn't going to be like Hogwarts at all, she told herself. The day the acceptance letter from the Auror Academy had arrived, brought by a midnight black owl and bearing the Ministry symbol for the Aurors, had changed Ginny's life forever.

Her parents had been quietly accepting, even though she could tell from their tight jaws and stiff shoulders that they were worried about her.

Her brothers had been suspiciously quiet on the whole subject. Although Bill and Fleur had purchased her training robes as a congratulatory gift.

And now, two weeks after walking off the Hogwarts Express for the last time, Ginny was beginning the rest of her life.

"You're early!" the trainer barked as Ginny opened the door, his stance rigid and his robes pressed with military precision. "That's good."

Ginny glanced around the room to find it completely empty. "Yes, sir," she agreed. She bit her lip and moved forward, holding out her paperwork to him. "Ginny Weasley, sir, reporting for training."

The man looked her up and down, although it didn't make her cringe. He wasn't doing it in a sexual manner, most likely simply judging her stamina and athleticism.

"Weasley," he nodded, his voice seemingly only allowing for clipped phrases barked out at anyone. "Supposed to play Quidditch. An Auror instead."

Ginny lifted her chin a fraction of an inch. "Yes, sir."

"Good," the trainer growled. "Quidditch is for pansies."

Ginny tried to hold in a smile. "Yes, sir."

He appraised her for a moment more before turning as the door opened once more. Two young men walked in, laughing quietly.

"You're late."

Ginny tried not to flinch at the booming voice. Honestly, they couldn't be late, since they were less than a minute after she'd walked in, and she'd been ten minutes early.

"Sorry, sir," the two both intoned, holding out their paperwork.

Ginny could feel their eyes on her, and a thousand jokes being thought up. The next few months were going to be hell. Doell had given her a blow-by-blow account of what she could expect. The rigorous schedule didn't scare Ginny. It was only the fear of failing that terrified her. *She would not fail.*

The two men came up to stand next to her and Ginny studied them without looking at them directly. They were both young, but older than she was by a few years it seemed. One was quiet large; broad in shoulder and at least eighteen inches taller than Ginny herself. He had darker skin that made her suspect some kind of exotic blood. The other was taller than Harry had been, but thin like he was. He looked a bit like Michael Corner, truth be told, although with light hair and a pale complexion.

"Just out of Hogwarts?" The thinner one asked.

Ginny glanced at him, shivering at the way he looked her up and down. "Yes," she admitted.

"Impressive," he nodded, turning to face the front again.

"I give her two weeks," the other man said with a deep chuckle. "Being an Auror ain't easy."

Ginny ignored the comment and stared straight ahead. One more man entered, stuttering and stammering his apologies to the trainer who looked less than impressed.

"Welcome to Auror Training, maggots!" he barked, sealing the door behind him and facing the four trainees. "You've just entered hell."

The last man stood at the end of the line and Ginny watched him suck his gut in a bit.

"You belong to me for the next eight weeks," the trainer continued. "You eat what I tell you to, when I tell you to. You sleep when I say it's time. You train harder than you've ever done in your life—for anything." Ginny had the distinct impression that he was looking straight at her, but she wouldn't move her eyes from straight ahead to verify that.

"By the end of eight weeks, if you've survived, you'll move on to full training. If you can't handle that... leave now!"

No one left, although the fourth man twitched, just slightly.

"From now on, you'll be known by your last name," the trainer continued, his loud voice making Ginny's ears ring and her head ache. "Weasley, Collins, Shepherd and Adams."

Ginny heard the soft intake of breath on her name. No doubt the other trainees were just now catching on to who she was, or rather, who she'd been dating. She and Harry had made no secret of their relationship.

"And I don't give a flying care in the world who you think you are, from now until you leave my sight, or drop dead, you belong to me."

Allowing her shoulders to drop just a fraction of an inch in relief, Ginny continued to stare straight ahead. Her fame, or Harry's anyway, had been one of her greatest concerns coming into the Aurors. Would they judge her more harshly because of it, or would they let her slide right through? Harry never would have allowed special treatment based on who he was—he'd earned every scrap in life that he'd been allowed—and neither would Ginny.

Four days later and Ginny seriously doubted the decision to join. Her body hurt in places that Quidditch had never discovered.

She lay face down on her bed in the room she'd been given, really needing to eat, but not having the energy to walk down the four flights of stairs to get to the canteen.

Taylor, the name the trainer allowed them to call him, had been serious about his training techniques. And for two days Ginny had kept at the front of the pack, running the laps, climbing the flights of stairs, doing the grueling physical workouts that Taylor laid out for them.

He hadn't given her any praise, yet he hadn't yelled in her face either; something that none of the other three could claim.

She groaned heavily when she tried to roll over, her arms shaking with the exertion of lifting her own weight.

But she wouldn't give up. It wasn't in her to walk away.

In the privacy of her room was the only place that Ginny allowed herself to move slower, to show that she was being affected at all by the pace Taylor had set. Showing weakness would only make her a target.

She could already feel the eyes of the men, watching and waiting for her to drop. But she was determined. If they could hold out, so could she.

Deciding that food was what she needed before she completely passed out, Ginny forced herself off the bed and out of her room.

"Weasley!"

Ginny bit her lip and refrained from rolling her eyes when Collins, the thin man from the first day, caught up with her on the stairs.

"Collins," she greeted him. She hadn't spoken to any of them more than simple phrases now and again required to complete the tasks they'd been assigned. What Collins wanted now was a mystery. Remembering his lecherous stare from the first day, she wouldn't put it above him to ask her for a quick shag.

"What's your story, Weasley?" he asked, glancing over at her as they walked side by side down the stairs. "I mean, besides what the papers printed."

"No story," Ginny denied.

"Yeah, but you were engaged to Potter, weren't you?"

Her heart hitched, but her movement stayed steady and strong, hopefully not betraying that he'd touched a sensitive spot. "Harry and I were never engaged," she said softly.

"Dating, engaged... whatever," Collins waived off the question. "Adams said he heard you were supposed to play for the Harpies."

"You three talk a lot then," Ginny said, shooting a scathing look at the man.

"You share a bunk with a couple of blokes, you get a lot of details," he shrugged. "You could join us, you know."

She couldn't help but chuckle slightly. There was the suggestive tone that she'd been expecting. "No thanks, Collins. None of you is my type."

Ginny picked up her pace until she was almost running down the stairs. Her thighs and calves screamed in protest, but she refused to give in.

"What *is* your type, then?" He pressed, keeping up with her step for step.

'Stupid boy,' she grumbled to herself.

"Because we can't all save the world, you know," Collins laughed. "Although I bet there are a few things I could do equally as well—if not better," he grinned, his eyes tracing her up and down.

"Is that what this is all about?" Ginny stopped abruptly, turning to him. Collins stopped, although he nearly stumbled into her, catching himself just in time. "You think that since I'm the only woman here, you can just proposition me, have a quick shag, and go back to tell your mates about it? Or do you really think you stand a chance with me?"

Collin's already pale face went white as her wand flashed into sight. He held up his hands and shook his head, backing up a bit. On a narrow flight of stairs, however, there wasn't much room to escape.

"Let me make this clear to you, Collins. I'm here for the training, not so you or any of the other blokes can chat me up, or add to the marks on your bedpost by getting into my knickers. If you really need it spelled out for you, I'll gladly make my point another way..." Ginny lowered her wand so that it pointed at his bits, a wicked spell on her tongue.

"N-n-no," Collins said, dropping his hands to clutch his crotch. "Bloody hell, I was just asking."

"Well, don't," Ginny snapped, staring her motion forward once more, seething at the man's audacity. "And pass that warning onto the other randy blokes, will you?"

She didn't wait for his answer, but darted into the canteen, intent on eating her dinner before anyone else could accost her. There was enough annoyance swirling inside her that the safety of the next person who approached her could not be guaranteed.

\* \* \*

Ginny was exhausted; physically and mentally spent. Five weeks at training and she was lonelier than she'd ever been. Even though she'd pushed most of her friends away at Hogwarts during the last year, there was at least someone always *there* to talk to if she needed.

Here, there just wasn't. Unless you counted Collins, who was liable to take anything she said as an open proposition. Or Shepherd, who took it as a personal insult that she was a woman, younger than he was, and seemed to be doing better.

Taylor may have been her commanding officer, but you just didn't cry on your commanding officer's shoulder about how much you missed home and family, and bemoan the fact that even though you'd expected to not hear from the outside world for eight weeks, the reality of it felt a bit like prison.

So she bottled it all up, and used the frustration to propel her efforts at training. She pushed herself to show Taylor that she could hold up, and wasn't going to walk out, like Adams had, and Collins that she wasn't just another piece of arse walking around, and Shepherd that she could beat him in everything, despite being a witch and less than half his size.

But there were days when she hit a wall. Literally, today it seemed.

They were supposed to be running the obstacle course that Taylor had set for them. They'd certainly done it enough in the past five weeks. Ginny ran it twice, struggling over the large wall in the center both times. The object was to grab hold of the rope and pull yourself up over it, using whatever part of your body you needed to get over it.

In the past, Ginny had made a good show of it. She couldn't beat the men over it, but she held her own.

Today, however, it loomed over her, growing at least another eight feet high, she swore.

The third time she met it, her arms gave out and she fell from the miserly two feet she'd been able to climb.

"Back up, Weasley," Taylor barked behind her.

Ginny grit her teeth, refusing to allow the tears that were gathering in her eyes to spill over. Usually, she could latch on to some bit of determination inside her and push it to make herself perform. But today it seemed it just wasn't in her.

She made it three feet before she just couldn't move any further, and slid back down the wall.

"Are you giving up, Weasley?"

Ginny shook her head blearily, glancing up at Taylor as he leaned over her. Behind her, she could hear the men chuckling and making snide comments.

"Get your arse to the other side of that wall," Taylor demanded, glaring down at her.

"I can't," Ginny finally admitted, her voice sounding small and frail—something she hadn't allowed herself to be for a long time.

"What was that?" Taylor crouched down next to her as she sat in the dirt. "You *can't*?"

Ginny glared defiantly back up at him. "I can't," she said again. "I just don't have it in me. I'm too tired, I'm too—"

"Weak," Shepherd called out.

"Shut up," Taylor told him, never removing his eyes from Ginny. He glared down at Ginny, rising to his full height and making her feel pathetic because she was still on the ground.

'You can make it that far,' she told herself. Her arms were shaky as she lifted herself off the ground, not caring that she was covered in dirt and leaves and grass.

"Get to the other side of that wall," Taylor said, his gaze intense enough that it lit a fire inside Ginny.

She nodded, determined to do it this time. The rope burned her hands when she tightened them around it. The blisters tomorrow would be horrendous. As she placed a foot on the wall and lifted, her shoulders and arms screamed at her, the muscles twisting and popping in protest.

She made it up three feet again before her grip slipped.

"Get to the other side of that wall!" Taylor yelled.

Shepherd was laughing behind her, a deep belly laugh that made her insides churn.

Strangely, Collins had come to the other side of the wall, opposite Taylor, and was urging her on. "Come on, Ginny, you can do it. You've done it before."

Ginny screamed in frustration as she landed back on her bottom. *Blast the hell out of it!* Harry's voice popped up in her mind and, without thinking of the consequences, she listened, drawing her wand and casting a blasting hex at the wall.

The sound was tremendous as bits of wood flew everywhere. Ginny stood there, looking at the gaping hole she'd created. Satisfaction spread through her as she slowly began to move forward again.

Behind her, she could hear the various reactions.

"That's cheating!" Shepherd yelled, obviously outraged that she'd used her brains rather than muscle her way through the task.

"Bloody brilliant!" Collins cheered.

Taylor was strangely silent, but Ginny refused to turn around to see his expression. If he disapproved of her improvising, she'd deal with the consequences later.

The rest of the course was a blur as Ginny ran it several more times. She was lapped by Collins, who didn't comment, but the weight of his gazes had changed a bit. Shepherd threw himself into the course, intent on proving that his sheer size and strength were enough to do everything with.

"Fall in!"

Taylor's voice echoed over the compound and Ginny bent over, trying to catch her breath. Achingly, she walked back to where Taylor was standing. They stood in a straight line in front of the Trainer,

huffing and puffing, and smelling like a bunch of discarded Quidditch socks.

"You've made it past the worst," he complimented, surprising Ginny. Rarely did Taylor say anything unless it was to tear someone's performance down. "Shepherd, I think that was a course record today. Collins, well done. Weasley..." He trailed off on her name and Ginny winced internally, waiting for him to reprimand her, or kick her out completely. "Nice hex."

He turned and walked away, leaving all three gaping at him.

Suddenly, nothing sounded better than a hot shower, and her camp bed, despite the huge lumps in the thin mattress, and the way the bars poked through. She started toward the building, limping and rubbing her shoulder where the muscle was pulled.

"You didn't cheat, by the way," Collins said as he fell in next to her.

"I wouldn't have cared if I did," Ginny said quietly.

Collins was quiet for a few steps. "Where did you learn that spell?" he asked. "That's not the normal one taught at Hogwarts."

Surprisingly, Ginny found herself chuckling. "Harry taught that one to me," she admitted. "Right after..." the Final Battle, she mentally trailed off, shaking her head. "I needed to blow some things up," she shrugged instead, not wanting to share something quite so personal with someone she didn't know. "So he taught me that."

Collins nodded. "They should teach that here," he said quietly. They made it to the door and Collins went through first, not holding the door for her, as he usually did. Ginny was shocked that he hadn't even made a suggestive remark or propositioned her today.

"I'll see you later," he mumbled, wandering off to his own side of the housing unit.

Ginny watched him go, too tired to worry about him really. If this was how he was going to treat her now, that would be good. Anything was better than the pandering, flirtatiousness from before.

She barely made it to the shower, her eyelids already becoming quite heavy. 'Bed, bed, bed,' she mentally chanted as she dried herself off, slipped into clean clothing and shuffled her sore body toward the narrow mattress. Her body wasn't even fully down before she could feel sleep take over.

\* \* \*

Eight weeks seemed like such a long time, especially when Ginny had been standing at the front of it. But now, at the last day, it seemed to have flown by. Time must do that when all you do is fall exhausted into bed every night, only to wake a few hours later to begin training again.

Adams had dropped out completely four weeks into the course. Ginny had since learned that both Collins and Shepherd were on their second try at the Academy, having dropped out once before.

The three Auror Trainees stood in the middle of an abandoned field where the Portkey had taken them, standing at attention and waiting for Taylor to explain what they were going to be doing.

Ginny let her eyes wander to the blue sky, longing for the chance to get on a broom once more and feel the wind in her hair. She definitely missed the freedom that flying gave her. Maybe when she got finished here, she could spend some time at the Burrow's pitch, simply flying in circles if necessary.

"Today you're flying," Taylor said simply. A thrill shot through Ginny as Taylor removed the Disillusionment charm on three brooms.

Nimbus 2001's, Ginny told herself from glancing at them. Not top of the line, but certainly nothing like her Cleansweep at home. It would be fun to ride on something with so much power. Although, really, nothing could compare to riding Harry's Firebolt. He'd let her borrow it once during the summer before her sixth year, and after riding that, nothing else felt right.

"Start with some laps to warm up," Taylor said. "And then we'll do some drills. You'll get more formal riding training later. I'm here to assess that you nancy boys can keep your arses on these contraptions."

Ginny grinned. Taylor always referred to them collectively as boys. It didn't bother her at all, having grown up with all brothers.

She glanced to the side to see that Shepherd looked more than a little nervous about the prospect. Collins was smiling slightly, but Ginny vowed to wipe that smile off his face completely.

Ever since the incident in their fifth week with the exploding wall, Collins had been much easier to be around. His comments had tamed down to mild flirting once in awhile and she noticed he didn't watch her arse when they were together anymore.

"What are you waiting for?" Taylor barked.

Ginny couldn't help the grin that spread over her face as she wrapped her hand around the first broom she came to. It felt so right to have the solid wood in her hands again.

She rolled her eyes at that thought. It sounded so... dirty, when she said it like that. Either all of Collins remarks had gone to her brain, or she was channeling her older brothers.

"You're going to fly laps around us," Collins moaned as Ginny straddled the broom and kicked off.

The rush of flying again made a laugh bubble up into her, and Ginny nodded. "You bet I am."

She shot off across the clearing, leaning down over the broom to test its acceleration. Not as good as the Firebolt, but definitely better than the Cleansweep she was used to.

A series of mild turns was next, and then sharp ones, just to get the feel of the braking and the way the broom handled.

Below her, Ginny could see Collins moving about. He looked fairly confident on a broom, but it was evident that he hadn't spent much time on one.

Shepherd on the other hand, looked downright unstable on his broom. She supposed his bulk might

have something to do with it. But the Nimbus could certainly handle the weight.

Taylor was standing in the shade, watching, but he didn't seem intent on commenting about their technique.

A wicked idea entered her head and she grinned at the two men making lazy circles around the field. Waiting until they were just the right distance apart, Ginny shot forward, laying low on the broom. If she timed it wrong, they'd all three crash spectacularly. But if it was just right...

Ginny whooped loudly when she made it in between both men, fitting through a space no more than two feet wide.

"Damnit, Weasley!" Shepherd clutched his broom with one white-knuckled hand, and his heart with the other.

Collins laughed, although his own hand was rather tight on his broom.

Ginny laughed fully, lazily doing a barrel roll and climbing higher and higher. If that didn't knock them off of their brooms, a Wronski Feint certainly should.

The exhilaration of the dive made Ginny come alive, and for just a minute, she could forget the dramatic turn her life had taken in the past ten months, and picture Harry hovering on his broom, cheering her on.

"Bloody hell," Collins said in awe as he came up beside her. "Was that a Wronski Feint?"

Ginny nodded. "Yep."

"I saw Krum do that at the Quidditch Finals years ago," he admitted, eyes still wide.

"I saw it too," Ginny nodded. "Harry learned it by watching Krum. I learned it by watching Harry."

"Cor," Collins breathed, shaking his head. "He must have been brilliant on a broom."

Ginny knew who he was talking about and nodded, feeling her cheeks darken in a blush. "He was the best," she agreed.

"What the hell are you doing here, Weasley?" he asked, scowling at her. "You should be on some team somewhere. With moves like that you could lead any team to victory."

Ginny felt her face heat. She really didn't want to explain, one more time, why she'd chosen being an Auror over playing a game.

Thankfully, Taylor let out a shrill whistle and motioned for them to come down. Ginny was spared an involved discussion with someone who truly would never be able to understand anyway.

\* \* \*

The Burrow hadn't looked so welcoming in a long time. Ginny let her rucksack slide down her shoulder and drop onto the ground, her eyes not leaving the battered, lopsided structure that

meant so much more than home to her.

Eight weeks ago, she'd been hell bent on leaving this place. She hadn't even looked back, she was so excited to get on with her training.

But now, Ginny could truly appreciate it for what it meant. The sun was just starting to set, making it dark enough that lights began to flicker on inside the house, making the windows shine happily.

"Now I know what you saw in this place the first time you came," she said, speaking only to the night air. She glanced down to her right, at the dull grey headstone that marked Harry's grave.

She leaned heavily against the stone and quietly told Harry about all that had happened at training.

"And I know it's silly," she ended, "that I sometimes think I hear your voice speaking to me. I'm not a nutter, I promise. Logically, I know it's not you—it's my own mind. There's probably a term that Hermione would love to look up for me. But... it helps that I think of it as you."

Ginny looked at the stone, the dark letters spelling out Harry's name. "Is that alright?"

Obviously, Harry didn't answer. And that was alright, Ginny decided. It was probably best if she didn't pretend to hear him too much.

"I better get in there," Ginny said with a sigh. "I didn't tell them when I was coming home."

\* \* \*

The kitchen was quiet when Ginny opened the back door. The hinges protested loudly, and Ginny winced, not wanting to draw the entire house.

Instead, she simply wanted to take a moment to be home. There were new curtains over the window and Ginny wondered why the old ones, which had faded so badly that you couldn't even see the pattern in them, were finally replaced. If she really thought back, she thought they had some sort of floral pattern to them. Or maybe it was fruit.

"They teach you how to sneak in at training?"

A smile spread over her face when Ron stepped away from the pantry. His hands were full of biscuits and he wore a rather guilty grin.

"Maybe," she shrugged. "You should sign up. Maybe they'd teach you not to get caught nicking Mum's baking."

Ron grinned and devoured another biscuit whole. "Not bloody likely," he mumbled, crumbs escaping down to the floor.

"You know," Ginny sighed as she let her rucksack fall from her shoulder, "I think I actually missed you."

Ron tossed a biscuit to her, his eyebrows rising when she snatched it from the air. "You look... different," he said, tilting his head to the side. "Happier."

Ginny thought about that for a moment before answering. "I'm not sure if that's the word you should use."

"More content, then," Ron shrugged.

"Maybe," she acknowledged. Happiness seemed to be a long way off—something that existed for other people, somewhere out there.

"You survived," he nodded, a strange smile spreading across his face. "Listen, I... I didn't tell you before, but... I'm proud of you."

Ginny stared at him, not sure how to respond. Ron had taken the idea of Ginny joining the Aurors almost as badly as their mother had.

"And... Harry would have been proud of you, too," he added, his voice jerking and halting through the phrase.

"How are you?" Ginny asked, feeling like an absolute prat because she really didn't know how Ron was dealing with Harry's death. She'd been so caught up in how it affected her... not that she didn't *know* Ron was struggling. But Ginny hadn't allowed more than surface thoughts lately about Harry anyway. It still hurt almost as bad as the moment Bill had told her.

"I'm... coping," he shrugged, staring down at the last biscuit in his hand as if it were a product of a particularly bad Potions lesson. "I... Hermione suggested I talk to this... counselor."

Ginny was surprised. She hadn't even considered talking to anyone about the hole in her heart, nor had she thought Ron would either.

"It's been helping," Ron said quietly. "Although I feel like an absolute nutter during the whole thing."

She smirked and snatched the biscuit from his hand. "I'm not sure I could talk to anyone about it," she admitted softly. "I deal with it other ways."

Ron snorted. "You blow anyone up?"

"Almost," Ginny cocked her head to the side, remembering Collins and all his suggestive comments. Now that it was over, she kind of remembered them fondly—or less intrusive and disgusting, at any rate. "Blew up part of the obstacle course."

"Nice," Ron nodded, impressed.

Ginny shrugged. "Anyway, that's all over now. I'm on to regular training duty now."

"I assumed you passed," he shrugged.

"Highest scores," Ginny grinned. Taylor had taken her aside just before she left and told her.

"Really?"

"Yeah." Ginny felt her cheeks heat a bit. "Mum will be so disappointed." Ron snorted out a laugh. "I think she was hoping I'd fail out."

"She was," Ron admitted.

"She's going to have kittens when she finds out I'm on active duty," Ginny groaned, envisioning the lecture and then the wailing.

"I think she'll surprise you," Ron said, eying her out of the corner of his eye. "She's proud of you, Ginny. She's just..."

"Scared," Ginny nodded. "Yeah. I got that bit."

"We all are," Ron admitted, leaning back against the counter. "But... I think it's a good thing."

Ginny was genuinely surprised that Ron seemed to support her now. Maybe the mind healer was doing some good after all.

"Yeah?"

Ron smiled slowly and slung his arm around her shoulders, pulling her into a headlock. Ginny could have escaped quickly, but she stayed where she was, enjoying—if only a little—a bit of the past.

"If I wasn't so tired, you'd be dead right now," she muttered into his arm.

"Don't flatter yourself," Ron chuckled. "I happen to know they don't teach you to be lethal until... at least twenty weeks."

Ginny struggled a bit, but didn't put much effort into it, allowing Ron to drag her toward the living room.

"You might want to be sure about that, Ronald." Ginny grinned as he faltered in his step, before swinging the door open in front of him.

"Look who I found!" he called out. "They *should* have failed her."

Ginny grinned as she reached down to his inner thigh and pinched, hard. Ron squealed in pain, quickly releasing her from his hold and Ginny tightened down.

"They might not have taught lethal, Ron, but I can still make you cry like a little girl."

"Ginny, stop torturing your brother."

Ginny looked up, grinning when she saw her father standing there. A gasp from behind her signaled that her mother was on the stairs.

"I'm home," she said simply, finally releasing Ron's thigh from her grip.

Two weeks passed and Ginny was finding her place with the new routine. Now the trainees went to classes every day, followed by time spent physically training and office work.

The classes were interesting, Ginny thought. At least they were better than they'd been at Hogwarts.

Collins was a good student; he caught on quickly to concepts and was usually the first one done with his homework. Ginny held her own, especially in Charms where she could outshine them all. Shepherd, however, was very slow with reading, leaving him far behind the other two. Despite bad feelings between him and Ginny at Initial Training, he did ask her for help on his Charms homework once, and seemed grateful when she showed him a few tricks to help him remember the wand movements along with the incantations.

Office work was the worst, which is what they had been doing this afternoon when the Minister himself walked into Auror Headquarters. Reginald Winters, whom she'd spoken to that one time after Harry's funeral, looked them up and down, nodding approvingly.

"Miss Weasley," he held out his hand for her to shake and Ginny hesitated in the slightest as shivers ran up and down her back. The same muddy brown stare that had made her sick before looked back. "It's good to have you join the Ministry."

"Thank you, sir," she managed as she limply shook his hand and then surreptitiously wiped it on her robes. Something about that man was... wrong, she decided. Something was ivery/i wrong.

That thought carried over when Ginny was laying in bed that night. The Burrow was making its usual creaking and popping sounds all around her; familiar sounds that had frightened her as a child, but were understandable now that she understood what they were.

Her mind was as alert as ever and Ginny cursed quietly, wishing she could just fall into bed bushed, like the days of Initial Training. Exhaustion meant no dreams.

Harry's face had been cropping up regularly since she'd come home, and it unnerved her. It wasn't that she didn't want to think of him, just that if she let them, the thoughts could be all consuming. Ginny knew she wasn't strong enough if she let herself go down that slippery path again. She'd been so close to total despair right after Harry's death. It wasn't a pretty place.

Burying herself in her training was much better. It gave her numbness that helped her focus on the here and now, rather than on what might have been.

*Ginny laughed softly as Harry danced her around the garden at the Burrow. They both wore the navy blue robes of the Aurors.*

*Harry smiled happily, dancing perfectly around the garden, oblivious to the hundreds of flash bulbs going off around them. It unnerved Ginny a bit, because Harry was not a good dancer, at least he hadn't been in real life.*

*'Just enjoy the dream, Ginny' she scolded herself, and leaned further into his embrace.*

*"I love you," she blurted up to him.*

Harry grinned back down. *"Of course you do, you married me."*

*Ginny's heart hitched and she looked down to see that she was actually wearing frilly, white wedding robes.*

*"We're married?" she asked in awe.*

*Harry chuckled and smoothed the back of his finger down her cheek, the way he always had.*

*"Of course we are," he said, his tone filling with amusement.*

*"Good," Ginny blurted out, wrapping her arms more fully around him and pressing her head to his chest, breathing deep to try and get the scent of him again.*

*"I have to go now," he said, forcefully pulling away from her.*

*"NO!" Ginny clung to him, digging her fingers into his robes and trying to convince him to come back. "We're married."*

*Harry's eyes met hers, although they weren't the usual bright green, but a dull grey. "We can't be anymore, Ginny. I have to go."*

*He finally succeeded in pulling away and walked toward a group of faceless men dressed in the same Auror robes.*

*Ginny fell to her knees in the middle of the garden, the flashbulbs still popping around her. Harry didn't look back.*

*"You'll be fine, Miss Weasley." Ginny was startled when Minister Winters appeared at her side, offering her a hand to help her stand up. She flinched, but accepted his help. "He'll be back soon and you can be married again."*

*"No," Ginny shook her head sadly and wiped at the tears that ran down her face. "He's gone forever."*

*"Not forever," the Minister said, a strange sort of smile spreading over his face.*

*Ginny gasped as his eyes began to glow red. She seemed to be frozen as he pulled his wand and yelled; a horrible sound that Ginny couldn't make out. But the vivid greenness of the light that shot out and hit Harry directly in the back was too familiar.*

*Harry crumpled to the ground, dead, while Ginny screamed. She frantically searched for her wand to do something, but it was nowhere to be found in the infuriatingly lacy wedding robes.*

*"You killed him!" she screamed, backing away from the Minister, who was laughing hysterically. "You killed him!"*

*"No," he shook his head, red eyes boring into hers and making Ginny writhe from the headache that erupted. "I didn't kill him, Miss Weasley. You did."*

Ginny awoke with a jerk, almost falling out of her narrow bed. Her heart pounded in her throat and she growled loudly.

Logically, she knew she hadn't killed Harry, and neither had the Minister. But her muddled, messed up brain had confused everything in the dream, making her feel helpless and vulnerable.

"Are you alright, Ginny?"

Her mother's voice through the wooden door startled Ginny and she rubbed her face harshly.

"I'm fine, Mum. Just... just a bad dream."

The door cracked open, light from her mother's wand penetrating the darkness. "Are you sure? Do you want to talk about it?"

Ginny sighed. "I'm fine," she assured her. "It was silly. I'm not even sure I could remember it now," she lied.

Her mother's half-lit face creased with worry. "If you're sure..."

"I am," Ginny forced a smile. "Really."

"Alright, dear. You try and get back to sleep. Five comes early."

Ginny nodded and forced herself to settle down under the covers. "Thanks, Mum."

"You're welcome."

The door squeaked closed again and Ginny waited a few seconds before sitting up, gathering her knees toward her chest and wrapping her arms around them.

She remembered every detail of the dream, as if it had really happened, instead of being painted in that fuzzy kind of quality that dreams usually had. It replayed over and over in her head until Ginny shook it violently.

"No more of that," she scolded herself. Through the window lit by bright moonlight, Ginny could make out the dark edge of the trees. She couldn't see them, but just on the edge were two graves. One holding her brother... and the other holding the only man she would ever love.

"No more of that," she whispered softly to the night.

# Chapter 6: Train

Ginny threw herself into her classes after the first nightmare. When the second one came, she signed up for an extra class. When the third came, she increased her physical training to four hours a day, instead of two.

And when the fourth one came, Ginny went looking for a flat.

“You know you don’t have to do this,” her mother said as she clutched her handbag to her, looking skeptically at the small, three room flat that Ginny thought was the best one they’d seen all day.

“I know,” Ginny said, inspecting the kitchen. It was very small, and a bit dingy, really, but a few scouring charms and a bit of time would fix all that. “I just feel like I shouldn’t be a burden on you and Dad anymore,” she excused.

Her mother huffed a bit and moved over to look out the smudged windows to the back side of Diagon Alley. “You and your brothers aren’t a burden to us, Ginny. You’re our children.”

Ginny sighed, having heard the same argument from the first moment she’d proposed the idea of moving out.

“You know my hours are getting crazy, Mum. And I can’t be waking you and Dad at all hours of the night when I get in.” She hesitated before continuing. “You remember how Harry was rarely at the Burrow.”

Her mother gave her a stern look, even as she nodded. “I didn’t approve of this for him, either.”

Ginny opened her mouth to defend, but her mother held up her hand. “But if this is what you want, what you need... then I’ll help in any way that I can.”

Choked with a sudden influx of emotion, Ginny could only nod and clutch the counter in front of her.

“This place could certainly use some help,” her mother sighed, glancing around once more. “Your father could use another project anyway. I’ll ask Bill to come over and work on the wards. I’m sure he’s going stir-crazy in that cottage, just waiting for Fleur to go into labor.”

Ginny smiled at the wonder of nature that was Molly Weasley. Organizing something like this—cleaning and preparing a flat to be lived in—seemed to get the fire going inside her once again. In no time at all, this place would be unrecognizable.

\* \* \*

A jaw-cracking yawn stretched her face and Ginny shook her head, blinking away the tears that it brought to her eyes. The paragraph she was supposed to be reading swam before her, becoming less than words—letters floating around and making no sense at all.

“You look like you could use a quick nap.” Ginny looked up to see Katie Bell leaning over her table,

tossing an apple back and forth between her hands. "Like about a week's worth of naps."

Ginny snorted softly and motioned for Katie to take the chair across from her. "Just trying to catch up," she shrugged when Katie sat and took a large bite of her lunch. "I've fallen behind in my courses a bit this week."

"Angelina told me that your oldest brother had a kid," Katie nodded.

A wide grin split Ginny's face. "Yeah, a little girl. I'm not the only Weasley girl anymore! They named her Victoire."

"He's married to the Delacour girl, right? From the Tri-wizard Tournament."

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, Fleur."

"How is the rest of your family?" Katie asked. "It feels like forever since I've seen anyone. Since Harry's..." She trailed off, glancing nervously at Ginny.

"It's okay," Ginny dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand. "You can say it. It's been almost a year now." She surprised herself with that revelation. Surely it couldn't be that long now...

It still hurt to think about Harry—it probably always would—but she didn't break out in tears anymore. She simply didn't have the time to be that little girl anymore.

"You seem to be coping well," Katie shrugged, pushing her half eaten apple away a bit. "I... I think the two of you were really good together."

"Thanks," Ginny smiled, not really sure what she could say.

"I've heard you're making great waves over at the Aurors," Katie grinned. "Really giving them hell."

Ginny couldn't help but snort at that thought. "I'm not so sure about that. I think the program might do me in, actually."

"Not at all," Katie protested with a laugh. "All we hear about in Records is this amazing new Auror who is kicking arse up there. Everyone is talking about you."

Her cheeks flaming, Ginny swallowed thickly. Oddly, she was rather pleased that they were talking about her skills as an Auror, rather than the fact that she'd been Harry's girlfriend. It was a hard shadow to come out of.

"Sometimes it feels like I'm running and running, yet I really don't know where I'm going," Ginny admitted quietly, her frustration finally breaking.

"It's a tough job," Katie nodded. "I'm not sure how you're doing it. I heard you were trying to finish in a year."

Ginny shrugged a shoulder, feeling self-conscious. It sounded unattainable, and a bit silly when someone else said it.

"I just feel like being here, filing paperwork and learning from books... it's not really doing anything important, you know. I mean, I know it's important. But..."

"You always were all about action," Katie shook her head. "I guess you're more like Harry than you thought. That's why you were so good for each other."

They both sat in silence for a few minutes, Ginny running her fingers over the page she was supposed to be reading.

"I'll let you get back to it," Katie said. "Just... know that there are a few of us out there cheering for you, Ginny. You'll be the one who changes the world." She patted Ginny on the arm and walked out of the canteen, leaving Ginny to wonder if she really could.

Some days she believed she could make an impact. Other days it felt like the mountain of work would swallow her whole before she ever achieved active status.

Ginny ruffled her hair and sighed, trying to focus back on the book. It certainly wouldn't read itself.

\* \* \*

"Weasley!"

Ginny poked her head up over the cubicle she was working in and found Director Robards staring straight at her.

"Report to my office in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," she swallowed thickly, her heart pounding away in her throat. The Director turned on his heel and walked away with no further explanation.

"You've done it now," Collins chuckled from across the aisle.

Ginny smirked at him and began to gather up all the paperwork she'd been completing into the file folder. She placed a quick security charm on it, as well as her desk before running to the loo. Once inside, she straightened the light blue robes that designated an Auror Trainee and splashed a bit of water on her tired eyes.

Their courses had finished only days before and the three Trainees were awaiting their results. Ginny was hoping to advance to the next level, at the very least. In reality, the heavy course load she'd forced on herself should yield her a bit more leniency in choosing where she went next.

Collins, she knew, was leaning toward Evidence Gathering and Magical Forensics, while Shepherd was edging for a field assignment. His scores probably hadn't been high enough to place him directly in the field, but perhaps they'd allow him a second choice. Or maybe they'd have him remain in the offices a bit longer, until he showed more improvement.

Either way, they would find out today.

Ginny certainly didn't want to spend more time in a stuffy office. The field was where she wanted to be.

"Miss Weasley," the prim and proper secretary for Director Robards showed her into the office. "Mr. Robards will see you now."

Ginny nodded her thanks and entered slowly, taking note that there was another man there. He was an older Auror, probably just younger than her father, in fact, and she thought his name was Trammel.

"Weasley, this is Trammel. He'll be your Senior Partner when you go out into the field."

Her jaw hanging loose, Ginny stared at Robards and then at Trammel. "Sir?"

"You make sure to get those robes changed to navy blue on your way out today. Congratulations, Auror." Robards held out his hand for Ginny to shake, but she just stared at it.

"Sir?"

Trammell chuckled lightly. "I thought you said she was bright?"

Robards just grinned even wider and waggled his hand in front of her. Ginny jumped a bit and reached forward to shake it.

The whole conversation felt more than a bit surreal. It was only days that she'd been standing, waiting for Initial Training to begin, wasn't it? The months of sleepless nights and eighteen hour days had finally paid off. Ginny had done it.

"Thank you, sir," she managed, feeling her face heat as everything caught up with her. "I'm... sorry, sir. It's a bit of a shock."

"Follow me, Auror," Trammel said, raising a grey eyebrow in her direction. Ginny nodded absently and willed herself to calm down enough to not make a complete fool of herself-anymore than she had already, of course.

Trammel's long stride forced Ginny to take twice as many steps to keep up.

"Sir?"

"Don't call me that," Trammel barked over his shoulder. "The name is Trammel. Nothing more, nothing less."

Ginny nodded absently, trying to keep her sense of direction as the man led her through a maze of corridors and into the far end of the MLE offices. He stopped in front of a plain looking door and stared at the nameplate next to it. It was gold and had 'Trammel' listed in black lettering.

"That'll have to change," he muttered, his wand appearing from nowhere and tapping on the small sign. It now said 'Weasley' below his own name.

Ginny stared at the gold, shiny plaque, an odd swelling happening in her chest. She had done it. It was nothing short of a miracle, she told herself. An absolute miracle.

"This is our office," Trammel said as he traced a complicated pattern on the door with his wand. "I

suggest you get yourself a book of locking spells.”

“My brother is a Curse Breaker, sir—er... Trammel. He’s, erm... he’s taught me a few.”

“Good ones?” Trammel grunted out.

“Decent,” Ginny answered. “I’ll train with him for some more complicated ones,” she promised.

“Nothing lethal,” he grumbled. “Don’t want to have to pick up bits and pieces of you and deliver them to your family after you muck it up.”

Ginny couldn’t help but smile at his attempt at a joke. It was dry, and dull, and not the slightest bit funny. But that seemed to be the point.

“We’ll get you a desk set up here across from mine. My files will be your files. My cases will be yours.”

“Yes, si—Trammel.”

He gave a slightly annoyed look to her, but continued, leaning on the edge of his desk, heedless to the files he was crumpling.

“I know all about you, Weasley. I’ve read your file. To make this whole partnership thing work, and because there is no way in hell you’re getting near *my* file, I’ll tell you a few things about me.”

Ginny nodded, unsure how to respond to the man.

“I’ve been an Auror for more years than you’ve been alive. I’ve seen Ministers and Directors come and go, and I’ve stayed put here in my little office, doing my work.

“I never married. Never had a family. Didn’t see the need.”

Ginny blinked at that. *Didn’t see the need?* What the hell was that about?

“I’ve only had three trainees in my career. You’re the third, and only the second one I’ve requested. My first request was denied.”

That didn’t really make sense to her, but she nodded anyway. Let the man tell his little story and get on with training her.

“I work six days a week—never seven—and I put in eighteen hour days. I don’t really care when you work, as long as the work gets done.” Ginny nodded again. “However, when I leave the Ministry, my files go under locking spell. And that one is lethal.”

Ginny nodded again, feeling as if her neck was made of rubber.

Trammell stared at her then, seemingly taking stock of her before he sighed. “You’ll do.”

Strange words, but they seemed to hold the weight of the world coming from this man.

“Si—Trammel... do you have a first name?” Ginny asked. “I feel a bit silly calling you only by your last name.”

“Do you think I do?” he asked, a half smile turning up one side of his mouth.

Ginny opened her mouth and then closed it again. “I... I wouldn’t know.”

“What do you think my name would be?” he chuckled.

“Er...” Ginny searched her brain, trying to think of something that might fit him. He was tall, and thin. His back bowed just a bit at the shoulders, as if he’d carried a heavy load recently and just never bothered to stand up straight again. His face was lined with wrinkles, and his hair was a snowy grey-white, making him look older than he probably was. Ginny wondered if it was the job that put the wrinkles and grey there, or just the years. “Linus?” she guessed, searching for something completely obscure.

“That’s it,” Trammel nodded, although Ginny could tell he was taking the mickey. “My name is Linus.”

“I’ll call you Trammel,” Ginny decided, relaxing her shoulders just a bit. “Although, I’m half tempted to call you Smart-Ass.”

“That works too,” Trammel chuckled, pushing himself off of his desk. “At least, that’s what my mother always called me.”

\* \* \*

“How many hours do you intend to work this week?”

Ginny started when Trammel walked in the door. “You were here when I left last night, and now you’re here this morning.”

She bit her lip, not wanting to tell him the truth. Really, it was a bit silly. How did you look your mentor in the eye, after working side by side with him for four months, and tell him that you were having nightmares?

“You wanted the work done,” she shrugged, looking back down to her file and scratching away another note. “I’m getting it done.”

Trammel sighed and closed the door behind him, coming over to lean against Ginny’s desk. “The object is not to kill yourself before the first year is up, Ginny.”

She looked away at his use of her name. He’d only used it once before, when she’d been trying to leave the hospital after being injured on a case. It had worked then too.

“I know this time of year is hard for you,” he said softly, a grimace on his wrinkled face. Ginny’s shoulder stiffened and she scowled down at the file. Why did everyone insist on counting off the days for her? Just yesterday her mother had asked, in a surprise visit to her flat, whether Ginny had any plans for this weekend.

Why on earth would she make plans?

Ginny answered that she planned on working, which her mother scolded of course. Nothing new there.

"I hate October," Trammel said unexpectedly, making Ginny mentally go back and try to figure out what she'd missed. "I always have. Who in their right mind made a holiday where people run around all trussed up, creating mischief?"

Ginny couldn't help but snort at his out of the blue observance of something that wasn't for weeks to come. The months with Trammel had been... interesting, to say the least. He was always spouting off some nonsense that he called wisdom, and expecting Ginny to remember it all, only to forget that he'd told her already twice that week. Of course, he'd deny it all when she reminded him.

He stood quickly, wiggling her desk as he did. "Killing yourself won't bring him back, Weasley. You'd better find something to occupy yourself soon, because I won't let you work twenty hours a day, seven days a week anymore. Take up knitting."

Trammel was gone and Ginny laid her head on the desk, quietly cursing him. She had been working that many hours. Because the thoughts just wouldn't leave her alone. She'd even worked two weeks ago when she had the flu. Trammel had tried to send her home, but she'd gone down to the workout room and spent hours in there training instead.

Spending time at the Burrow just wasn't an option. Everyone else was... happy. And it made Ginny decidedly unhappy to see them. And then she would go home feeling guilty because she really shouldn't be feeling that way.

Fleur and Bill were busy documenting every aspect of their daughter's life. Charlie was still off with his dragons—at least some things never changed. Ginny saw Percy regularly around the Ministry, but he was busy with his work, and he'd started dating a new girl, Aubrey or Audrey, or something like that.

Ron and Hermione were planning for a wedding, although they hadn't set a date yet. Ron had proposed to Hermione out by Harry's grave. Rather morbid, in Ginny's opinion, but both Ron and Hermione had thought it was right to share that with Harry. Personally, Ginny could easily picture Harry rolling over in his grave, plugging his ears so he didn't have to think about his two best mates having a relationship. Harry would be happy for them, but he wouldn't have wanted to know all the gory details.

Even George had moved on. He and Angelina had eloped only a few weeks ago. Their mother had been furious and had even taken George aside to ask if he'd gotten Angelina in trouble. Ginny, who had been returning from the loo, overheard and nearly fell down the stairs from laughing so hard. George denied it, and his mother finally released him from the binding spell she'd used to drag him into seclusion.

Everyone had something in their lives. Everyone except Ginny. She pretended that she lived for work. And, really, it was challenging and exciting, but it didn't make her flat any warmer when she came home. It didn't stop the dreams and nightmares when they came; almost with alarming regularity lately.

So she worked harder. She put in more hours than any other Auror Trainee. Even Collins and Shepherd, whom she saw regularly around the office, seemed puzzled by her non-stop work routine. The other Auror Trainees, who were a year or two further along in training than she was, avoided her like the plague. Collins said they were all more than a bit threatened by her.

Ginny remembered Harry saying something similar when he joined the Aurors. His celebrity status tainted almost any friendship he tried to make. However, he'd been dealing with Aurors who were older than he was, mostly. These were trainees who were only a few years older than Ginny herself.

But they decidedly stayed away from her.

Which was fine with Ginny. She didn't need them anyway.

The paperwork in front of her faded and she nudged it away, looking around the office she shared with Trammel and sighing.

There wasn't much to show here for personal effects. Trammel's desk was a mess of files—all perfectly organized if you asked him—but nothing to tell of the man himself. There were no family photos (he had none) and nothing on the walls to indicate a hobby in anything. When Ginny had asked, Trammel said his hobby was sleeping.

Sadly, when Ginny analyzed her own life, it wasn't much better. While she had put a few Harpies posters up, and had two framed photographs on her desk, and one buried deep inside it under severe locking charms, there wasn't much to show that Ginny Weasley existed outside the Ministry.

Her mother had done wonders with the little flat, and all her brothers had contributed with house-warming gifts and even thrown her a little party, Ginny rarely spent time there except to sleep. Neville and Luna had visited twice, but even their interest had waned when Ginny forgot about lunch dates or was late meeting them for a pint after work.

Her eyes avoided the accusing stares of her family in the photograph on her desk. Her father smiled softly at her, giving a small wave, but the others wore concerned, and even angry, expressions.

"I know," she whispered to them, rubbing her forehead. "I'm sorry."

But the real heartache came when her eyes found the other photograph. This one featured a two year-old Teddy Lupin, sitting astride his first broom. Ginny had given it to him for his first birthday, but Andromeda had kept a tight leash on it. Ginny finally persuaded her to let the boy try it one summer afternoon a few months ago.

He zoomed around the garden, holding onto the little stick and laughing gleefully, while his Grandmother chewed her fingernails nervously. Kingsley had even come outside to watch, laughing in his hoarse, choking kind of way.

Ginny picked up the picture and watched Teddy zoom about, his blue hair blowing in the wind this way and that.

"I'm royally mucking this up," she muttered to him, feeling a weight settle on her shoulders. It was months now since this photo had been taken, and Ginny had only seen Teddy, Andromeda and

Kingsley at the Burrow for a hurried Sunday dinner before running off to work a second shift that day.

Harry's voice, one she'd successfully blocked lately, came back with a biting tone. "Go see them."

Ginny winced. She could almost see him, leaning one hip against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest as he scowled at her, disappointment written all over his face.

"I don't know if they'll even let me in," she muttered to the ghost in her head.

But it was worth a try, she knew.

Closing the files she was working on and locking them away in her cubby, Ginny gathered her things.

Trammel was out in the hallway, talking with another Auror over some sort of map.

"I'll be in tomorrow," Ginny said quietly when his eyes met hers. He opened his mouth to reply, but then just nodded before turning back to his discussion.

Ginny walked swiftly to the lifts, fighting back tears the whole way. Maybe she should go see her mother while she was at it. Try to mend some fences with her family, as well.

\* \* \*

Andromeda looked genuinely pleased to see her, surprising the hell out of Ginny. She expected to be thrown out and told not to come back for the way she'd treated them all.

"I'm sorry," was the first thing out of Ginny's mouth, making her roll her eyes at herself.

Andromeda gave a knowing smile and stepped the side, nodding Ginny inside. "Teddy's down for a nap," she said quietly.

Ginny nodded dully. "Is... is it alright if I stay for a bit then? Until he wakes up?"

The older woman nodded slowly, making the guilt settle in on Ginny more than ever.

"You know," she said as she led Ginny to the lounge, "Nymphadora set out to prove something at the Ministry too."

Ginny sank into the sofa, worrying her hands in her lap. "She probably didn't alienate everyone around her to do so."

"She did, a bit," Andromeda admitted. "Her father and I rarely saw her that first few years. She was always flitting about chasing something—even as a young child. Teddy gets that from her, I think. But he's definitely more his father; pensive and quiet at times."

Ginny nodded absently. "He and Harry would have been so good together." Cursing internally, she fought the tears that rose in her eyes.

"They would have," Andromeda said, nodding. She reached out and took Ginny's hand, giving it a

small squeeze before calling for Kreachar.

"Miss!" Kreachar actually wrapped himself around Ginny's leg, hugging her exuberantly, before remembering himself. "Kreachar is sorry!"

"It's fine," Ginny chuckled. "It's good to see you too, Kreachar."

"Kreachar," Andromeda said, her voice soft, "Would you please prepare a light tea? Ginny will be staying for awhile. And, if you don't mind, please see if Kingsley is up to joining us?"

Kreachar bowed low and blinked out from in front of them.

"How is Kingsley?" Ginny asked, genuinely curious. That was another thing to feel bad about. She hadn't seen Kingsley in months either.

"He's... well," Andromeda said, her tone pensive.

"What is it?" Ginny questioned, scowling. Her mind whirled with the possibility that something may have happened to her friend.

"I'm not sure what he told you in his letter, Ginny—"

Ginny sat up straight, scooting to the edge of the sofa. "What letter? I never got a letter from him."

Andromeda scowled. "Really?"

Ginny shook her head and Andromeda stood, pacing a bit.

"He worked for weeks on it," she said, twisting her fingers together and staring out the window where the leaves swirled in the wind. "He was so... different, Ginny. You have to understand. Something consumed him during those weeks. He was so driven to write it. I don't know what he wrote, because he never asked for my help on it."

Ginny scowled, wondering what had happened. "And you're sure he sent it? Maybe... maybe he changed his mind." Her heart pounded. Maybe it was something about Harry... something he'd finally remembered from the attack. Or, perhaps, it was simply an apology for not being able to do anything for Harry.

"I attached the letter to the bird myself," Andromeda dismissed with a shake of her head.

"I never got anything," Ginny sighed.

"King was so... intense," Andromeda said, her voice strange. "He rarely came for meals; Kreachar brought them to him. He would sit outside a lot, watching Teddy play, but he rarely interacted."

"When was this?" Ginny asked, coming to stand beside the woman, whom she could see reflected back to her in the glass of the window.

"Months ago, before you were here last," Andromeda said, her brow furrowing. "When you didn't respond any differently to him... I assumed it had been something private between the two of you,

and that you had cleared it up."

"I never got anything," Ginny confirmed again, her mind racing, trying to figure out what was going on. "He... he seemed so... happy when I last saw everyone."

"He was," Andromeda confirmed. "He brooded in his room for days... and then his friends visited and... he seemed fine."

"Friends?" Ginny questioned. "Someone from the Order—"

"The Ministry," Andromeda shook her head. "Three of them; the Director... what's his name?"

"Robards?" Ginny asked.

"Yes," Andromeda nodded. "And two others... Stebbins and... something starting with a 'W'."

"Williamson," Ginny nodded. He was Collins' Senior Partner and the only Senior Auror with a name starting with that letter. And he and Stebbins were always together.

"I think that must be the one," Andromeda nodded. "They asked to talk to King privately and... after about an hour, they left. Kingsley came to dinner that evening and he's been... happy ever since."

"And you don't know what they told him? What made the difference?" Ginny asked, trying to fit the pieces together.

"I asked," Andromeda said, "King said it was something about his retirement."

"Perhaps it was just about paying his bills," Ginny guessed, grasping at straws.

"Perhaps," Andromeda said. But Ginny could tell she wasn't convinced.

\* \* \*

The mystery continued to stay at the back of Ginny's mind for several days. The time away from the Ministry had proved to be what Ginny needed to rejuvenate. Teddy had been thrilled to see her, and Kingsley had smiled his crooked, half grin and laughed as Teddy entertained them all.

That evening, Ginny had dinner at the Burrow, her appearance there out of the blue startling her mother. But Molly rallied strong and chatted the afternoon away while Ginny helped her prepare enough food to feed eight Weasleys. Of course, when it had only been Ginny and her parents, most of it had gone home to Ginny's flat in preserving containers.

"You look better," Trammel grunted when she entered the office.

"I feel better," Ginny admitted softly. "Thanks."

"No clue what you're talking about," Trammel denied, shuffling through the paperwork on his desk.

Ginny grinned and nodded, knowing that the gruffness was just his way. "What do we have up

today?"

"Tracking a DE," Trammel huffed out. "Low level potions pusher who has been spotted in Diagon Alley recently."

Ginny nodded, the thrill of tracking immediately focusing her Auror's instincts. "Narcotic potions?" Ginny asked, sinking down into her chair and leaning forward on her desk.

Narcotic potions were no new thing. They'd been around for years, even though mostly things were kept under the table; shady dealings out of the back of pubs, hand-offs in dark alleys. But lately, it seemed, the demand for the illicit potions was growing. Just last month two Hogwarts students had been hauled out for selling on Hogwarts grounds.

"Yeah," Trammel said. "Eugene Goode. He's low on the food chain, so we'll be tracking him to see if we can determine his suppliers and where he operates from."

Ginny nodded, intrigued. Years of sneaking around with Gred and Forge, spying on her brothers, and playing pranks bred the perfect instincts in Ginny for an assignment of this nature.

"You think you're up to taking point on this one?" Trammel asked, looking through his bushy eyebrows at her.

"Really?" Ginny asked, swallowing her heart, which had jumped into her throat at the question. "I mean, yeah, if that's what you want."

"You're ready," Trammel nodded. "Just don't do anything stupid."

Ginny nodded, her mind reeling to gather all the details.

"What's the first thing we're going to do, Boss?" Trammel asked, a sarcastic tone to his voice.

Ginny glared at him. She always called him 'Boss' when he was in teaching mode, and it irked the man, she knew. That's precisely why she did it.

"We'll need to start where he was spotted," Ginny said carefully. "Start tracking him from there. Do we have a photograph?"

Trammel flipped a small square toward her and Ginny studied the man inside it. He was thin, a bit mousy looking; but that may have been because his eyes darted everywhere.

"Where was he spotted?"

"Coming out of Knockturn," Trammel grunted. "But that's no surprise. We think he has a flat somewhere above one of the shops there."

Ginny nodded, her eyes scanning the file that Trammel slid onto her desk. "And he was buying... asp venom?" She gaped at the note attached to the top paperwork. "At the Potion's Emporium?"

"Never said he was bright," Trammel shrugged. "Should make it easier for us."

Ginny nodded again. "We'll go with Polyjuice, then," she said, her eyes lifting for confirmation. Trammel only raised an eyebrow at her.

"This was reported only an hour ago," Ginny said, tapping her finger on the file. "If he was buying asp venom, he's most likely making Euphoria. He'll need a few other rare ingredients."

Trammel nodded. "And?"

"And," Ginny sighed. "We'll send in a second team, this one to Hogsmeade."

"Good," Trammel said. "And what next?"

"We watch," Ginny shrugged. "If his flat is in Knockturn Alley, he'll be going back there, most likely, to make the drug. If we can catch him with the ingredients, we can petition for a search warrant, and get a look at that flat."

"Good," Trammel said again. "Let's go."

\* \* \*

"How old is this kid?" Ginny hissed as they watched the skinny man perusing the questionable publications kept on the back shelf of Flourish & Blotts.

"Older than you," Trammel said. Ginny had to blink to get used to the man she stood next to. He was at least thirty years younger than the Trammel she was used to seeing everyday. And blond.

Then again, Ginny mused, she didn't look anything like herself either. Her brown hair hung low down her back, making her neck ache just a bit. How had she ever worn her own hair this long, for so many years?

"He's on the move," Ginny mumbled, showing Trammel the inside of a book, while her own eyes focused on the mirror she held to the pages.

Goode glanced around the shop nervously, not paying any attention to the young couple looking at cookbooks.

"Got him," Trammel said quietly. He moved slowly around the end of the bookshelf, looking high and low at the titles. Ginny could tell, however, that his senses were on full alert as their mark walked past them, clutching a bag that held porcupine quills and sugar. Neither of those ingredients was harmful alone, but combined with the asp venom, and the other ingredients they'd watched him gather over the past two days, Ginny was sure it was Euphoria that the man was producing.

"Let's follow," Ginny said quietly. Trammel met her eyes through the stacks of books and nodded once.

Together, they moved swiftly through the crowded Alley, Trammel taking her hand in his, simply playing his part.

Ginny's heart hitched. She hadn't held hands with anyone besides Harry, since he'd seen her off on the Hogwarts Express, two years ago now. And even though she knew it was only Trammel, and

necessary to keep up the illusion of who they were pretending to be, Ginny couldn't help but be bothered by it.

"Got you," Trammel grinned when Goode looked around nervously before ducking into the shadows of Knockturn Alley.

Ginny nodded, and pulled out a small piece of parchment, tapping on the map of the Alley with her wand. The spell would alert the other Aurors that they were ready to serve the warrant.

"Message sent," Ginny confirmed as she pulled up the hood of her black cloak, casting a Notice-Me-Not charm on her face. Trammel did the same and they moved into the shadows behind Goode, all pretense of being a couple forgotten. Now they were simply two highly trained Aurors, stalking their prey.

Goode shot one last look around before bolting up a rickety set of wooden steps. Ginny caught Trammel's eye and nodded that she would check for spells. Trammel kept his wand hidden in the folds of his robes, but Ginny knew it was there. She trusted him to protect her while she worked.

Kneeling down near the base of the stairs, and deep in the shadows provided by Trammel and his wand, Ginny started to run through the spells to identify any wards or protections might be on the flat.

"Woah," she hissed, removing a tricky spell that would make a person so dizzy they would quite possibly fall back down the stairs, or possibly tumble over the side.

"Work faster," Trammel hissed, his eyes darting between the street, Ginny's progress, and the top of the stairs.

"Intruder alarm," she mumbled, disabling that spell, rather than removing it completely. Chances were, whoever was protecting this place would be alerted if that particular beauty went missing. There was no doubt it wasn't Goode himself doing this work. The spells were meticulously placed—a work of art, really. Ginny bet even Bill himself would be impressed with the layering of them.

"Done," Ginny said as she disabled a Disorientation Hex and turned her wand into an offensive position. As Point, she would be the first up the steps, with Trammel following and covering her back.

The adrenaline from the hunt coursed through her, making blood pound in her ears. Harry had spoken of this; how everything seemed to focus in when you were in these types of situations. It was a thrill that Ginny hadn't understood until she'd become an Auror.

The only thing that came close was a Wronski Feint, or perhaps making the winning goal. However, even those took a backseat to this kind of thrill. She was making a difference in the world. One less child out there would fall prey to this slimeball, and one less parent would be up all night, crying over their wayward son or daughter.

Trammel nodded her forward as they swiftly, and silently, climbed the stairs before Ginny reached out and pounded on the door. "Eugene Goode? Open up, it's the Aurors!"

She blasted the door in with a huge explosion, more for effect than anything. Ginny grinned to herself when the wood splintered into a thousand pieces, raining all over the interior of the entryway.

Inside, huddled over a cauldron that was billowing noxious purple fumes, was a rather glassy-eyed Goode. He stumbled around for a moment, almost tipping the cauldron and its contents all over himself before he slowly raised his hands in surrender.

"Eugene Goode," Ginny continued, casting a binding charm and summoning Goode's wand, "you're under arrest for the manufacture and distribution of illegal potions. Anything you say can be used against you." She continued on, reciting his rights as Goode merely nodded, his head slightly wobbly on his shoulders. Ginny had to concentrate hard, however, as the fumes started to make her light headed.

"That was too easy," Trammel grunted. He sealed the cauldron in a Contamination Charm and Ginny shook her head, willing away the effects of the potion fumes. No wonder people wanted this stuff so badly, she thought. If just the fumes made you forget what was happening around you...

Once Goode was bound, his eyes wide at what was happening around him, Trammel finally turned his wand on the young wizard. "Got anything to say, lad?"

Goode shook his head slowly, still a bit wobbly.

"We'll take him to the Ministry," Trammel said slowly. "Let him sober up a bit. He'll talk."

Ginny grinned at the feral smile that stretched Trammel's face. He enjoyed the hunt even more than she did, it was obvious.

The Forensics Aurors started to pile into the room, and Ginny looked around, waiting for Collins to walk in. He didn't however, and Ginny was a bit disappointed. Perhaps he'd gotten called on another case. She knew he was itching to get out into the field, having told her as much earlier this week when they'd shared a lunch table in the canteen.

"Come on," Trammel prompted, pointing toward Goode. "You collared him; you get to haul him in."

Ginny sighed. "I'm a bit disappointed that he didn't try to run, actually."

Trammel chuckled darkly as Goode fought the levitating charm, struggling back and forth in his bindings. "I would have liked to see your Stunner in action too," he nodded, keeping his wand trained on the suspect. "I heard you blew Shepherd through the wall a few months ago."

Ginny grinned. "To be fair, the bloke weighs enough that he brought the wall down on himself."

"Still would have liked to have seen it," Trammel said.

Ginny continued out the door, Goode bobbing next to her. They levitated him straight up Knockturn Alley, grinning at the dark faces peeking from shadows and behind cracked doorways. Let them see what happens to scum, Ginny thought viciously.

If it would have been legal, Ginny would have produced a flashing sign above his head, telling all of his crimes.

Marching through Diagon Alley was a bit much, she had to admit, but Trammel's voice kept her nerve up.

"Make him an example, Weasley. Let everyone know we mean business."

Embarrassingly, when they passed Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, George, Ron and Lee stood outside, ramrod straight and saluting as she paraded Goode past. Small bursts of fireworks shot in the air and 'Weasley Is Our Queen' played in the background.

Ginny rolled her eyes, glaring at her brothers, who seemed even prouder that they'd gotten to her. Their stoic faces threatened to break out in smiles, lips curling upward every so often.

Trammel chuckled.

"Don't encourage them, please," Ginny groaned.

"Oh, let them have their day," Trammel waved her grumbling away. "You're a celebrity."

Ginny gave one last dark glare to her brothers and Lee, who was almost as good as another brother, before she fastened a Portkey pin onto Goode's clothing and they disappeared, off to the Ministry.

\* \* \*

Once Goode had been processed into the holding cell, Ginny made her way back up to the MLE offices, only to be greeted by applause when she entered.

Her face heated and she smiled, waving her hand absently at everyone who was standing for her. This was sort of a tradition whenever a collar was made; the arresting Auror got treated to a bit of a celebration. Sadly, these silly little things were few and far between lately.

"Congratulations," Director Robards was the first to greet her, shaking her hand and smiling genially at her. "Trammel tells me everything was perfect."

"Thank you, sir," she smiled.

Several other Senior Aurors nodded their heads in her direction, but didn't approach. Strangely, one of the women Aurors, Buckstone, Ginny thought her name was, from the group that had trained with Harry, approached.

"Nice collar," she complimented, although it wasn't with much of a smile. Maybe it was more of a grimace.

"Thanks," Ginny said, still a bit shocked. Buckstone hadn't said a word directly to her in the nearly year and a half since she'd started as an Auror.

"They only get harder," she warned, raising her eyebrow before walking away.

Ginny wasn't sure if that was a warning, or a promise. She shrugged it off and began to move down the corridor to her office.

Collins stepped out of his own office as she passed, and Ginny smiled.

"I thought you'd be there on this one," she said.

He smiled, although shot a nervous glance around. "Yeah, I was bogged down in paperwork," he said. The file he held in his hand, transferred back and forth a few times and Ginny stopped in her progress down the hall, staring at her friend.

"What's with you?" she asked.

Collins shushed her quietly and looked down the deserted hall again before leaning in.

"Rudy, you're really scaring me now," Ginny said, using the name he hated. Truthfully, his name was Ruyard, named after the Muggle author by his Muggle mother, something he'd tried to pretend he had never told her.

"Shhh," he shushed again. "I... I need to show you something," he said, shifting in his spot. "I was working on a file today—an old file, a case that's already been closed. But Williamson wanted me to take a look at how the evidence had been gathered..." He trailed off and looked around again, causing Ginny to do the same. No one was on either side of them, and all the doors, save Collins' were closed.

He slid a single piece of parchment from the file and into her hand. The writing on it was only a few lines, and it was written by hand.

"I'm not meant to see this, Ginny," Rudy hissed. "No one is." His eyes met hers and Ginny took a breath, looking down to the paper.

*Could use your advice. K.S. and H.P. getting nosy, starting to get suspicious. Everything might end soon if they catch on. Do we deal with it now? Or wait? W.*

Ginny's breath caught in her throat as she realized the implications of what was being said.

"This must have accidentally been slipped into my file..." Rudy leaned in, his voice low. "Do you think they mean—"

"Yeah," Ginny breathed, her own gaze darting up and down the corridor. Still, no one was there.

"That means—"

"Yeah," Ginny nodded, suddenly feeling very unprotected in the middle of Auror Headquarters. "Do me a favor?" she asked. Her heart thundered away as she clutched the parchment, wrinkling the edge horribly. "Forget you saw this."

"Ginn—"

"Just," Ginny overrode his protests. "Just until I can decide what to do about it. Whatever

happened... Harry and Kingsley were in the middle of something." The idea that they'd been caught up in some sort of scheme made her stomach churn. "And Williamson is involved."

Rudy nodded, chewing his bottom lip. "Don't do anything stupid, Ginny."

She tried for a smile, but it came off rather weak, she thought. "You know me."

"That's why I said it," he nodded. "Can you talk to Trammel about it?"

She pondered that before shrugging. "I don't know. We don't know who this was meant to go to, or who was involved." Really, she couldn't be sure. Trammel had been at the Ministry a long time. He'd even stuck around during the Death Eater regime, keeping his head down and doing his best to protect those he could.

"I'll give you two weeks," Collins whispered harshly, "and then I'm going to research it on my own."

Ginny nodded absently, her eyes tracing the scratchy handwriting once more.

And then, Collins was gone. Back to his office, perhaps... or somewhere. Ginny didn't know, really.

Flashes of Harry's face threatened to overcome her as she hurried back to her office, closing the door behind her and locking it. Her hands were shaking as she opened the drawer in the bottom of her desk and took out Harry's photograph. She fumbled with the back of it before it finally released. The paper went into the small cavity in the frame and Ginny closed the cardboard over it before hurriedly hiding it away again.

The drawer was sealed with the strongest locking spell that Ginny knew, along with a hex that would turn anyone who touched the drawer a bright shade of electric blue.

"What the hell am I going to do now?" she asked the empty office, as a sob welled up in her.

# Chapter Seven: Ticket To Heaven

Two days later, Ginny was a nervous mess. She hadn't slept more than a few hours, really, while trying to decide what to do about the note. If what she suspected were true, something Kingsley and Harry were investigating had gotten them in deep trouble. Was it enough trouble that Harry had been killed and Kingsley nearly been killed to cover it up?

That was the question.

But Ginny had no idea where to go for the answers. And who, besides Williamson, was involved? She just couldn't be sure.

The conversation with Andromeda replayed over and over in her head. Kingsley had spent weeks writing a letter to her; he'd been agitated and insistent that no one see it.

And then, after he'd sent it, three of his colleagues from the Ministry, one that Ginny knew was involved, came to visit him and Kingsley never mentioned the letter again. Could they have altered his memory?

And if that were the case, Ginny surmised, she was in big trouble, because that meant someone was screening her mail, and most likely anything coming from Andromeda's house as well.

That thought had come, naturally, at three o'clock in the morning. Ginny just narrowly stopped herself from Apparating to the Tonks' house.

"You're being paranoid," she told herself over and over, as she paced around the flat, wearing holes in her socks. "You're inventing things to get worked up over. Stop jumping to conclusions, girl."

Taking a deep breath, Ginny finally sat down and began sketching things out on parchment, trying to put some order to her thoughts.

When she looked at the events logically, they were all simply incidents that didn't connect at all, except in her head. Ginny had always been good at telling herself stories. That didn't help.

"They don't connect," she said out loud, shaking her head at herself. Too little sleep and too much work were starting to make her head feel stuffed with cotton.

Her overactive imagination didn't help when she walked down the halls at the Ministry either. She imagined dark eyes watching her all the time, jumping out at her. These moments blended with her nightmares, making both seem less than bearable.

Rudy wasn't anywhere to be found. Ginny cornered Shepherd in the training room and he shrugged her off, saying that Collins had been on assignment.

If that were true, Ginny was happy for him. But what if they had done something to him to get him to shut up?

Ginny had removed the note from the photograph the first day before going home and now had it hidden away in her trunk, buried in the back of her wardrobe at the flat.

And, she had to admit that the note hadn't been specific enough as to give full credence to the vast spectrum of conspiracy theories that her mind regularly came up with.

Trammel had even commented on her distraction.

"Don't fall apart on me, Weasley," he warned. "You and I still have a lot of work to do."

His calm steadiness gave Ginny the reassurance that she needed to get back to work and ignore the fairy tales that her mind spun.

Goode had named two other potions makers when Trammel had added pressure during his interrogation and they were closing in on one of the men. The other had fled to the Continent, it was rumored, when Goode had been captured.

"Wouldn't want you to lose your head out in the field."

Ginny shook her head, mostly to clear it, but to answer Trammel's mutterings as well.

Collins reappeared on the fourth day and Ginny cornered him near the men's loo, startling him when she edged in front of him.

"About that file..." she said, glancing around. The room they were in was busy, but no one paid them any attention as they spoke.

"What file?" Rudy asked, genuine confusion on his face.

"The *file*," Ginny said, hoping he was just being a bit thick. "The *file* you gave me four days ago."

He stared at her as if she were crazy, however. "I don't know what you're talking about, Ginny," he chuckled. "Sure you're feeling alright?" he asked, trying to feel her forehead.

Ginny impatiently pushed his hand away, annoyed that he was playing some sort of game with her. But he didn't seem to find any humor in any of this, and genuinely looked concerned for her.

"You've been working too hard," he scolded softly.

Her mind sped ahead, trying to figure out if he even *ihad/i* given her something days ago, or if it was just another dream, or nightmare, or story that she had invented in her muddled brain.

But that couldn't be true, she knew. Because she'd held that paper in her hands, and she'd read the words until her eyes had burned from staring at them. Slowly, the evidence slid into place. Someone knew that Rudy had found something he wasn't supposed to see. And whoever it was had Obliviated Rudy to cover their tracks.

"Never mind," she said quickly. Rudy scowled at her in bewilderment.

"Maybe you should go home, Ginny. You look a bit flushed."

She nodded absently. "Maybe I will," she mumbled, hurrying back to her office. She was confident that no one had seen Rudy give her the note, and they certainly hadn't been able to see her hide it in her desk, or to take it out later that day. But... what if someone had?

The fact that Rudy now couldn't remember anything about it meant that someone, probably Williamson, was working hard to cover themselves. It rather verified her belief that the note wasn't something innocuous, but rather dooming.

What she needed to do was check to see if someone had been in her things, searching; then she'd know if they suspected her.

But everything had seemed fine when she came in this morning. No fine dust of blue powder covered everything, like it would have if someone had tried to get into her drawers.

Ginny had to be sure, however. Despite the fact that Trammel was still in the office, Ginny slammed the door behind her and immediately knelt down in front of her desk, going right to the drawer where she had originally hidden the paper. If things were disturbed, surely she'd know it, wouldn't she?

"Has anyone been in here lately?" she demanded, her hands shaking as she tried to control her wand enough to dismiss the charms. But her palms were sweaty and the words weren't coming out right. "Besides you and me?"

"Good afternoon to you too," Trammel said quietly, glancing up at her.

Ginny swore softly and took a deep breath, concentrating on the spells. "You didn't answer."

Trammel sighed and narrowed his eyes. "Not that I can remember," he answered, staring at her.

Ginny lifted her eyes once the locks released, looking at him over the desk. She nodded jerkily and rummaged in the drawers, looking for anything that was out of place. For a second, her fingers hadn't been able to find the frame that held Harry's portrait, the same one she had hid the note inside. She let out a deep sigh of relief when it slid into her hand.

"Everything alright?" Trammel asked. He hadn't moved from his chair, and Ginny was grateful. She didn't want to explain what she was doing right now. And she highly doubted her brain could think up an excuse fast enough.

"Yeah," she started to say, before turning the picture over. The word died on her tongue, however, when she saw that the glass in the frame was shattered. Blood marred the front of it and she stared at her own hand, not feeling the deep cut where red was oozing out.

"Damnit," she hissed. Someone had been in here, and had gotten into her desk. The picture hadn't been broken the other day when she'd looked in here.

"Weasley?"

"Sorry," she bit out immediately, shoving the frame into the drawer and slamming it shut. "I... I cut myself."

Trammel's brow bunched together and he blinked at her. Ginny looked away, wrapping her hand in the excess amount of fabric in her robes. She couldn't bear to look at him and see what was in his eyes.

What if he was involved? He'd said no one had been in the office. That meant either he was lying, or he was involved—or whoever it was had really fooled them both. A small part of her brain nudged the idea of a memory charm forward, but Ginny was too distraught to think further on that now.

"Best get to the infirmary then," Trammel nodded.

"Yeah," she mumbled, wandering out of the office and in the direction of the Medi-witch that the MLE kept on staff.

Tears rolled down her face, but she couldn't even concentrate on them. Nothing made sense anymore, and the world seemed to be revolving on a different axis.

Someone had murdered Harry. But this was beyond a rogue Death Eater out to assassinate the Minister.

This was a plot.

An evil, dirty plot to protect some secret. A secret that was worth killing to keep.

\* \* \*

After pretending that her hand hurt too much to continue working, Ginny wandered down Diagon Alley, with a vague notion of where she meant to be going, but no idea of what she was going to ask, or say when she got there.

The flashing lights of her brothers' store were harsh, making Ginny blink the brightness away. How they could stand to work inside something so garish and ostentatious amazed her still.

Thankfully, nothing happened to her when she opened the door; no confetti rained down on her, her hair did not turn a different color and she did not turn into some sort of animal. Must have been their off day.

"Ginny!"

George greeted her from where he was ringing up a customer. "What brings you by today?" He stopped speaking however, when he got a look at her.

Ginny flushed, remembering that she hadn't changed her Auror robes, which were now covered in dried blood. Grimacing down at herself, she removed her wand and tried to clean them.

"It's mine," she dismissed. The pale woman that George had been helping at the counter grew even whiter as she clutched her purchase to her chest and backed out the door.

"Nice," George complimented, although his tone was tight.

"I just cut my hand, prat," she dismissed, showing the bandage wrapped there to protect the new

skin. The stains in her robes lightened but didn't come out completely. She grumbled to herself that now she'd need to go see her mother, which would mean explaining why she was covered in blood.

"Is Ron here?" she asked, finally giving up on the stains. As she walked down Diagon Alley, Ginny had allowed a numbness to come over her. It was like a familiar old friend returning, but one that you'd hoped to never see again.

George studied her for a minute before he nodded jerkily. "I'll get him."

Ginny nodded absently and reached for a box sitting on the counter. It was a Patented Daydream Charm and Ginny grimaced at the face of the enraptured witch on the front. *Where the hell did they find people who look like that?*

She quickly tossed it aside and drummed her fingers on the counter top. What was she going to say to him? Anything she did say, if they figured it out, Ron was liable to not remember it tomorrow. Or worse, he could end up like Kingsley... or Harry. The thought made her shudder, and she tugged at the collar of her robes, feeling a little clammy and feverish.

"Gin!"

Ron's entry from the back room made Ginny wince. Her head was throbbing now too.

"Hi," she greeted, her throat becoming thick when she looked up at him. He looked so young and carefree, especially wearing that silly dragon-hide apron, with the potions goggles pushed up on his forehead.

"Don't look so serious," George warned as he brushed past them. "People are liable to think you're here officially and that we've broken some law." He trailed off and a wicked smile bloomed. "That might be bloody brilliant for business. Imagine one of us being hauled off by the Aurors, customers would come in by the droves."

Ron chuckled and Ginny managed a weak smile.

"Can we talk?" she asked, turning back to Ron. "In private?"

"What am I?" George demanded.

Ginny turned back to make her excuses, but he was already flitting off after a new customer who had just walked in.

"Don't worry about him," Ron dismissed. "Come in the back room. I need to stir the potion again."

Ginny followed, amazed at how much was actually crammed in the back room. Three cauldrons bubbled in separate corners of the room, and the workbench in the middle was covered with various parts and pieces, including a pile of rubber chickens.

"You always hated potions," she mumbled absently as Ron adjusted the flame under one of them.

"In school, yeah," he shrugged. "But its loads easier when you don't have a greasy-haired..." he grimaced, perhaps remembering Harry's defense of the man after the war. "Snape, breathing down

your back. I reckon Slughorn even taught me a thing or two."

Ginny nodded and found what looked like a relatively safe stool out of the way of things. She took a breath to ask a question, not even sure what it would be, but Ron beat her to it.

"You look like hell, Gin," he said. She looked up, knowing that she couldn't refute it.

"Can anyone hear what we're saying?" she blurted out, glancing around the room, as if she'd be able to see some Ministry listening device.

Ron narrowed his eyes at her. "No."

"Are you sure?" she demanded, pulling her wand and intending to cast privacy charms.

"Don't!" Ron warned. "You never know what you'll set off if you do that." His scrutiny of her deepened and she nodded, now feeling like she may not be able to talk to him after all. "It's completely safe back here," he finally said, pulling a second stool out from behind the workbench and sinking down onto it next to her.

"A few months ago we caught this bloke back here. Turns out he was a spy for Zonkos."

Ginny sat up straighter in her chair. "Did you call the Aurors? I don't remember hearing about that."

Ron shook his head. "No, we took care of it ourselves." The waggling eyebrows were too much, causing Ginny to sigh in exasperation.

"Bill came in and charmed the hell out of the place. No spy cameras, no listening devices—nothing can work within thirty feet of the building. Makes it rather hard to test the Extendable Ears, but..."

Ginny nodded absently, her head still pounding.

"Did Harry ever tell you what he was working on right before he... died?" she blurted out, wincing at the bluntness of the question.

Ron jerked in his seat and studied her before shaking his head. "No. Couldn't talk about things like that." He sighed. "You know how much I regret not being there for him."

Ginny's stomach lurched inside her at the thought. "You would have been killed too," she defended in a low voice. And she knew it was the truth. She wasn't quite sure why Kingsley was left alive. Something had definitely gone wrong with their plot there.

"Something happened, didn't it?" Ron asked perceptively.

The picture of Ron lying on the carpet next to Harry, his eyes staring blankly ahead, or perhaps wrapped in bandages like Kingsley had been when she first saw him, was too much. Ginny slid off the stool and shook her head.

"Forget I brought it up." She turned to go and Ron jumped in front of her.

"Gin—"

"Don't, Ron," she warned, but even in her own ears it sounded weak. "I can't talk about this."

"Okay," he nodded, pulling her to his chest. "We won't talk about it."

Feeling incredibly needy, Ginny wrapped her arms around his chest and burrowed into his embrace.

"Hermione and I are supposed to meet some people," he said quietly, rubbing his hands up and down her back. "Why don't you come with us?"

Ginny automatically refused. She definitely wasn't up to visiting anyone today. It felt like ages—years even—since she'd even seen anyone besides at the Ministry, or her family.

"It's just Seamus and Dean," Ron defended. "Seamus' uncle opened a new pub, calls it Shenanigans, which Seamus thinks is the funniest name in the world. Come with us and have a few pints." He tugged at her shoulders until he was looking down at her.

Ginny blinked up at him, hoping he didn't see how miserable she was.

"Come on," he coaxed. "I'll bet George and Angelina, and probably Lee, would come along too. We'll make it a regular party, and then you can do your hiding thing afterward."

At the same time she chuckled, a part of her was rankled that Ron knew her so well. She did hide, and obviously not very well.

The idea of being with so many of her friends actually sounded decent. She could have a few pints and forget the trouble she was in—until she had to go back to the Ministry.

"I have tomorrow off," she commented, still trying to convince herself.

"Perfect," Ron nodded. "But... can I suggest you change? Not that you don't look spiffing in navy blue... but, blood stains are a rather outdated style." He laughed and pulled away when Ginny tried to hit him.

"Since when do you know anything about style?" Ginny scoffed, pointing toward what he was wearing.

Ron laughed again as he adjusted his goggles on his face, blinking at her through them. "I'll have you know, I'm a fashion connoisseur."

Ginny snorted out a laugh before sobering. "Thanks, Ron."

"Just be there," Ron nodded, dropping a handful of ingredients into the cauldron as pink smoke rose from it. "Or I'll drag your arse out of that flat."

\* \* \*

Shenanigan's was everything Ginny had heard it was. Which was perfect tonight, she mused, sipping from her first pint and watching the chaos around her.

The volume in the pub was so high that you had to either shout to be heard, or speak right into

someone's ear. Hermione looked decidedly uncomfortable with it, but she was loosening up.

Ginny sat at their table, Dean on one side and Demelza on her other. They were animatedly discussing the Quidditch standings while Ginny sat back, taking it all in.

George and Angelina had started swaying to a song playing, but when the music changed to something lively and very Irish, they'd decided to live it up, and were now swinging around the small dance floor, putting on a show for the clapping crowd.

Lee was chatting up some girl at the bar while Seamus stood behind him, making exaggerated faces to those watching.

Ron and Hermione were chatting with Neville, across the table.

Of everyone here, Ginny felt most uncomfortable around Neville, strangely. He kept looking at her, confusion and something else on his face. Like he was trying to figure out the puzzle that was Ginny Weasley these days.

But Ginny didn't want him figuring it out. It sounded incredibly selfish, she knew. But it was for their protection, now, rather than hers, as it had first been. If they could get to Rudy, who was an Auror trainee, they could get to anyone.

The slight buzz that her pint was providing finally helped Ginny to relax a bit, although she was still very much on edge, her eyes scanning the crowd every few minutes for anything out of the ordinary; which, in a place like this, was extra hard.

"Dance with me?" Dean asked when he leaned in close. His smile was wide, and absolutely harmless, Ginny determined. "Come on," he cajoled, "stop being a bloody Auror for five minutes and enjoy yourself."

The denial almost rolled off her tongue before she nodded, sliding her hand into his, and allowing him to lead her to the dance floor.

His arms felt strong around her back and Ginny sighed. 'Just let yourself enjoy a minute with a friend,' she scolded herself.

"You've been busy," Dean said as they swayed to the music. "It's like you've disappeared off the face of the earth."

"I'm sorry," she used her standard response to that phrase, and then winced. Why should she be sorry? She was working hard. And despite the mess that she was getting caught up in, she was a damned good Auror.

"You like being an Auror?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "It's... it's what I'm supposed to be doing," she said. "And not because of Harry, but because I'm damned good at it."

Dean's face stretched into a slow smile. "I'll bet you are. You looked absolutely fierce that day

marching that suspect through Diagon Alley.”

“You were there?” Ginny asked, pulling back a bit. Her arms slid from around his neck until her hands were on his shoulders.

Dean blinked at her, and Ginny had the feeling that she’d missed something. “It was all over the papers,” he shook his head.

Feeling incredibly stupid, Ginny just said, “Oh.” She hadn’t actually seen a newspaper in months. She avoided them at all possible costs, actually.

“You *do* live at the Ministry,” he teased, but his voice sounded a bit sad.

“I guess so,” she shrugged, feeling uncomfortable with the turn of conversation. “What about you?” she tried. “What have you been up to?”

“Trying my hand at being an artist,” he beamed. “I’ve made a bit of money selling some of my paintings, but I’m just lucky Seamus hasn’t kicked me out of the flat yet.”

“That’s brilliant, Dean,” she complimented. “I always thought you did amazing work.”

“Thanks,” he smiled, his arms moved tighter around her. “You should come see my stuff. You haven’t seen any of the latest ones.”

“I know,” she said, swallowing thickly when his finger traced her cheek softly.

“Ginny,” he whispered before leaning in and pressing his lips to hers. Ginny didn’t push him away, not wanting to make a scene, but she didn’t respond.

“I’m sorry,” he said as he pulled away. Ginny blinked around at the people who were watching in surprise. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Thanks for the dance, Dean,” Ginny said, pulling completely out of his arms and moving back to the table.

No one said anything as she sat down and drained her pint, grimacing at the bitter aftertaste. Ginny’s head was reeling, but not really from the kiss. It was nice, but it didn’t spark any feeling inside her at all. The feel of Dean’s lips on hers didn’t make her stomach flutter, as they once had. Nor did his pass make her angry, like it probably should have. Really, it just made her tired.

Dean rejoined the table, although he sat as far away from her as he could, and avoided her eyes.

Silly, really, since Ginny didn’t feel bad about it. It was rather ironic, she thought, that her first kiss after Harry should be with the same man that her last kiss before Harry had been with.

In a way, she was disappointed that she hadn’t felt anything. Was something inside her so broken that she couldn’t respond physically when a handsome and eligible man kissed her? Surely she couldn’t still be pining over Harry.

The thought made her queasy and she excused herself, striding purposely to the bar and ordering a

Firewhiskey.

"You could use a good shag."

Ginny snorted into her glass when Seamus took the stool next to her with a salacious wink.

"You offering?" she quipped back, feeling decidedly more bold now that some serious alcohol was flowing through her blood.

"I might be," Seamus said, his tone going thoughtful for a minute and making Ginny blink in surprise. She'd never really considered Seamus in that way. "If it wouldn't kill me best mate," he jabbed his thumb back over his shoulder where Dean was obviously trying to avoid looking at the bar. "He wouldn't say no, though."

Ginny grimaced, but tried to turn it into a smile. "Seamus, I..."

"Don't worry about it," he dismissed. "Just... just talk to him for me? He still... well, you got the idea."

Ginny's heart raced at even the thought of being with anyone. Even now, two years later, she could still feel Harry's hands on her shoulders, rubbing lightly over the skin on her back and holding her hips to his. The thought made her shiver.

"I'm not ready," she admitted, thinking that she might never be. The thought made her inexplicably sad. Harry Potter was stamped so deeply into her heart that she might never be able to feel anything for anyone again.

Seamus studied her before nodding. "I imagine it's got to be hard."

Ginny nodded and ordered another whiskey, ignoring Seamus' worried look. "You have no idea," she whispered.

"You'd best go a bit easy there, Ginny," he warned, trying to reach for her new drink.

But the events of the day rolled back in heavily on her mind, and Ginny tugged the shot glass out of his hand and downed the entire thing. "Leave off," she growled, nudging him with her shoulder.

"Maybe you should..."

His words were drowned out as Ginny felt everything hit her empty belly. The alcohol made her head spin and she groped for the bar, clinging to the edge of the wood as the room danced around her.

"I'm goin' home," she mumbled, mostly to herself. The doorway was somewhere near the dark corner of the room, she knew, so she headed that direction. Relief flooded her when she made it to the cool night air, drinking in great gulps of it helped to clear her head a bit, and make the world stop spinning.

"Ginny?"

She turned at her name, expecting that Ron, or perhaps Dean, had followed her out. It was Rudy Collins, however, who wrapped his arm around her back, lifting her away from the wall.

He chuckled at her state, his blue eyes sparkling in the half-light cast by the glowing windows of the pub. Ginny stared up at him, wondering how she'd never realized how handsome he was, with his blonde hair and fair skin.

"You're soused," he chuckled again.

Feeling half way caught between a sob and a laugh, Ginny pressed against him, rising on her toes to kiss him. Rudy was gorgeous, and he fancied her, she knew... if she couldn't make herself feel something with him, then all hope really was lost.

Rudy responded just how she expected him to, by pulling her closer to him, deepening the kiss until he was devouring her.

Ginny closed her eyes, forcing the uncomfortable feeling away, along with the comparisons to the way Harry kissed her, out of her mind.

*In the moment. Just be in the moment.*

She sighed, as the wall of the pub came up against her back. Rudy pulled away, and began to press his kisses to her neck and jaw, but Ginny kept her eyes closed tight.

*In the moment.*

He was pressing against her, and Ginny could feel his... enthusiasm, evident when they were this close.

"Can we go?" he mumbled into her ear.

Despite the bile rising up in her throat, Ginny nodded and opened her eyes, trying to remind herself that this wasn't Harry she was with. Rudy was nothing like Harry—and that was rather the point.

He kissed her again, and Ginny responded fiercely, still feeling nothing. But she could act. She'd always been good at that.

The kiss faded away as darkness pressed in on her, and, suddenly, she didn't care about anything anymore.

\* \* \*

A loud pounding woke her, making Ginny groan and roll back over in bed, clutching a pillow over her head.

She was just about to pound on the wall to warn the next door neighbor of impending death, when she realized the throbbing was in her own head.

"Bloody hell," she groaned, smacking her lips over and over to try and get the horrid medicinal taste out of her mouth. It felt like she'd stuffed her mouth and throat with cotton—it was so dry and

thick.

"Ahhhh, you are alive in here."

Ginny made the mistake of trying to sit up, startled by the voice. She immediately changed direction as her head spun and her stomach heaved.

Ron (thank heavens it was Ron!) sat on the edge of the bed, smelling like strong coffee and bacon. Unfortunately, those smells only made Ginny queasier.

"How bad did I embarrass myself last night?" she managed, her voice slurred as her cheek pressed against the edge of the mattress.

"Well," Ron started out.

"Never mind," Ginny said, closing her eyes. Little bits and pieces were slowly filtering in until something... clicked. Ginny sat up quickly, clutching the sheet to her, even though she knew she was dressed, and swayed dangerously. "Rudy..."

"Is that what his name was?" Ron asked. He wasn't angry, it didn't seem, but his jaw was rather tight.

"We... didn't? Did we?"

Ron stared at her for a minute before shaking his head. "Neville interrupted. He brought you home, then came and got me."

Ginny blinked, trying to remember that. "I don't remember," she said out loud. "I should..."

"You were pretty wobbly," he said, shaking his head.

Ginny glared down at her hands, trying to piece together the rest. She remembered Rudy, unfortunately. Her cheeks flamed. "I'm going to have to apologize to him."

"Let's have some breakfast first," Ron suggested, chuckling when Ginny gagged slightly. "Or, well... lunch, I guess."

She nodded, taking his hand and allowing him to pull her up. "I shouldn't feel this bad," she protested. "I've had way more to drink than that in the past."

Ron glanced down at her, chuckling. "Don't let Mum hear that."

"You, erm... didn't say anything, did you?"

"Hell no!" he burst out. "And have her accuse me of leading you astray?"

Ginny snorted as she sank down onto a chair in the tiny kitchen. "Right. You leading me astray. That'll be the day."

"Yeah, well, we have to keep up appearances."

Ginny grimaced when he shoved a hot cup of coffee in front of her, as well as a fried egg, bacon and toast. "Seriously? Are you trying to make me vomit?"

Ron glared at her. "Speaking of keeping up appearances," he said, dodging her question. "The Daily Prophet had a nice spread this morning."

Ginny winced and took a large swallow of coffee, hissing when it burned her mouth and throat. "Do I want to see it?"

"No," Ron shook his head. "But it might be best."

"Let me get some of this in my stomach first," she gestured to the food. "That way I'll have something in there when I throw up."

Ron only nodded.

Ginny began picking at the food, taking minuscule bites. Her stomach protested, but either the food, or the coffee, was working to wake her up a bit. "Did you stay here all night?"

Ron cleared his throat. "Neville and I took turns on your sofa. You need to get a new one, by the way. That one is a piece of shite."

"Thanks," Ginny said dryly, shredding her toast into tiny bites and chasing them down with more coffee.

"Read it to me," she said. Viciously, she attacked the egg, as if it had written the article she was sure to hate.

"You sure?"

"Just do it, Ron," she sighed. "No doubt I'm going to have to go to the Burrow soon and hear about it first hand. I'm surprised there wasn't a howler first thing."

"There was," Ron chuckled. "Two, actually. You owe Neville—he opened both of them."

Ginny gagged on her bite of bacon, but swallowed it down harshly. She really did need to apologize to Neville—probably more than anyone. He had been an amazing friend, even after she'd treated him so horribly.

"Urgh," she said, pushing the plate away from her and sinking down until her face rested on the table. "Don't read it," she changed her mind. "Just... just give me the general idea."

Ron sighed, rustling the paper across from her. "The headline is 'Weasley Gone Wild'."

Ginny groaned. "Could be worse, I guess."

"It is, actually," Ron snorted. "They have three lovely photos of you yesterday."

"Tell me I did not dance on a table naked." Her head continued to pound, so she pressed more of her skin to the wood, savoring the cold.

“Not quite,” Ron said. “But they have one of you kissing Dean.” Ginny groaned. “And an even better one of you wrapped around whatever his name was.”

“Rudy Collins,” Ginny supplied, wincing at the thought. What was she thinking? Actually, she clearly remembered being a bit distraught over feeling no attraction whatsoever to any wizard in the club. “He’s an Auror Trainee.”

“Yes, well, I’m not too thrilled at where his hands were,” Ron grumbled. “Anyway, it goes on to say that you’ve been living it up, night after night.”

“Not true,” Ginny sighed.

Ron continued on as if he hadn’t heard her. “They speculate that you and Collins have been having a torrid affair—their words, not mine.”

Ginny lifted her head. “Ron,” she said delicately, her fingernail catching on a bit of skin near her thumb and pulling at it, watching blood seep into the edges of her nail. “I haven’t... There’s been no one since Harry.” She lifted her eyes, wanting to make it clear to him, yet hoping that she didn’t have to spell it out.

Ron stared at her, his expression a mixture of distaste and relief. “You and Harry, erm...”

“Yeah,” she said, blinking as she stared at the wall. “We, erm... before I went back to Hogwarts.”

“Oh. Guess he didn’t tell me everything,” he grimaced. “I can be thankful for that.” He was quiet for a minute before he looked at her out of the side of his eyes. “Ginny, if you did... it wouldn’t be anyone’s business, you know.”

She nodded, understanding how much that admission had cost him. “I... I’m just not... ready,” she said finally.

Ron cleared his throat and looked back down to the newspaper. “They talk about you going through a bunch of blokes, breaking hearts the whole way.” Ginny snorted. “And... and it mentions you drinking.”

She sighed. “How can they blow everything out of proportion like that? It was one night. Three measly drinks.” She scowled, thinking back to her drinks. Really, one pint and two small shots of Firewhiskey shouldn’t have done that to her. Weasleys had a reputation for holding their liquor.

“There is also a picture of you in your Auror robes, covered in blood—I’m assuming someone in Diagon Alley saw you.”

Ginny moaned and lay her head back down.

“They, erm, they’re questioning your stability, really. Saying that your, erm, displays of public affection, and, er, drunkenness, point to you suffering from severe depression.”

“Lovely,” Ginny sighed. Slowly, she pushed herself up from the chair, holding onto the edge of the table when the flat swayed before her.

A loud pop startled her and she groped for her wand, holding it into the corner of the kitchen, where Neville now stood, his hands raising in surrender.

"Sorry," she grumbled, tucking the wand back into her pyjama trousers. "Not the smartest thing to do, you know, Apparating into an Auror's home."

Neville swallowed thickly. "Sorry," he shrugged.

Ginny pressed her fingers to her forehead. "No, Neville, I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean to snap. And I didn't mean to... well, embarrass you last night." She looked up at him, hoping he wouldn't be wearing a look of disgust.

"I wasn't embarrassed," he denied softly. "And... I understand. I just didn't want that... man, taking advantage of you."

"I appreciate it, Neville," she said, shuffling past him in search of a glass of water. "Although you probably should have been more worried about *his* virtue." She chuckled softly, but neither Ron nor Neville joined her.

"Thanks, Neville," she said, drawing a large glass of cold water from the tap. "Urgh," she grimaced once she'd finished drinking. "Why does everything taste like... plants?"

"What?" Neville said, coming up behind her and taking her glass, sniffing at it.

"My mouth... there's an aftertaste, like I've been... sucking on a tree, or something," Ginny explained, rubbing her tongue on the roof of her mouth.

"What did you drink last night, Ginny?" Neville asked, peering at her closely. Ginny swayed away from him.

"Just a pint and a couple of Firewhiskeys."

"And when did you start to feel... strange."

Ginny leaned against the counter, trying to follow his train of thought.

"You think someone drugged her?" Ron roared, making Ginny groan and hold her head.

"Drugged?"

"There's a new one going around," Neville sighed. "They've had trouble with it at Hogwarts, actually. It's a plant extract, and it works something like Euphoria, I'm told, except that it's untraceable once it enters your system."

"Bloody hell," Ron sighed, protectively putting a hand on Ginny's shoulder.

"It works almost instantly, but it does have a bitter taste. Some older students were slipping it into the morning orange juice at Hogwarts and then... leading the girls away to, erm..."

Ginny felt even sicker. "Why weren't the Auror's called?" she yelled, reaching almost hysterical

volumes. "That's... that's rape!"

Neville backed away just a bit and held his hands out. "They caught them before... Hagrid stopped everything. He put the fear of Merlin in those boys. McGonagall called the Aurors, I just don't know the details."

Ginny breathed deeply, feeling bile roll up in her throat. Who could have done something like that to her? Suddenly, she just wanted to go back to bed. "I'm going to be sick," she announced, right before throwing up spectacularly in the sink. Her stomach heaved several more times.

A heavy hand clumsily rubbing her back let her know that Ron was there. Neville's friendship duties obviously didn't include cleaning up vomit, Ginny thought with a moment of embarrassment. Not that she blamed him.

"Here." Ron nudged her arm with a glass full of water and she took it, greedily drinking some to swish out her mouth, and then gulping the rest. Her stomach rolled again, threatening to send it back up as well, but Ginny clenched her teeth and willed it back down.

"Let's get you back to bed," Ron murmured, taking her elbow.

Normally, Ginny would have pushed him away and walked there herself, but her mind was swirling so fast, trying to put this new piece into the puzzle, that she wasn't sure she'd make it on her own anyway.

Someone had obviously slipped her something... that plant extract stuff, probably. But why?

"How long does that stuff take to work?" she asked vaguely, knowing that Neville was following them. His pattern of footsteps was rather distinctive, she'd come to know: kind of a shuffle-step-step.

"It's fairly fast," he said. She could practically hear his frown of concentration as they stepped into her bedroom. "I'd say no more than an hour, and possibly as little as a few minutes, if the concentration was high enough. But it obviously lasts for awhile."

Ginny nodded and climbed into her bed, clutching her duvet in front of her.

"Gin..."

Ron's low tone made her look up at him. His expression was something between anger and pain, confusing her.

"What?"

"When did you start putting that picture there?" he asked.

Ginny rolled over, following his blazing stare to see a framed photograph of Harry and herself on her bedside table. She opened her mouth to reply, but simply stared at it. That particular photograph had stood on her nightstand at Hogwarts, until Bill had come with the news.

She'd spent many nights curled around it, crying. But then she'd wrapped it in paper and cushioned

it in-between a stack of jumpers in her trunk. The jumpers were still in her trunk, she knew. Or they were when she last checked. And that's where the photograph should have been as well.

"I didn't," she glared at it, her heart thumping wildly. She viciously snatched it off of the table and stuffed it under the bed. "I didn't put that there. I haven't for years." Her mind raced, trying to remember if she might have pulled it out when she put the note in her trunk. But nothing was very clear right now.

Ron stared at her, concern on his face, before sinking down to the edge of the bed. "I miss him too, but you need to move on, Ginny."

"I didn't put it there!" she yelled, making both Ron and Neville jump.

"Alright," Ron held out his hands in a placating gesture and stood up.

Ginny rolled over, fuming now. How could he think she was so pathetic as to keep something like that on her table? The fact that she kept the other photograph of Harry at work was a moot point. Ron didn't know about that.

She closed her eyes tightly, trying not to let the panic take over. Someone had drugged her last night, for whatever purposes. Could it have been Rudy, desperate to try anything? He certainly seemed interested, if she remembered.

But then the bottom fell out of her stomach. It could have been anyone. Because she hadn't even spoken to Rudy before she'd pounced on him outside the pub... it could have been *anyone!*

And now... the picture on her table...

Someone was definitely telling her to something. Probably to stay away. Even the thought of someone coming into her home, rummaging through her things, made Ginny feel dirty, violated. She'd have to increase her security.

Intimidation, however, wasn't the way to get her to back off. Ginny was a fighter—had always been one.

Harry wouldn't have backed away either.

# Chapter 8: Behind Those Eyes

Ignoring cold looks and behind-the-hand whispers was old hat to Ginny. Her relationship with Harry at Hogwarts, and after, was always the subject of gossips.

She couldn't pretend it didn't bother her having everyone stare and whisper when she walked by, but it didn't hurt like it could have. Ginny knew that the people she really cared about knew the truth.

The previous afternoon and evening at the Burrow had assured her of that fact. Ginny had nearly needed to stun her mother to keep the woman from taking part in an all out assault on the Daily Prophet.

Ginny's attitude of 'let them think what they will' had fallen on mostly deaf ears.

The rest of the evening and late into the night, Ginny spent sketching out everything she knew on a piece of parchment.

Harry's death had not been the result of an attack by a rogue Death Eater—it was part of a far more insidious plot. He and Kingsley had stumbled onto something that they weren't supposed to see, or to know about. Harry had been killed, and Kingsley had nearly died because of it.

Collin's Senior Partner, Williamson, was involved. Knowing that, it was entirely possible that Stebbins and Robards were involved as well, since they'd visited Kingsley together.

Someone was screening Ginny's mail, and had stolen the letter Kingsley sent to her. Someone had discovered that Collins had given her the note, and had dealt with him.

The note was still there in her trunk, wrapped in Harry's Invisibility Cloak, just where she'd left it. She had checked that at least ten times before reworking the wards on her flat.

And now the personal attacks on Ginny had begun; the photographs in the Prophet, along with the article claiming she was unstable. Slipping something into her drink at the pub—after thinking about it, Ginny knew that's where it had to have been. And then someone had been in her home and had put the photograph on her table.

*Someone* had been busy.

"Wild weekend?" Trammel greeted her with a smug smile when she finally made it past all the people sticking their heads out doorways to see her walk by.

Ginny still wasn't sure what to make of Trammel. Was he involved? And if so, how deeply?

"More wild than you think," she said tiredly. "I was drugged, Trammel. Someone slipped a plant extract into my drink."

His thick eyebrows rose into his hairline. "Did you report it?"

Ginny sank into her chair, shrugging a shoulder. "No proof."

"Hmm," he scowled. "You should have been more careful." His words weren't harsh, but more contemplative, giving Ginny a glimpse that perhaps Trammel didn't know everything that was going on.

"Constant vigilance," she nodded, making him stare at her. "I know. I was stupid; it won't happen again."

"Right," he nodded. "Well, the damage from this end isn't much. Robards showed up this morning, asked me to talk to you. He seems to think you're just stressed out. I didn't argue with him."

Ginny opened her mouth to protest, but snapped it shut. What Trammel had done for her just now clicking in her mind.

"Consider yourself warned," Trammel sighed. He flipped open another file and pushed it across to her.

"Last night, the French Aurors tracked down our Potions dealer, Gudmundson." Ginny swore softly and Trammel nodded. "It gets worse. Three deaths have been linked back to him over there, so they have jurisdiction over him."

"We won't even be allowed to talk to him?"

"It's possible," Trammel shrugged. "We need to get the paperwork in order, track this scum-bag's movements until we find some concrete evidence tying him to an older homicide or suspicious death here. The French may let us have a crack at him if we can pin something on him first."

Ginny groaned. Paperwork. Her favorite thing.

"Let's start by picking apart this latest case and track him backward."

Ginny nodded. "I'll get the coffee."

"You stay put," Trammel said, standing from his chair. "Don't need you distracted by blowing some git through the wall when they look at you wrong."

She tried to smile, but it came out as more of a grimace.

\* \* \*

Hours later, as Ginny made an entry on the map they'd conjured to track Gudmundson's movements, Trammel growled loudly and began shuffling paperwork around his desk.

"Where the hell did I put it?" he grumbled, scowling at the various surfaces around the office that had been littered. Ginny thought it looked like the file cabinet had regurgitated everywhere, it was such a mess.

"I must have accidentally taken it back," he mused, mostly to himself.

"What are you looking for?" Ginny asked.

"The Weltham file," he sighed, sinking back into his chair and rubbing harshly at his eyes. "I found something that may tie into it, but I can't seem to find it. I must have taken it back to Records with me last time I went down."

Ginny nodded. Trammel had been down to the Records Division at least ten times already today, carrying back files stuffed with old cases, unsolved murders and mysterious deaths.

"Let me go get it," Ginny soothed him. "I haven't been out of this place all day."

Trammel looked at her skeptically and Ginny rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to kill anyone who looks cross-eyed at me. I promise."

He studied her for a minute more before shrugging. "And stay away from Collins. He doesn't need another dressing down."

"Rudy?" Ginny asked.

Trammel nodded. "Robards laid into him something fierce about keeping it in his pants in front of the cameras."

Ginny flushed and groaned. "He and I... there's nothing there."

"Don't really care, do I?" Trammel said gruffly, as he scratched out a list of files for her to retrieve. "But if that's the case, it's best to let the poor lad lick his wounds in private."

Ginny nodded, even though her first instinct was to search Rudy out and apologize, both for her behavior, and for the fact that he was taking the lion's share of the punishment over the incident.

She waited in line at the Records office behind two other Aurors, who whispered about her, shooting looks back over their shoulders, as if she couldn't hear a thing they were saying.

'Don't listen to them.'

Harry's voice—she should really stop thinking of it that way, because she knew it was only her own thoughts—echoed in her head. It gave her a little strength to think of the hundreds of times Harry had endured similar incidents.

She shifted back and forth on her feet, waiting for Katie and another woman to retrieve the files for the two in front of her. Finally, they were done and left, still whispering between them and snickering at her.

"Hi, Ginny," Katie greeted her. Strangely, she glanced behind her to where the other woman was putting away a stack of files.

"Hi, Katie." Ginny set the note with all the files listed onto the counter and slid it toward her former fellow teammate.

"How are you?" Katie's quill moved down the list of files efficiently, but her question startled

Ginny. It was so... casual, yet it held a certain weight to it that Ginny had trouble deciphering.

"I'm alright. Just busy working on this case."

Katie nodded, never lifting her eyes from the list. Her quill checked them off one by one, before she scribbled at the bottom of it.

*Can we meet later?*

Before Ginny could answer, however, Katie was turning away. "Let me track those files down for you."

"Thanks," Ginny said quietly, puzzled at what was going on. She glanced over at the other woman to see her jerk her head away. Part of her wanted to make a nasty comment about staring, but Katie returned carrying two of the files.

She looked up at Ginny with bright blue, expectant eyes. Ginny nodded just once and Katie's shoulders seemed to slump in relief.

"I found these two," she said, unnecessarily. Her quill hovered over the note again.

*Your flat? Nine tonight?*

Her scribbled words made Ginny's throat close. This was something serious. Something that Katie didn't want anyone else to know about, obviously. "Katie," Ginny said softly. "I was thinking about something the other day. You remember that time in the Quidditch locker room, during your sixth year. Right before the final match?"

Katie stared at her and nodded slowly. She must have understood what Ginny was getting to as she chuckled slightly. The sound was harsh and forced. "I remember."

"What was it you said to me? I was trying to remember. We were talking about winning the game."

Katie glanced back at to see that the other woman had disappeared. Ginny knew that didn't mean she was gone completely, however.

"I told you that we should win it for Harry." Katie's cheeks went pink, convincing Ginny that this truly was Katie, and not someone polyjuiced, trying to lure Ginny into a trap.

"You had a crush on him," Ginny nodded, smiling somewhat fondly at the memory.

"But you were the better one for him," Katie assured her, tapping her quill on the question again.

Ginny nodded once again. "Thank you," she said quietly, touched by the statement.

"I'll just get these other files," Katie said softly, taking the note with her.

The other woman still hadn't appeared and Ginny rubbed her forehead, the lingering headache from yesterday coming back with a vengeance.

"Don't tell anyone," Katie whispered as she handed over the last stack of files.

"Thanks for your help," Ginny said quietly, gathering the files to her. 'Be careful,' she mouthed to Katie as she left. Katie nodded, her face looking tired and somewhat haunted.

\* \* \*

It took Ginny almost ten minutes to get back to her office, but not because she was avoiding people. She was terrified. What if Katie had stumbled upon something in one of the files she managed? What if she'd seen something that she wasn't supposed to? Certainly, she wouldn't be allowed to keep that knowledge; at the very least there would be memory charms liberally spread in that office. The similarity to Rudy's stumbling on that note was almost too much to believe. Then again, paperwork had a way of turning up in the oddest places around here.

"Bout time you got back," Trammel barked.

"There was a line," Ginny protested weakly as she set the files on the desk. She was just about to continue when a goldenrod colored paper airplane zoomed in through the narrow window above the doorway, landing on her desk.

That shade of yellow was for emergency communications. Ginny's hands shook as she reached for it. Trammel just grunted.

"Get on with it."

She nodded, unfolding the paper, her heart climbing into her throat.

*Dear Ginny,*

*I'm sorry to bother you at work, but I just don't know where else to turn. Teddy is sick and he's practically inconsolable. I could really use your help to calm your godson. I think he may have Dragon Pox. I know it's hard for you to get away from work, but surely they could make an exception so that you can leave today.*

*Please come,*

*Andromeda*

"Well?" Trammel's bark broke Ginny from reading the letter a second time.

"It's from Andromeda Tonks..." she said, letting her brain slide things into place. Clever woman, Ginny snorted to herself. Andromeda's use of key phrases to catch Ginny's eye meant that she was aware that people were reading Ginny's mail.

"My godson is sick."

Teddy wasn't Ginny's godson. He'd been Harry's, and Ginny just kind of picked up the pieces after Harry's death. And, Teddy had already had a very mild case of Dragon Pox last year, and was now immune to the disease. Whatever Andromeda wanted to talk about, it was serious.

Trammel grimaced and looked around at the stacks of files. "I suppose you've outlived your usefulness today."

"Thanks," Ginny jerked out of her chair, gathering her cloak and the letter with her. The last few days felt a lot like Ginny was riding on the Hogwarts Express... except she was strapped to the front of it as it rolled downhill, picking up speed. But she just couldn't make out what was ahead of her.

She barely made it to the Apparition point before closing her eyes and concentrating on the clearing in front of the Tonks home.

Ginny banged on the door, not afraid of waking anyone. Andromeda's slanted handwriting had indicated that she needed to talk to Ginny right away.

"Come in," Andromeda said, a look of determination on her face as she glanced around outside. Ginny noted that her wand was held tightly in her hand.

"What happened?" Ginny demanded, just now realizing that her own wand was drawn.

"I'm glad you understood my message," Andromeda said once she had performed a complicated locking charm on the door. "It's King. He's been... agitated the past few days. He doesn't eat... rarely sleeps. And if he does nod off, he's plagued by horrific nightmares."

Ginny swore softly, grimacing.

"He keeps calling for you," Andromeda said quietly, meeting Ginny's eyes. "Whatever he wants you for... I think it's important."

Ginny nodded, steeling herself as she made her way down the hallway to Kingsley's room. She quietly opened the door, afraid of what she might find.

Inside was dark and overheated, the scent of too-warm bodies spilling out into the hallway. Ginny grimaced, but slipped inside, startling the small house-elf who stood at the foot of the bed, wringing his hands.

"Thank you for coming, Miss," Kreacher greeted her with a low bow. "Master Kingsley is... he's just..." Kreacher broke off, possibly not finding the words, or experiencing too much emotion to get them out.

"I came," Ginny nodded, patting Kreacher's shoulder lightly.

"Master has just gone to sleep," Kreacher informed her needlessly. For the moment, the large man was breathing deeply, completely still in his bed.

"I'll just wait then," Ginny said, lowering herself onto a chair and leaning back. She closed her eyes and pressed her forefinger and thumb deeply into the sockets.

"Kreacher will bring tea for you, Miss."

Ginny nodded absently, but didn't respond. The day's events swirled in her head, making her dizzy. That, and the lack of sleep last night, made her eyelids heavy.

She awoke to find Kingsley thrashing in his bed, arching his back and grunting out harsh sounds that should have been words.

Andromeda stood at the door, tears running down her face. Her hands gripped the doorjamb tightly on either side, her knuckles white.

“King,” Ginny gasped, reaching out to try and still him. She placed her hand on his face, rubbing lightly while she repeated his name.

Kingsley sucked in a deep breath, his eye going wide with fright. His hands closed over her wrists—even the weak left side closing down like a vice on her arms, making Ginny wince.

“Geeeeee,” he pushed through gritted teeth.

“I’m here, King,” Ginny soothed. “You’re not alone.”

He writhed in bed, making Ginny wince as he kept her hands in his. Finally, his grip loosened and he made a sound of pure frustration, groping for something on the side table.

Ginny helped him get the parchment and the ball-point pen in his grip, tears flowing down her face as she watched him struggle to make his hand work right. The pen jumped and skittered across the page as he forced it to write what he needed to say.

When he was finished, he shoved it into her hands, flopping back onto the bed and curling around himself, great wracking sobs shaking his body.

Ginny looked over at Andromeda, whose eyes were on the man. She stepped forward, possibly to comfort him, but then stopped, frozen. Her cheeks were shiny with tears also.

The paper was covered with marks, but two words stood out distinctly.

*Harry alive.*

Ginny dropped the paper, letting it flutter to the floor, while her head wrapped around that sentence. There were so many questions she had, but Kingsley was in no shape to answer them. He shuddered and cried, still thrashing on the bed when Ginny raised her wand.

“*Somnius*,” she whispered, putting him into a light sleep.

“Ginny?”

Andromeda stood across from her, her hand resting on Kingsley’s shoulder.

“It won’t last long,” Ginny protested. “But he needs to rest.” She sank into the chair and picked up the paper again.

*Harry alive.*

There were so many implications to that statement. Was it simply a dream Kingsley was having? Or did he really mean that Harry was still alive?

The thought compressed her chest so much so that Ginny had a hard time breathing and her body began to tremble uncontrollably.

Unable to explain, Ginny stood and handed the note to Andromeda. The older woman gasped and crumpled the paper in her hand, eyes wild.

“Do you... is it real?”

Ginny nodded, allowing the tiny sliver of doubt that had always existed in her heart to grow. “It might be,” she amended. If it were true, however, she could not fathom what had happened to Harry.

Where was he? Did they have him locked away somewhere, being tortured? Or did they kill him later, after they’d assaulted Kingsley?

None of it made sense.

“Ginny?”

Andromeda’s question shook Ginny and she blew out a deep breath.

“I’m... well, I’m not okay. But...”

“Do you need to sit down?”

Ginny shook her head. “No. I need to... I need to walk, I think.” She slowly moved out of the room, after checking that Kingsley was still sleeping. Andromeda followed her to the front door.

“Some things are happening at the Ministry,” she said in a low voice. “Bad things, Andromeda. I... I can’t say more than that right now without endangering you all.”

Andromeda’s jaw set firmly. “Then don’t,” she said.

Ginny nodded. “Set the spells again when I leave. And don’t let anyone in unless you’ve identified them. Even me.”

“I know my safety rules,” the older woman nodded, but her tone wasn’t snappish at all. Instead, Ginny felt as if she were trying to take a bit of Ginny’s concern away. And it helped, just a bit.

\* \* \*

Nine o’clock couldn’t come fast enough, Ginny thought as she watched the hands on the clock drag into position.

The past three hours Ginny had written down the entire experience with Kingsley, including sticking the original note to her parchment with spello-tape.

She’d also spent quite a bit of time reinforcing the wards on her flat and disconnecting her floo connection. Ginny wasn’t sure if her mother bought the idea that it was a new Ministry regulation for Aurors or not. Either way, she hadn’t been particularly happy when Ginny mentioned that she

would only be available by owl for now.

Eventually, Ginny would be forced to tell her family the truth, or at least part of it. But for now, everyone was safer knowing as little as possible.

The thought of Harry being somewhere out there... it was just too much, and Ginny didn't allow herself to dwell on it.

Piece by piece. That's how she had to handle this, or it would drive her crazier than the papers said she was.

Katie was right on time, nervously looking over her shoulder as she slid into the flat. Ginny could see her shaking inside her heavy robes; see the scared eyes inside the pale face.

"What the hell is going on?" Ginny demanded.

"When the sixth year girls held a sleep-over in Gryffindor Tower," Katie began, "what did they play?"

Ginny blinked at her for a minute. "That's too easy. We always played Truth or Dare."

"And what did Alicia dare you to do?"

"It was you," Ginny said, feeling her cheeks heat. "And I was supposed to do a strip-tease. But Hermione stopped me and broke the party up."

Katie tugged off her knit hat, sending her strawberry-blonde hair into the air with static. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"It's fine," Ginny waived. "Come in."

"I'm sorry about earlier, too," Katie said, sinking down on the second-hand sofa. "I couldn't say what I wanted to at the Ministry. There... there are always people watching, and listening."

Ginny let out a breath and nodded. "There are. It's better to say it here."

Katie's blue eyes searched her for a minute before she tugged a file out of her robes. "I... I thought you should see this." Her fingers traced the bright orange band that sealed the file. It signified a top secret clearance; a clearance that Ginny didn't know how to break.

"You, of all people, have the right to see this."

"That's an Unspeakable seal," Ginny said. "I can't break it."

"I can," Katie whispered, sharing the secret. "Records Clerks have to be able to add things to the files, and do maintenance when needed. Strictly speaking, we're not supposed to be able to divulge anything. But..." She chewed her lip. "This is too important..."

Ginny nodded, holding out her hand for the file. "This is about Harry, isn't it?"

Katie's eyes met hers and filled with water as she nodded. "I owe him my life."

"Unseal the file, Katie," Ginny whispered, hoping she could handle what was inside. "I'll read it when you're gone."

Katie nodded, doing the complicated wand movement to break the seal. She flinched several times and Ginny wondered just what the consequences of doing this were for her.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Katie lied, concentrating on the file. "There are several things in this file. At first they don't seem to make sense—they don't seem related. But they are."

"Katie—" Ginny watched as bright spots of color flamed on her cheeks.

"It's fine," she said, blowing a breath out.

"Don't go back to the Ministry," Ginny said, taking the file and, with great effort, putting it aside. "You can't go back now."

"I know," Katie said, a tear escaping and sliding down her face.

"You have somewhere to go?"

Katie nodded. "My grandmother is a Muggle," she said. "I'll go to her house in Ireland for awhile."

"Go tonight," Ginny urged. "Right now."

"I am," Katie said. "I just... just have one more stop to make."

Ginny's heart clenched. "Katie, I..."

"Just... just find him, Ginny. And... tell him that I helped." Ginny's stomach felt as if she'd swallowed a rock. Kingsley's words hadn't been a dream.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said, not sure what she was apologizing for, but needing to all the same.

"Just find him."

Katie hurried out the door once she'd pulled her hat back on, disappearing into the darkness of the hall.

Ginny sank into the sofa, taking deep breaths and trying to decide if she had the courage to open the file.

She closed her eyes, conjuring up an image of Harry—her favorite image of him—sitting in the sunny field near the Burrow, surrounded by the tall, waving grass as he stared up at her, a mischievous and truly happy smile on his face.

"What am I going to do, Harry?" she asked aloud.

"You do what is right," she imagined him saying, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled at her.

"But what if I can't?"

"It won't be easy," he shrugged. "But I'll help." His smile melted into the one that she both loved and hated—it was infuriating and completely endearing at the same time.

Taking another deep breath and opening the file, Ginny started to read.

The first document, just as Katie had said, simply made very little sense. It was an Unspeakable's study on Memory Charms, and the effects of layering them. It seemed that layer upon layer of small Memory Charms did a more effective job of making memories irretrievable than using one powerful charm.

The file went into specifics, discussing brain function and medical reactions—Ginny skimmed through that, getting lost in the technical jargon.

She stopped glancing over it, however, when she noticed a handwritten note scribbled in the margins of the report.

*Project Lucas underway. Possibilities strong and positive. Forward report on to R.W. re: K.S. and H.P. Eligibility for project looks perfect. Would solve issues on both sides.*

Ginny's heart thundered in her ribcage, hurting so much that she had to look away to breathe.

The report ended with a recommendation to remove memories to a pensieve and then begin the memory charm layering.

Either way sounded horrific, Ginny thought.

She flipped past several papers, not seeing anything more of interest, other than a few names. She didn't know who they were, or why on earth they were listed in the file.

The next thing that caught her eye was a report from the Auror Academy. It was dated the year before Ginny had applied, and listed a handful of Aurors that Ginny worked with. Beside each name was their birth date, education status, test scores, and, strangely, their blood status. The words 'Half-blood', 'Pureblood', and 'Muggleborn' stuck out to her like a flashing light.

Ginny let her eyes find the date the report was prepared. July. Well after the reconstruction had begun, and after Kingsley had handed over the Ministry to Winters. There shouldn't have been any consideration given to blood status anymore.

Even more shocking was when Ginny traced her finger along the lines adjacent to the names, seeing handwritten notes next to each of them.

'Dropped Out'

'Passed'

'Failed Initial'

'Drug Overdose—possible suicide'

'Passed'

'Passed'

The list went on, making Ginny sicker as it went. The Muggleborns had been decimated at training. The Half-bloods had fared better, but it was only the Purebloods who made it through unscathed.

"Merlin," Ginny sighed, finally seeing where she thought this might be going. Is this what Harry and Kingsley had stumbled upon? The Ministry was weeding out "undesirables" once again?

The report went on, delving deeper into each Trainee's background, showing an overwhelming support for those who came from families that were termed 'grey'. In other words, they hadn't openly supported Voldemort, and they hadn't openly fought against him.

To Ginny, it seemed as if someone had wholly accepted Voldemort's agenda, and was pushing it along, under the table, as it were. The thought made her want to be sick. What the hell had they fought a war for? What had Fred, and Remus and Tonks, and even Dumbledore, died for? It certainly wasn't a world where wonderful people like Harry were sliced down for no reason other than they chose to stand up, or one where their memories were stolen right out of their heads. They were no better off now, Ginny growled.

Angry tears came then. How could they have thrown away so many lives just like that? How could all their struggling have been in vain?

Ginny set the file aside and went to her bedroom, digging the framed photograph of Harry and herself out from under her mattress. The couple inside clung to each other, smiling and laughing, hope for a future shining in their eyes. They had everything—at that moment in time.

It hurt that someone had stolen it from them. Harry had tried to stand up for what was right, and they'd taken him away, with no thought as to the impact that would have on the world.

Her fingers traced Harry's profile in the photo. She felt hope flutter low in her belly. Perhaps they *hadn't* killed him outright. Kingsley seemed to think Harry was alive.

And the report suggested that memory removal and charms might be involved.

Could Harry be out there, unable to fight because they'd taken his identity away from him?

The possibility made Ginny's head swirl and she clutched the picture to her, stumbling back to the living room and the file that lay spread out on her sofa.

She kept the photograph held against her body while she shuffled through the dry, confusing notes from the Unspeakables. One small handwritten page jumped out at her.

*Confirmed: H.P. and K.S. both good subjects for Project Lucas. Sufficient trauma in past to qualify. Have advised Headquarters and await your approval.*

It wasn't signed, and Ginny didn't recognize the writing. That's what happened, then.

The evidence didn't make it any easier to take, Ginny sighed. Her head still spun with the information. Harry was out there. Something had gone horribly wrong when they'd tried to subdue Kingsley, and he'd been injured, rather than... well, probably stunned.

But now that Ginny had this knowledge, what did she do with it?

The low chime on the clock rang out, startling her. Twelve times, Ginny counted, the pounding in her head matching each one.

Instead of going to bed, Ginny pulled both the file, and the photograph to her, curling up on the sofa and staring into the low-light of the room.

"I'm going to find you, Harry," she whispered. "I promise you that."

\* \* \*

She awoke with a jerk, scattering the file she'd held onto all night to the floor.

"Urgh," Ginny groaned, wiggling out the cramps in her neck and arms. She felt horrible. Cramped and disoriented from not sleeping in her bed. Her mouth was dry and sticky as she smacked her lips together.

A loud tapping came from the window, startling her. A dark owl hovered outside, clutching a thick roll of parchment that looked like the Daily Prophet.

That must have been what had awakened her, Ginny decided, slowly getting up from the sofa. Her body protested each stretch and movement, but she needed to get to the window before someone saw the owl and reported it.

Strange, because Ginny didn't subscribe to the newspaper.

"You've got the wrong house," Ginny scolded the bird when it flew in the open window. "Someone's going to be angry they don't get their paper this morning." The bird, however, didn't listen, and didn't even wait for Ginny to put a coin into the little leather pouch it wore, but dropped the scroll onto the table and soared back out the window.

"Stupid bird," Ginny muttered, sliding the sash closed.

She didn't look at the paper right away, but put a pot of tea on to boil first, gathering her cup and tea bag. She needed to wake up more anyway, before trying to make sense of today's stories.

Once the tea was ready, Ginny poured herself a cup and sat at the small table, with the mismatched chairs.

"What nonsense have they found today?" she mumbled, unrolling the scroll.

Her hand jerked, however, when she saw the picture on the front, and read the headline. Her teacup tipped over, spilling its contents all over the table, soaking into the paper.

Ginny could only gape. "No, No, No, NONONONONONONO!" she screamed. "Please no!"

*Aurors Make Spectacular Arrest In Illegal Potions Trade! the headline blared. 'Promising Quidditch Talent Caught Up In Drugs; Alleged Girlfriend to Blame'*

The black and white photograph said it all. Oliver Wood and Katie Bell being led away from a shabby, rubbish strewn flat, their hands bound behind them.

*Aurors called in today suspect the pair was involved in the use of illegal potions. Evidence was found in the flat suggesting the fact. Lead Auror in the case, Jerome Stebbins indicates that Aurors have been watching the pair for weeks now, tracking their movements and attempting to tie them to a larger organization. 'They'll have their day in court,' Auror Stebbins promised.*

"They wouldn't," Ginny whispered to the emptiness.

Tea dripped from the table onto the floor as Ginny continued to stare, with unseeing eyes.

The shattering of broken glass as Ginny's teacup found the edge of the table and plummeted to the floor, woke her from her daze.

Her breathing hitched painfully and her chest compressed. Katie had been with her just over twelve hours ago. She was breathing and warm... and safe.

The memory of Katie's pale blue eyes, bright, even through the fear that caused dark rings around them, haunted Ginny. Tears raced down her cheeks, burning against her cold skin.

"They set her up," she repeated over and over, becoming almost hysterical.

She clutched the soggy newspaper in her hand, crumpling it until the mushy substance squeezed through her fingers. She told Katie—warned her to go into hiding right then. But Katie didn't. And now she was gone, dragged off to Azkaban to await trial. And Oliver had been a helpless victim in all of this.

Ginny stood in the middle of her flat, looking around, but not really seeing anything.

She needed to talk to someone, someone who would help her figure out what to do. But it had to be someone who was smart enough to stay safe.

Hermione's face flashed into her mind, but could she really endanger her friend like that? And hadn't Hermione been through enough?

Then again, if there was anyone who deserved to know that Harry was alive, it was Hermione and Ron.

The decision was made even before she could think it through.

\* \* \*

The Burrow seemed a bit foreign, its outline a bit of a shadow in the brightness of the unusual late

October sun. Or maybe it was just that Ginny couldn't quite bring her feet to move her forward from the Apparition point.

She must look a right mess, still in her clothing from yesterday, with her hair a fright and her face all swollen from crying. But all she could do was stare, as numbness started to travel from her feet, all the way to her head and heart. She should be safe here; safe enough to figure this all out.

When she finally managed to make it inside, it seemed strange to find most of her family there.

"Oh, Ginny, dear," her mother bustled over, wrapping her arms around Ginny and extricating her from Hermione's grip. "We just tried to floo you."

"The floo's been disconnected," Ginny said dully. She rubbed her forehead and sank into the chair that her mother offered. Several people exchanged looks, making Ginny squirm, but then it was quiet again.

"I just saw Wood two days ago," Ron mumbled, gathering Hermione into his side. "He... he came in to see George. I never would have expected him to be caught up in something like this."

A loud crash sounded from somewhere outside the room and Ginny looked up. Her father caught her eye and shrugged. "Angelina," he said softly, grimacing. He was probably imagining what might be left of their living room when George's wife was finished with her angry rant. Ginny nodded, her chest already so constricted that she couldn't hurt anymore.

"Why would they be involved in something like this?" Bill asked, staring down at the newspaper that lay in front of him.

"I can't imagine," Hermione nodded. "It *must* have been potions, like the paper said. They've been all over the place lately. Just the other day a wizard in my own Department tested positive for them. I can't imagine how Katie made it through the screening they did."

"She didn't do it," Ginny said softly, staring down at the small section of table in front of her. "She wasn't involved. And Oliver probably wasn't either." This time her voice was stronger. Everyone started and stared at her, making Ginny shift.

"She... they set them up," she explained, trying to grab a hold of one of the thousands of thoughts flying through her brain. She had to explain... but how to do it.

"Who?" Bill said, leaning over the table more until he was almost touching her.

"The..." Ginny rubbed her forehead, wondering if she could say it. Would she be endangering them all by telling them what she knew? "The Ministry," she finally bit out, anger swelling up so fast in her that she had to stand. It bubbled and boiled inside her, burning her throat like acid.

"Ginny—"

"She found out what they'd done, and she... she told me."

"Ginny—"

Ginny started to pace, chewing her bottom lip as the pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place more. "I told her to go, but she said she needed to make a stop. It must have been Oliver she was going to see."

"When did you see Katie?"

Hermione's voice shook her for just a bit and Ginny blinked at her. "Last night."

"You saw Katie last night?"

"Yeah," Ginny nodded. "She came to my flat... She brought the file. Merlin! The file!" Ginny wound her hands into her hair, tugging at the roots of it. She shouldn't have left the file out. If something happened to it...

No. It would be fine. The wards were still up. Only Ginny could Apparate in and out. And the floo was closed. She'd sealed it herself. It would be fine.

"Harry would be so disappointed," she mumbled, cursing herself for being so stupid. "He wouldn't have let Katie leave. He would have made her stay, or taken her to her Grandmother's house himself. That's what I should have done."

"Ginny!" Ron yelled at her, impeding her pacing as he stood in front of her. "You're not making any sense."

"I'm fine," Ginny growled, feeling bad at pushing him away. But if she stopped thinking, things would fall away from her, and she'd never figure it out. The key to everything was here somewhere; she just needed to put all the pieces into place.

She started to walk again, around and around the kitchen, bumping into this and that as she pieced the puzzle together. Vaguely, she could hear her family talking around her.

"... think she's lost it..."

"They went after Kingsley too. He and Harry were figuring it out. Just like the Horcruxes..."

"... calming draught..."

"But someone knew," Ginny continued. "They found out. And then there was Lucas. How does that fit?"

"I'll get it. How much do you think we should give her?"

Ginny made another round of the kitchen, rubbing her face harshly. Somehow it all fit. "Harry's alive," she whispered, the thought finally taking a hold, and making a smile spread across her face. Of course he was! Harry was always a fighter.

"Ginny!" Her father's strong grip on her arms made her wince. He shook her a bit. "What have you taken?"

"Taken?" Ginny asked, blinking up at him. "What are you talking about?"

He stared at her, looking into her eyes, and then over at her brothers. Ginny spun around, trying to figure out what they were saying. It dawned on her. They didn't believe her.

"Harry's alive," she said plainly. Dead silence answered her back. Frantic to make them understand, Ginny moved over to stand in front of Ron, clutching at his t-shirt. "He's alive, Ron."

"That's not funny, Ginny," he said, not looking at her. His hands forced hers away from him and he moved away.

"It's not... it's not a joke," she protested, turning toward Hermione. "Hermione, I'm telling the truth. Kingsley saw him. He told me that Harry was alive."

The hurt was evident on Hermione's face, and she shook her head. "Ginny—"

"Kingsley doesn't even talk," George hissed from across the room. Angelina was huddled into his side, her eyes swollen, but wide as they stared angrily at Ginny.

"HE'S ALIVE!" Ginny roared. "I... I have proof... at my flat. There's a file, on my sofa. Katie brought it to me. She found it and... and they knew she took it. So they followed her to Oliver's. And they arrested them both. Stebbins is involved up to his arse."

Ginny laughed a bit at this. "They arrested them both." The hysterical feeling was returning, and Ginny spun toward the door. "I need to go and get the file."

"Ginny—"

"Wait...," her mother said, reaching out to wrap her arm around Ginny, blocking the back door. "Just... don't go, Ginny."

"Maybe it's best if you don't Apparate," Hermione said, nervously chewing on the side of her cheek. Ron, next to her, nodded as he moved to help guide Ginny back to the table.

"I'll get the file," Bill suggested. He glanced around the room before popping out.

A wave of relief washed over Ginny. Bill would get the file, and then they would believe her. Bill had experience with wards—he'd be fine.

"Ginny, maybe you should lie down," her mother suggested.

"I'm fine," Ginny shook her head. "Once you see the file... you'll understand. I'm not crazy." She pointed at everyone in the room, shaking her head. "Katie... Katie wasn't crazy. And she wasn't on potions."

She accepted the chair that her father gestured to, sinking gratefully into it. Her body groaned in relief and Ginny sighed, realizing that she must have only managed a few hours of sleep, at most, on her rickety sofa.

When Bill Apparated back in, he held the file, but his face was dark. He must have read part of it, Ginny guessed.

She stood, holding out her hand for it. "Give it here, Bill. I'll show you what I mean. Harry's alive."

"Ginny..." he said quietly, anger—greater than she'd ever heard in his voice—dripped off of him. "You..."

"Give me the file, Bill," she demanded, glancing around the room. Ron and Hermione stood at one end of the room. They were looking between her and Bill, but looked away quickly when Ginny turned to them. "Why won't you give me the file?"

"Ginny," Bill began again. "How long has your flat been like that?"

Ginny scowled at him. "Like what? My flat is the same as it's always been."

Bill slapped the file down on the table, making everyone jump. "The pictures of Harry—they're covering one entire wall. And the stacks of dishes and dirty laundry everywhere. Merlin, Ginny..."

"No," Ginny shook her head, scowling at the room. She could feel everyone's eyes on her and an overwhelming, choking feel of pity in the air. "No, it wasn't like that when I left. The file—"

Bill looked as if he were going to be sick, shifting the file toward her father, rather than to Ginny.

"You've completely removed the wards on your flat, Ginny," he shook his head, deep shadows showing on his scarred face. "The floo is still working—did you ever really cancel it?"

"YES!" Ginny roared, leaning forward on the table until she was close to his face.

"There are days and days worth of mail and Daily Prophets all over the floor," Bill continued. "And that damned sofa, turned to face... that... that *wall!*"

Ginny slowly sunk back to the chair. Nothing was making sense anymore. There was no wall full of Harry's pictures. She'd canceled the floo herself, and she had the cancellation order back at the... But it wouldn't be there, she realized. After she'd left, they had come through and changed it all.

"Damn it," she hissed, holding her head as it pounded. "They got to me." Awe and a bit of disbelief swirled through her until she laughed. "They got to me. I underestimated them."

"Ginny." Her father's soft, concerned tone broke through and she turned to him. The file would be useless, she knew. Ginny had really messed up by leaving it there. Now all the evidence she had would be gone.

"Ginny, I think... I think you need to talk to someone," he said. His eyes wouldn't quite meet hers, and that scared Ginny more than anything, because he had never acted this way. "This... this is more than any of us can handle."

"This... it's just sick," Ron said. Ginny's head snapped to the side and she realized that Ron now had the file. His skin was green and he glared at her, open anger written all over his face.

She jumped when he tossed it in front of her. Ginny looked down at the file, almost gagging herself at what she saw.

A photograph of her—recent, by the cut of her hair—draped in glorious white wedding robes, getting them fitted by Madam Malkin herself, lay right on top. Another one came after it, the robes slightly different in this one. And yet another one.

Ginny flipped page after page before coming to a detailed list, in her handwriting, listing the steps one would need to plan a huge wedding. Many of them were checked off, also.

“I didn’t,” Ginny protested softly. “This isn’t...” Words failed her at how disgusting this actually was.

Receipts for things they’d actually reserved in her name were at the end, her Gringotts account number scrawled at the bottom with her signature.

“Those bastards,” she hissed, crumpling one page. “How could they do this?”

“Ginny—”

She brushed away her mother’s hands and flipped to the back pages, gasping when they were covered in graffiti. Different colored inks sprawled all over the pages. Little hearts and lightening bolts drawn in between the words.

‘Mrs. Harry Potter’

‘Harry and Ginny Potter’

‘Mrs. H.J. Potter’

‘Ginevra Molly Potter’

“I didn’t do this,” she defended, violently shoving the file across the table and watching the parchments flutter to the floor. “It was the Ministry. They’re trying to make it look like I’m crazy. But I’m not. They took Harry away... but he’s not dead—”

“Ginny—”

“They have him,” she continued, backing away from Bill and Ron, who were now coming closer, looming over her. “And I’m the only one who knows. Lucas! They have him there. And he can’t get away, because he doesn’t remember!”

“Boys... Be gentle.” Her father’s voice, full of torment, reached her ears.

“I’ve got the draught,” her mother said, holding it out to Hermione, who looked down at the small vial doubtfully.

Ginny was crying now. What could she say to make them understand? She wasn’t crazy!

“I’m not sure... what if it mixes badly with whatever else she’s taken?” Hermione asked.

“I didn’t take anything,” Ginny protested as her brother’s hands closed on her upper arms, effectively binding her. She struggled, but the fight was slowly draining out of her. “I’m not crazy!”

I'm not on potions! Why won't anyone believe me?" She wailed, throwing her head back and arching her back, trying to pull away from her brothers, despite their iron grip.

"I'm so sorry, Ginny."

Ginny barely heard Hermione's whisper before a red light flashed and darkness closed in.

# Chapter 9: The Real Life

Her head pounded when she stirred. The bed was comfortable, but it felt like she'd been in it entirely too long. Days too long.

Little bits and pieces of what had happened floated through her brain and she cursed softly to the half-lit room.

She'd underestimated the Ministry. And that was her biggest mistake. She should have known, seeing the photograph of Katie and Oliver there on the front page—no one could be trusted.

Now even her own family thought she was crazy. Or on illegal potions. Ginny scoffed at the idea. Even at her lowest, just after she believed Harry had been killed, she didn't take potions. And they'd been offered—not the rubbish things that were out there now—but there were always low-level illegal potions floating around Hogwarts, if you knew who to ask, anyway.

But that just seemed so... cowardly, Ginny supposed. Taking all the feeling out of yourself, cutting out anything that made you feel anything—it was just wrong. If Harry had taught her anything it was that emotions and feelings were real. If you felt them, then you were still alive.

Ginny sat up slowly, realizing she was in her old room. They must have conjured a bed for her, because she'd taken her small, single bed when she moved out.

The floorboards were cold on her bare feet, puzzling her; she wasn't wearing the clothes she'd come in. She was dressed in a warm flannel night gown; the same kind she'd worn for years before moving out.

Affection and annoyance warred inside her, simply making her feel tired once more. After they'd stunned her, someone—her mother, most likely—had cleaned her, dressed her, and then put her in bed. The act itself brought tears to her eyes, even though she was still angry because they hadn't listened to her, and had the nerve to stun her.

Then again, she sighed as she rubbed her face harshly, she was beyond irrational at the time. And she really couldn't blame them for thinking that she was insane. The Ministry had done a good job on that front, planting little clues and feeding doubts over the past few months.

"Bastards," she sighed into the room.

What the hell was she going to do now? They'd taken every scrap of evidence. Everything at her flat would be contaminated now. They'd probably stolen every thing that was of any value to her too.

Ginny leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. Her scalp itched horribly, like it always did when she woke from a potion induced sleep. Someone had given her a Dreamless Sleep Potion. Ever since she was little, that particular potion always made her head itch when she woke up.

The stairs outside on the landing creaked and Ginny waited for someone to open the door. It was Hermione who peeked inside, her eyes going wide when she saw Ginny sitting up.

"I'm not going to hex you," Ginny said when the older woman paused at the doorway. She held a tray of food in front of her and Ginny's stomach growled loudly. "I don't even know where my wand is."

She couldn't help the annoyance in that last statement. For two years she hadn't been without her wand—well, three, really. And she felt more than a bit exposed without it.

"Your mother has it," Hermione said softly, setting the tray down on the bedside table. She sank into a chair across the room and watched as Ginny quickly dug into the meal.

Her mother's scones had never tasted so good, Ginny decided as she let the cream melt into her mouth. Nothing was said as she ate one, then two, then a third, taking deep gulps of cold pumpkin juice to wash it all down with.

"How long?" Ginny asked.

Hermione looked confused for a minute before nodding, a guilty look coming onto her face. "Two days."

Ginny nodded slowly, sitting back, her hunger finally sated. She wasn't exactly sure where to begin. There was so much to talk about, but where did she start?

"I... I didn't take anything," she said softly, lifting her eyes to meet Hermione's. "No potions, no drugs... nothing."

Hermione nodded. "Okay."

"And I'm not crazy," she added, the breakfast churning in her stomach.

"The file..."

"Wasn't mine," Ginny shook her head.

"Right," Hermione clarified. "It was planted—"

"By the Ministry," Ginny nodded. She wasn't sure if Hermione believed her or not. Really, though, did it matter? The odds of Hermione believing her were next to nothing. The Ministry was nothing if not thorough.

"Ginny, why would the Ministry—"

"Never mind," she said softly, shaking her head. Convincing Hermione wasn't going to work, that much was obvious, because Ginny had no physical proof right now. Hermione continued to stare at her.

"Ginny, I think your father is right. I think you need to speak to a Mind Healer, or someone—"

"Someone who can wipe my mind like they've done to everyone else?" Ginny scoffed. "No thank you." She stood abruptly, searching for her clothing. It was folded neatly next to the bed. Not caring what Hermione might see, Ginny shucked off the nightdress and started to dress.

"Where are you going?"

"Somewhere," Ginny said, not even sure herself. She just knew that she needed to get away. To be able to piece together the bits of her life that had slowly fallen apart.

"Ginny, I don't think—"

"I'm not going to do anything stupid, Hermione," Ginny protested as she sat down to pull her trainers on. "But I've got responsibilities that I just can't walk away from. I've got work, and... and Teddy. And..."

"Work won't be a problem," Hermione said softly. Her cheeks were flushed as she reached into her robes and hesitantly drew out a folded piece of parchment. "You... you've been suspended from the Aurors, Ginny. I'm so sorry." She finished in a whisper and Ginny stared at her before snatching the parchment.

"Pending further investigation, you are hereby suspended from active duty."

The words almost didn't make sense, yet Ginny understood them for what they were. It was a warning shot. Her one warning that they knew she was digging, and that they wanted her to stop.

"Why haven't they just killed me?" she pondered aloud, starting when Hermione gasped.

"Ginny—"

"Hang on," she held out her hands, "that's not what I meant." Getting Hermione all worked up probably wasn't the best idea. She certainly had a mean Stunner.

"There's life beyond work, Ginny. You can start over somewhere else. Maybe working as an Auror is just too close to Harry. Maybe it's just too much for you."

Ginny shook her head, staring down at the paper, continuing reading, but not really caring.

"That's not it. They know I've found out about Harry."

"Ginny," Hermione snapped, standing up so abruptly that the chair she was sitting in fell backward with a loud clatter. "You have got to stop this nonsense. Harry is dead! Do you know how much it hurts us all when you say he's not? I'm sorry that you can't believe that. I'm sorry that... that your brain just can't handle it—"

"Hermione," Ginny said softly, knowing that arguing wasn't going to get her anywhere. "I'm sorry."

Hermione stopped yelling at Ginny's contrite tone.

"You're right," Ginny continued, her eyes darting over to where Ron and George stood in the doorway, their wands drawn. "I'm sorry... I just get... confused sometimes." The lie rolled off her tongue.

Ginny understood now what she needed to do. Her family loved her, and they truly wanted what was best for her, but they didn't understand what was happening. And they clearly wouldn't listen

to her if she behaved as insane as the Ministry was portraying her to be.

She sank down onto the bed. "I just... miss him so much."

Hermione sat hesitantly next to her and draped an arm over her shoulder. "We all do."

"Some days I wake up, and I can't believe he's gone," Ginny continued. This wasn't a lie, but it wasn't exactly the truth anymore. But this... maybe the grief they could understand. The grief they could forgive.

"Maybe time away from the Aurors will do you some good," Hermione said, rubbing her arm. "Would you... would you like me to help you find someone to talk to?"

Ginny shook her head. "There's someone... the Aurors use him."

Finally, George and Ron relaxed, pocketing their wands. Ginny rubbed her face once more.

"I... I need to check on some things."

"Er..."

"I'm not sure it's wise for you to be... er, Apparating," Ron stepped forward.

"Come off it," Ginny scoffed. "I'm not four, Ron."

"Ginny—"

"No, George," Ginny protested. "Who was the one who stood up for you when Mum wanted you to move home after Fred died?" George squirmed a bit in place. "And who was the one who checked up on you every day that summer, to make sure you hadn't pickled yourself?"

Hermione gasped and George grimaced at Ginny. "You were," he admitted.

"That's right," Ginny nodded. "And all I'm asking is for you to go nick my wand back from Mum, and let me take care of what I need to take care of."

Ron and George shared a look before both shrugged. Hermione flew off of the bed and stood before Ron, whispering fiercely about how this wasn't a good idea.

"She's old enough to leave anyway, Hermione," Ron protested, giving Ginny a sad look.

Ginny sighed, grateful that she wasn't going to have to fight him as well. She turned on George who sighed heavily and thumped out of the room, as if marching to his own death. And, honestly, that might very well be what happened if their mother caught him at what he was going to do.

Hermione pressed her fingers to her temples. "Ginny, I really think you should stay here. At least let us find out what's going on at the Ministry—"

"No," Ginny shook her head. "I just... I need to contact the right people, Hermione. This is just... some sort of mix-up. They're probably angry because I didn't show up yesterday..."

Hermione looked like she wanted to argue, but Ginny moved forward taking her friend's hands in hers. "I appreciate that you're worried, Hermione. But I'm going to be alright. I'm just... I need to clean up the flat, and... I need to make an appointment with the Healer." The urge to cross her fingers over the lies was great, but Ginny held back.

"You know that we're here for you, don't you?" Hermione asked, leaning back into Ron's embrace.

"I do," Ginny assured them. "And you have no idea how... how that makes me feel. But I... this is something I need to do on my own."

George came back in, his chest rising and falling from his run back up the stairs. "You have about one minute before she realizes it's gone."

"Thanks." Ginny leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek, then mirrored it on Ron's. She gave Hermione's hand one more squeeze before closing her eyes and Apparated away.

\* \* \*

Two whole hours Ginny watched the flat for any signs of life. She drank coffee at the small café down the block, her eyes never leaving the third window on the second story of her building, ducked behind newspapers and magazines, not seeing a word of the print, but scanning the crowd, watching for anyone watching for her.

After a quick change of her glamour charm, Ginny spent the next twenty minutes pushing a conjured pram up and down the street, appearing to be window shopping, when she was really watching the building in the reflections.

Several other disguises were wasted as she circled the building, surreptitiously checking for spell work.

When she finally made it up to the floor her flat was on, Ginny spent a nervous twenty minutes tracking who might have been at her flat. Bill's signature, which she recognized from working on this charm together last year, showed up brightly, crimson against the bottom of the door. Strangely, her own golden hued color showed up next, muted over time. Whoever had been there between she and Bill was very good, Ginny had to give them that.

The flat really was a nightmare, Ginny decided. It's no wonder that Bill thought she was insane. Ginny nearly vomited when she caught sight of the wall. Literally one whole wall of the living room was covered in pictures of Harry—cut from newspapers, magazines, and even duplicated over and over again. Harry's green eyes seemed to follow her everywhere, making her feel incredibly uneasy. It was a horrific shrine that would make any stalker proud.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she whispered, using her wand to vanish large sections, leaving the bare magnolia walls staring back at her. The fact that they'd taken something so close and personal to her and twisted it into something so... tainted and ruined, made her sick.

Slowly, she began to gather a few essential items. It was very clear that she wasn't going to be able to stay here at the flat. The Burrow was definitely out as well. And despite the fact that she knew Andromeda would gladly offer an extra bedroom, or her sofa if needed, Ginny just couldn't burden

her friend that way. Plus, that would draw unneeded attention to Teddy and Kingsley.

No, it would be best to find somewhere else to stay for a bit.

But what to do about the Ministry—that was the question. They were arresting people who weren't guilty of anything but trying to find the truth, and making others vanish. Surely she was next on the list, if they didn't simply kill her outright.

She sank down onto the sofa, staring anywhere but the blank wall. Even when they weren't there anymore, the pictures still remained in her mind.

Ginny had a handful of galleons that she'd stashed in her bedside table for an emergency. Perhaps she could exchange them for Muggle money at Gringotts and spend some time out in the Muggle world. That would probably be the best place for her.

She really didn't have anyone to turn to. The family... she couldn't endanger them like that. And Kingsley was out too. He was just finally recovering—if that's what you could call it. The Order—she might be able to call on some of them, but, honestly, after the war had ended, they had all gone back to their lives, picking up the pieces and getting on with the business of living. It seemed selfish to call on them to get her out of trouble she'd walked head first into.

No. It wasn't time to call on them just yet. Maybe sometime soon.

Although, with the picture the Ministry and press had been painting of her, she wondered if they'd even respond.

Jasper Doell popped to the front of her mind. He'd been honest and open with her, as well as helping her get accepted to the Auror Academy when it looked like a hopeless dream. But he'd been sent on assignment out of the country not long after she graduated Hogwarts. He hadn't really been around for any of this.

A loud 'pop' startled her and Ginny defensively threw a stunner toward the corner, expecting that the Ministry must have tracked her somehow.

But a simple roll of parchment fell to the ground, rolling slightly from where her spell had rushed past it. It sat innocuously in the corner, staring her down.

Who the hell...

But curiosity had always been one of the worst enemies for Ginny. And she knew from the moment she'd peeked out from behind the sofa that she was going to read it; after she checked it over for curses, of course.

A few practiced flicks of her wand proved it was curse free, save the charm that allowed only her to open it. Trammel's signature seal was pressed into the wax.

Ginny sat directly on the floor, leaning up against the wall, while she stared at the parchment. Could she trust Trammel? That was probably one of the foremost questions she should ask. He hadn't given her a reason *not* to trust him. Then again... he was more than likely involved somehow

in all of this, even if he simply knew about it.

Taking a deep breath, Ginny broke the wax and opened the seal. Trammel's messy handwriting covered part of the page, along with a crude sketch of sorts on the bottom.

"Lucy," she read aloud, rolling her eyes at the silly code name he'd come up with. Ever since she'd dubbed him 'Linus', Trammel had called her Lucy, but only in private. He said it was good for partners to have code things like that between them, to be able to verify that it *was*/i them, and not someone masquerading in Polyjuice.

Who would have thought an obscure Muggle cartoon reference would come in handy now, Ginny huffed to herself.

"He's a seer," she muttered. "I swear he is."

*Lucy,*

*Get the hell out of that flat. You're signing your own death warrant by being there, girl.*

Ginny cringed. The urge to scramble over to the window and look for him was great; but she'd never see him. He probably wasn't within a kilometer of the place, in either direction.

*Stay hidden. Meet me at half-seven tonight. Look for a familiar face.*

*Linus*

At the bottom of the page was a sketch of something. Ginny had to squint to tell what it was, but she recognized it.

Four months ago, after a particularly trying case tracking a child abductor, Trammel had insisted on taking Ginny to a Muggle pub that he knew about. *The Drunken Monkey*. She'd chuckled at the sign above the door; a monkey and a rabbit, lifting pints into the air, asking Trammel which one he was—the monkey or the rabbit.

That was what Trammel, with his rudimentary art skills, had replicated below his note.

No one knew they'd gone there. Between that and the obscure Muggle names he used, it had to be Trammel.

Ginny laughed a bit in relief. Perhaps she wasn't completely on her own after all.

\* \* \*

The noise from the crowded pub spilled out onto the sidewalk, rambling up and down the street for a ways. Ginny watched the entrance from the shadows of the alley across the street for a few minutes, clutching her wand inside her jacket. If anyone from the Ministry had followed on her insane journey through Muggle London, she would gladly hand herself over to them.

Three different rides on the tube, ducking in and out of doorways and changing her appearance every time made Ginny positive that she was alone.

Now that she was here, however, her nerves almost made her turn back. It took some strong inner dialogue, and calling herself several choice names, to gather the courage to enter.

The pub was full, almost wall to wall with University students and young professionals looking to have a good time, or at least get pissed enough to forget the work week. It was Friday, after all.

Ginny tensed, standing on the balls of her feet, her eyes scanning the crowd for anything unusual. But no one stood out as even noticing she had walked in, let alone caring that she was standing in the midst of them.

It was loud in here—a good place to meet, actually, because everyone was doing something else, and certainly weren't looking for a couple of covert wizards in their midst.

Ginny didn't see anyone familiar to her, and then her eyes caught blonde hair and blue eyes, sitting in the far corner of the room.

Rudy.

Although she knew it wasn't really him. Trammell wouldn't have brought him in on this. At least Ginny hoped he wasn't that stupid.

"Are you insane!" she hissed as she slid into the booth across from him.

"Not anymore than usual, Lucy."

Ginny rolled her eyes at his use of the code name. "I think your brain has been addled."

"Do the check," Trammel murmured, although his gruff tone sounded very funny coming out of Rudy's mouth, with Rudy's silky voice.

"Does Rudy know you're parading around wearing him, Linus?"

A blonde, perfectly shaped eyebrow rose. "He knows," Trammel answered.

"I can't believe you dragged him into all of this." Ginny almost stood to walk out then. She couldn't endanger someone who shouldn't be mixed up in something he hadn't chosen.

"He's fine," Trammel protested, blue eyes scanning the room again. "It's the perfect cover, anyway."

"Why is that?" Ginny asked, shifting in her seat so that she could see more of the room. A young man wearing a white shirt and black apron nodded to her, but she shook her head, not particularly wanting a drink right now. She really didn't need a repeat performance of what happened in the pub not so long ago.

"I don't like sitting this way, Linus. It feels like my arse is hanging out there, waiting to be hit."

"Scoot over here," he motioned the spot next to him. Ginny stared at him. It made sense, really, because his back was up against the wall, where she had her back to the room. But there was still the fact that she'd be sitting right next to him. And the booth really wasn't that big.

"Thanks to your little scene the other day," Trammel drawled, "the whole world thinks you and Collins are an item anyway."

Ginny grimaced but moved to where he suggested. It put them in close contact, their shoulders rubbing.

"They're going to end up killing him," Ginny muttered, fighting the unease that crept up her spine. "Or at least completely messing up his brain from so many memory charms." This wasn't fair. Not to anyone involved.

"Probably," Trammel nodded. "But he knows you're in trouble, he offered to help."

Ginny turned and searched his face for a minute, finally giving up when she couldn't see anything. Trammel was very good at hiding his emotions. Rudy wasn't, and she could usually read exactly what he was feeling on his face. It felt very strange to try and reconcile these two very different men together in her mind.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching a group of drunken young men bet on a rather loud game of darts, and chat up some girls wearing skimpy clothing.

Trammel drank from the pint in front of him but didn't say anything. She could feel the stiffness in the way he held his body, however; the way his shoulder was rigid against hers. And his left hand was out of sight, no doubt on alert for any threatening movement. His wand was probably shooting sparks below the table, he was so keyed up.

Ginny tried to force a smile as the waiter walked by once more, giving them a stare full of pity. She could practically read his thoughts. And she supposed she and Trammel did look very funny crammed into the same seat, side by side, but both very rigid, certainly a contrast to the couple who were snogging passionately in the booth across from them.

"You know what they're doing? The Ministry?" Ginny asked finally, swallowing harshly and sniffing at Trammel's drink before taking a large swallow.

He studied her for a minute. "I know you've gotten yourself in deep."

Ginny considered how much to tell him. Really, if he knew this much, he was a marked man anyway. It was possible they'd kill him simply for talking to her. What would it hurt to tell him everything? Unless he really was working for the Ministry, and just here to lure her into a trap, but Ginny didn't think that was the case.

She was willing to take the risk.

"You have no idea," she muttered, swallowing the bitter taste that Trammel's ale had left in her mouth. "You saw the paper the other day? Katie and Oliver?"

Trammel's eyes flashed something deep and he nodded. "I wondered. You're mixed up in that."

"Katie worked in Records. She brought me something... a file," Ginny said in a low voice. "They... they claim she's mixed up in this potions mess. Oliver was just in the way, I guess."

He was quiet for a minute. "You remember when I told you I'd only been turned down for a partner once?"

Ginny scowled, trying to follow his train of thought. She couldn't connect it into what they were talking about, however.

"It was for your Harry," he said, watching her from the corner of his eye. "I... Seeing what he did, what he was capable of—I was scared for him," he said, looking down into his half-empty pint and then fumbling in his jacket before pulling out a small flask and taking a drink. Ginny's nose wrinkled at the cabbage smell. The smell of Polyjuice always brought back memories of her third year, when Crouch had impersonated Alastor Moody. His classroom had always smelled of it; of course, they'd never realized what it was beforehand.

Trammel's admission startled her. She hadn't ever considered that Trammel had followed Harry's career at all. And in all their time working together, he hadn't ever mentioned Harry at all.

He narrowed his eyes, staring off over the crowd, but not seeing any of it. "He was headstrong, and hell bent on changing the world."

"He *did* change the world," Ginny defended, loyalty swelling inside her.

"He did," Trammel nodded. "But not everyone appreciated the way it happened, girl. You can't be *that* naïve."

"I'm not," Ginny hissed. He glanced at her and she continued. "I know more about that kind of evil than you do, believe me." She was irritated, sitting this close to a man who was painting himself as a huge, moving target—and willingly doing it, at that. As if she wasn't in enough trouble already, now Trammel wanted to involve himself.

That was selfish, she knew. He was trying to help her—or, maybe that's what he was trying to do, Ginny still hadn't figured it out yet.

"You do," Trammel nodded. Ginny blinked. Trammel had never referenced her past, nor had he asked her any questions about what she'd been through. But it was obvious that he knew more about her than she'd ever spoken of to him.

"Your boy was set on changing the way the Ministry worked. And Shackbolt was right there next to him." He shook his head, as if that wasn't a worthy goal, but a fool's errand.

"Kingsley..." Ginny trailed off, tamping down the fierce loyalty at the thought of the man who had been Harry's friend first, and was now hers.

"They had the right idea, Ginny," Trammel admitted softly. "But they were in too deep. And by the time I figured out what they'd uncovered..."

"You knew?" Ginny gritted out, sliding away from him as much as she could in the small space.

"Not until after," Trammel soothed her. "I... I started to poke around a bit myself. Thankfully I was more careful than you were." Ginny bristled, but stared straight ahead. "That comes with

experience. I know how to keep myself from looking like I know what I know. People don't bother old Trammel. They let him get on with his work, so long as he's not in their way. And I make it a point not to be in their way.

"Doell came to see me the day he signed your papers," Trammel said. Ginny's jaw nearly dropped, but she caught it in time, schooling her features. "He was worried about you."

"He's one of the other ones you trained, isn't he?" Ginny asked, remembering that he'd only had three partners in so many years.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Good kid."

Ginny nodded, not sure what to say. Trammel's role in the Ministry was starting to become clearer, as were his words when they met the first day.

"He knew you were headstrong and nosy." Trammel shook his head. "Was worried you'd go off half-cocked and get yourself killed."

"He wasn't far from the truth," Ginny muttered, glaring down at the scarred wooden table underneath her hands.

"You've got a good head on your shoulders," Trammel protested. "But you let your emotions rule you too often."

"You sound like Snape," Ginny chuckled. "That's what he always told Harry."

Trammel growled something low under his breath that sounded rather like 'bastard', but Ginny couldn't be sure. Either way, it made her smile.

"You've been suspended," he bit out.

"Yeah," Ginny nodded. "I got the notice. It's a warning, isn't it?" she asked. "They've broken into my flat a few times. And this rubbish they're spreading through the press... Everything to get me to keep my mouth closed. I'm too big a liability to kill directly," she scoffed, the idea just coming to her, but becoming clearer as she pondered it. "They don't need another high publicity murder right now."

Trammel nodded with an awkward kind of shrug. "What is it that you know?" he whispered, his usual curt tone riding over the top of Rudy's laid back manner.

Ginny glanced at him, weighing her options again. "They didn't kill Harry," she said softly. For the first time ever, Trammel showed absolute shock. "They did something to his memory... something called Project Lucas. I haven't figured out what it is yet, or where they might have taken him..."

A deep, low breath rattled from inside the older man, released slow and long as he contemplated what she'd said.

"They've arrested Katie and Oliver to cover up the fact that Katie gave me the file. No doubt the two of them won't remember much of what happened. Merlin, they'll probably have then confess in

an open trial." She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "They wiped Rudy's memory of a note he'd stumbled on. They tried to drug me—slipped something in my drink that night at the pub. I... I would've gone home with Rudy—or whoever it was I *thought* was Rudy—if a friend hadn't stopped me."

Trammel chewed the inside of his cheek, nodding slowly. "It was Collins," he assured her with a nod. Ginny wanted to ask how he knew but she was sidetracked by his next comment. "Here's how this is going to play out. They're going to drag you through the mud, disparage your name and make you out to look insane."

"It's not a far trip, let me assure you," Ginny said.

But he continued over her words. "They'll open an investigation at the Ministry, probably find potions or something else illegal in your flat."

Ginny nodded, letting the pictures take place in her head, playing out the storyline.

"And then I'll end up dead, the victim of some potions deal gone bad," Ginny sighed. "Or worse, stuck somewhere in this Project Lucas, not knowing who I am, or what happened to me."

The look on Trammel's face meant she had guessed right. "Or you'll end up in Azkaban."

Ginny shuddered, remembering Sirius' haunted eyes watching her from the shadows of Grimmauld Place.

"Why didn't they just kill him?" Ginny whispered, exhaustion creeping into her voice. "I don't understand what their goal was. And what the hell is Lucas?"

"I don't know," Trammel shook his head. "I don't have many answers for you, Ginny. I'm guessing that he was more valuable for their little project." He scratched his head. "Project Lucas... I have no idea what it is," he mumbled.

"And now they're going to kill me." The truth of it seeped into her slowly, like cold on a winter night, numbing as it went. The noise of the busy pub faded into the background and she heard her heartbeat, counting out the seconds. "Or worse."

"Only if they catch you."

Ginny lifted her head and slowly turned her head, eying the sly look on his face. "You think I can get away?" The idea was new and held just a glimmer of hope.

"I know you can," he nodded. "You're smart, and you're resourceful. If anything, they've proven how flawed their plan is. They let stupid things be found; stupid things that should never have existed. They're running on emotion and the high of not being caught."

"But you..." he shook his head. "When you focus, Ginny, when you tuck those emotions away, you're deadly. I've seen it. I've never seen an Auror like you before."

Ginny nodded slowly, considering his words. "I've gotten good at locking things away," she

admitted, remembering how practiced she was over the last few years.

“And you’ve got motivation,” Trammel said.

The idea took hold somewhere deep inside Ginny. From the moment she’d seen Kingsley’s scratched out message, and read the file on Harry, Ginny hadn’t allowed herself to focus on the fact that somewhere out there, Harry might possibly be alive.

“I don’t know,” she said. The whole thing seemed so overwhelming. How could she possibly find him in... well, she had no idea where to even start. Or if he was alive still.

“You start at the beginning,” Trammel offered, staring out of Rudy’s blue eyes. “Just like you would with any other case.”

“And I live on the run.”

“Didn’t say it was going to be easy,” Trammel chuckled dryly.

Ginny nodded slowly again. “I... I need to think about this.”

“What’s there to think about?” he hissed, glaring at her. “You do understand—”

“I know,” she bit back, pressing her fingers into her temples. “But you have to understand... this means leaving everything, everyone I love.”

“But you’d be protecting them,” Trammel pointed out.

“Would I?” Ginny asked, a wry smile twisting her mouth. “Would they use them to try and get to me?”

Trammel thought about that for a minute before shrugging. “It’s a possibility. But what happens if you stay here? Would you be able to ignore what you know? Would you be able to walk away from the fact that the man you loved may be out there? Because that’s what you’d be doing. At best, they’re going to take everything you remember, Ginny. They’ll turn you into a mindless drone.”

Ginny’s eyes filled with tears and she blinked them away. The answer was automatic; she didn’t even have to think about it. “No.”

Trammel smiled, a half-grimace, half-tilt of his lips, which was the most she’d ever seen him accomplish. “You may just be the girl I hoped you’d be then.”

Ginny bit the inside of her lip, not sure what to say to that. The idea of leaving her friends and family made her sick, but the thought of Harry out there somewhere, alone and not knowing where he belonged—that made her heart ache until she wasn’t sure she could breathe.

“You need someplace to hide,” Trammel continued. “Think you can manage that? And not with your family, or with the kid.”

Ginny nodded, not really knowing where she was going to go yet. The recklessness of a half-formed plan took over and decisions started to come to her—things that she’d never even considered

before.

She nodded again, finally feeling like she might be able to respond now.

"You get it all straight in your head."

"They took the file," she admitted.

Trammel nodded. "But they haven't taken what's in here," he said, reaching up to tap her forehead. "They can't take that, girl, unless you let them."

Ginny swallowed thickly and blinked back her tears. "I won't let them."

"Good," he barked. "You stay hidden. I'll keep a watch out and contact you. Don't leave until we can figure out what's going to happen. You use this time to make your plans. You're smarter than they are, Ginny. You can do this."

"I have to contact my family," she protested in a whisper. Heartache and fear were quickly being replaced by determination and purpose. "If I don't let them know I'm safe..."

Trammel nodded. "Don't tell them any of this. If you do, they'll be dead or gone within days. You'll think up something to tell them, to keep them safe."

Ginny's mind whirled, trying to grab hold of a story. Hermione's face loomed before her, concerned, just as it had been this morning.

"I can... they think I need to see a Mind Healer," she blurted out, the idea taking shape quickly.

"You're not crazy, Ginny."

She shrugged. "I'm right on the edge. But... I can tell them that. I can... go away for a bit. It's something they'll believe, something that makes sense. And then, I can contact them later."

"That'll work," Trammel nodded, glancing around the pub. "But I'll contact them. You can't risk it." Ginny nodded, her mind not fully processing anything much after the thought of actually leaving took hold. "I need to go. Collins only had a four hour supply."

Ginny scowled at him and Trammel chuckled.

"You don't think it's really me, here, do you now, Lucy? Trammel's back at the Ministry, catching up on his paperwork like a good little Ministry puppet." He winked at her and Ginny couldn't help but laugh.

So that's where Rudy was. Probably doing all the mundane filing and copying charms that had been piling up for months. Sipping from a flask and grimacing at the taste that would be Trammel.

"Tell him..." Ginny trailed off. "Tell *Trammel* that I appreciate everything. And that I couldn't do this without him."

He nodded as she slid out of the booth and stood. "And... *Rudy*... take care of yourself. Don't... don't

get caught up, yeah?"

"I won't," he assured her. "I've been playing games longer than most of these bastards put together." A very feral look crossed his face and Ginny looked away, wondering if, like Katie, this was the last she was ever going to see of either man.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked, just before he walked away.

Trammel stood for a minute, looking at her and then at the crowd around them. "Because someone deserves a happy ending. Might as well be you."

And then he was gone; lost in the crowd as he weaved toward the door.

Ginny stared down at her hands, knowing that she should go too. It was best to disappear for awhile. Until she could get her plans straight in her head.

If it was a game they wanted, she'd play. But it was going to be by her rules. No more waiting for each blow to strike her and drive her to her knees. It was time to land a few blows of her own.

\* \* \*

Tucked deep inside Grimmauld place that night, rolled in musty blankets that hadn't been aired for a long time, Ginny allowed herself to break down. She screamed and threw things and swore enough that her mother would use a cleaning charm on her if she heard.

When the exhaustion took over, like a wave washing over her, Ginny cried. She closed her eyes against the pain and let Harry's face come to her.

Flashes of times they'd had together—both good and bad—made her head ache and her heart twist.

She fell asleep just as she had years ago, with his heartbeat echoing in her head—not sure if it was real or not.

*"I'm in love with you, you know," he said softly, his voice rumbling under her ear.*

*Ginny lifted her head and rested her arm on his bare chest. "I would hope so," she smirked.*

*"I am," he confirmed, his emerald eyes burning into her in the dark. Despite all that they'd just shared, Ginny felt herself blush at the intensity of his gaze.*

*"I love you also," she whispered.*

*He smiled then, reaching down to trace her cheek with his finger. "You were what I thought of... that night, in the forest. When I saw that curse coming at me, I saw you like you were in the Common Room, with that... blazing, determined look. That's when I knew I loved you."*

*Ginny nodded. He'd told her this before, but it was good to hear. Her heart swelled inside her chest and she shifted, lifting her leg over his and winding them together. "I knew when you stepped in front of me, in the Department of Mysteries. I just... I tried to hide it from you though... you didn't know then. You weren't ready yet."*

*"I was a prat," he chuckled, winding his fingers into the ends of her long hair.*

*"You were a boy," Ginny corrected, tracing the scar tissue on his chest. "A silly teenage boy."*

*"I've grown up now," he whispered fiercely.*

*"You have," Ginny nodded, a slow smile stretching her face. "We both have." She moved up to kiss him then and Harry's arms wrapped around her.*

*"You're everything to me, Gin, do you know that?"*

*His question caused her eyes to burn and Ginny chuckled, trying to hold in the emotion. "Prove it," she challenged. Harry's face melted into a smug smile—one that she recognized from playing Quidditch with him.*

*"I thought I just did," he said, sliding his hands down her body, making her shiver as his fingers settled at her hips.*

*"Prove it again."*

*He laughed then, peppering her face with kisses. "Every day, Gin," he whispered against her cheek. "Every single day."*

Ginny's eyes fluttered open and she focused on the dusty blackness of the room.

Strangely, in this haunted, deserted place, she felt safe. In the forgotten layers of decay and dust, she was able to think for once.

She needed to find Harry—even if it never led anywhere. If all he was now was an entry in a log book, or even a grave. She had to know, because part of her had gone with him when he'd been taken. And it was the best part of her, she knew.

Harry's face came to her again in the misty darkness. "Ginny, I need you."

"I'm coming," she promised, the whisper torn from her throat. "I'm coming."

# Chapter 10: Never Will I Break

Four days of wandering Grimmauld Place and Ginny knew exactly what Sirius had been talking about when he'd told Harry he was going stir-crazy all cooped up.

The walls in the old house seemed to have eyes, making Ginny feel about as insane as the Daily Prophet was painting her.

Trammel had sent a newspaper each morning. The first morning was rather harmless, at least for her; more speculation on how unbalanced Katie Bell had been and how Oliver Wood had simply gotten caught up in the relationship, not appreciating how damning the whole thing was to him.

It made Ginny sick just thinking about it. She knew Oliver had close family—if only there was some way to contact them, tell them that it wasn't true what everyone was saying; that their son wasn't this horrible monster who preyed on children and ruined their lives with potions.

But for now, it was better that they just accepted that lie and were safe. Ginny vowed that one day she'd work on clearing their names and getting them out of Azkaban. But now wasn't the time.

Hell, she couldn't even come out of hiding long enough to even get fresh groceries.

The second day, the story of her suspension from the Auror's broke. And the media was quietly speculating on what could have possibly gone wrong in the young Auror's career.

Ginny read the articles with mild amusement. Everything was very... veiled. Quotes and comments that didn't mean a whole lot if taken at face value, held a heftier weight when you twisted them just the smallest way, or if you added them all up.

The fourth newspaper was waiting for her when she entered the kitchen, shuffling along in ratty old carpet slippers and pyjamas she hadn't bothered to change out of since yesterday.

"How the hell does he do that?" Ginny demanded to the empty room, looking around for signs that Trammel had been there. The wards on Grimmauld Place hadn't been disturbed at all. If he'd actually been there, then he was much better at dealing with warding magic than he let on.

Ginny didn't even bother making breakfast before she lifted the paper. She wasn't sure her stomach could handle anything in it after reading the drivel that they'd probably come up with today.

However, she never made it past Trammel's hand-written note on the front.

*Lucy,*

*It's time for your move. Meet at the same place as last time, at noon. Look for a different face. And change yours.*

*Linus*

Ginny set the note aside, her eyes sliding out of focus as she thought about what it meant.

Leave.

She was really going to have to do this. But where would she go? Where *could* she go?

The hours between receiving the note and the actual meeting were agony. Ginny nearly paced a hole in the floor and then explored Sirius' scattered room to see if there was anything valuable to bring with her. A picture that she found under the edge of his bed, taken during Harry's fifth year and showing him and Sirius together—their gaunt and angry expressions just under the surface hard to ignore—was the only thing Ginny found worth anything. Ginny supposed the Death Eaters, or Harry, had taken everything else.

When it was finally time to venture out, Ginny took a deep breath and stared at the door that was shielding her from the outside world.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Linus," she muttered before opening it and Apparating from just within where the wards shielded.

*The Drunken Monkey* was far less busy today, and that made Ginny more nervous than if there'd been a hundred people inside, talking loudly.

It was Shepherd waiting for her this time, his bulking mass crammed into the same booth. Ginny stared at him out of her now-blue eyes before sighing and walking over, her longer limbs making her feel awkward. It hadn't been hard to pluck a hair off a passing woman in Downtown London.

"I liked Rudy better," she sighed as she sat across from him.

Shepherd's face stretched a bit and his eyes darted about in a way that only meant Trammel was controlling them.

"So... time to move?" Ginny asked, her voice quavering at just the words. Leave England.

Trammel grunted and focused on her a moment. "Rudy was busy today," he said vaguely, "and Shepherd flooded in sick."

"Did *you* drug him?" His mouth quirked up in a funny way and Ginny's jaw dropped. "You didn't!"

"Interesting shop that brother of yours has. Or, I guess its brothers, isn't it?"

Ginny's mind goggled at the thought of Trammel wandering around Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, chatting amiably with George, or even Ron. This just didn't fit into the picture of her life at all—still, it made sense in a weird, this-is-my-life-now kind of way.

But she shook it away, knowing that it wasn't really the point.

"How are you holding up?" Trammel asked.

"I'm a mess," Ginny admitted, picking at her stubby, half-chewed fingernails. "I'm..."

"I can imagine," Trammel sighed, reaching forward to knock her hand away from pulling a piece of skin off. "There's going to be a full inquiry at the Ministry," he said, choosing his words carefully.

"They're going to find potions in the drawers of your desk."

"But I didn't—"

"I put them there," he barked out and then ducked his head to avoid the scowl of a couple a few seats away.

Ginny stared at him, trying to decide if he really did know what the hell he was doing. Did he set her up? The panic that lived just under the surface of her skin now surfaced and her hands began to shake.

"And you resigned," Trammel admitted, the very first hints of regret seeping into his voice. "I'm sorry it had to be this way."

"Resigned." Ginny nodded as the word rolled off of her tongue, not sure she could do anything else. Well, that was just so... final. "Will that help?"

"It should," Trammel nodded. "They're going to be steered in a certain direction and that will help to take the pressure off of you some. Not that they'll stop looking, but at least they may slow down a bit."

"So you're going to play up the insanity angle," Ginny said, blinking hard as she stared at the wall opposite them. The idea made her gut twist, mostly because she wasn't sure how close it was to the truth. It *felt* like she was going insane.

"I'm going to play up the grieving angle," Trammel said, his eyes not meeting hers when she spun back around to face him. "An angry young woman who had the man she loved murdered and is looking for any explanation for it."

Ginny's throat closed tightly. "Will it be enough? They... they *framed* Oliver and Katie, they're not just going to let me go away quietly."

Trammel finally looked at her, Shepherd's small, dark eyes blinking deep in his face. He took an envelope out of his pocket and slid it across the surface of the scarred table toward her, his meaty fingers never leaving it. "There are coordinates inside. You show up at the place listed and someone will be waiting with another envelope. Doell will be waiting on the other end of that leap."

The name sounded foreign coming out of Trammel's mouth—which was really Shepherd's—and Ginny blinked. If he'd pulled Jasper Doell in, then Ginny was going deep underground.

A flashback to a conversation she'd had with Doell in his classroom when he'd been helping her prepare for her entrance exams came to her then. Doell had explained that each Auror seemed to have a specialty that helped make them unique—or, at least the really good ones did. He predicted that Ginny's would be warding and being able to sense magic. When Ginny asked what his was, Doell had stared off into the distance, a wry look on his face.

"My specialty is disappearing," he'd said vaguely.

At the time, Ginny had assumed he was particularly gifted at disillusionment. But later, when he'd

finished his time at Hogwarts and seemed to completely disappear from the surface of the planet, Ginny had understood.

She took a deep breath now, trying to let the oxygen clear away the thousands of questions that clouded her brain, because she knew that Trammel wouldn't answer any of them right now.

"And... and he'll be able to help me?" Her voice forced the question out. She shrugged, rather proud that all the rest hadn't burst out of her yet.

"He knows what he's doing," Trammel nodded vaguely.

Ginny bit her lip, knowing that was the most she was going to get out of him.

"You... you be careful," Trammel said, an odd emotion filling his voice. It was almost as if he really cared for her. The idea was so foreign to everything that Ginny knew about the man that it almost made her laugh. And just for a second, Trammel's veneer—the mask he wore, and *ihad/i* worn for so many years—cracked.

"And I hope that you find what you're searching for."

Harry's face flashed in her mind and Ginny held onto it for a minute, making another in the line of a thousand promises she'd made over the years. She was coming for him.

"I will," she promised Trammel now. "I have to."

Trammel nodded, his eyes back to closed off right now. "I'll... I'll keep everything together back here."

"Yeah?" Ginny asked, her eyes tearing up at the reality of everything. She was leaving.

"Yeah."

That was as good as a promise to Ginny and she stood, forcing the awkward, long legs to work, even though they didn't want to. Her time was running out, in more ways than one.

\* \* \*

The exterior of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes looked like a safe haven right now—all bright with a riot of colors and flashing lights. Someone had charmed the word "sale" to float up from the roof and hover before dissipating every few seconds. The smoke was different colors every time, indicating that it was probably George, and not Ron, who had done the work. Ron would have chosen bright orange, probably without even consciously doing so.

After meeting with Trammel, Ginny had gone back to Grimmauld Place, letting everything sink in before gathering her things into a rucksack. It was a very sad commentary on her life right now that everything she owned could be shrunk down and fit in one single rucksack. But she just couldn't risk dragging an entire trunk with her.

Her foray into Diagon Alley had gone fairly well, surprisingly. People flinched when they recognized her, and several very obviously crossed the street to get out of her path, but no one said anything

directly to her.

And the forlorn expression she most likely wore probably helped that. No doubt the Aurors would show up soon, possibly to haul her in for questioning. Trammel hadn't been very clear on the details and she wasn't sure she believed that the Ministry would simply let her slip away.

But saying goodbye to her family, or at least some of them, was worth it. They had to have some indication that she was going to be alright—even though she was disappearing.

Ginny pushed the emotion behind that thought away. There would be time to break down later. Right now, she had to stay sharp.

“Ginny!”

Ron's startled yell made her twitch when she walked into the shop. She tried to smile, but the stares of the shoppers inside made it falter just a bit. Her brother's strong hand under her arm was comforting, even though his grip was like a vice. Ginny ignored the people who shuffled out of their way and blinked owlishly at them.

“What are you doing here? The Aurors are out looking for you. They just left here not long ago. I'm surprised they didn't stop you. Do you *want* to get taken in?” he demanded once they were alone. His harsh tone was betrayed by the open concern on his face. Before Ginny could answer, she was swallowed up in a hug that very nearly broke her determination to do this, to actually walk away from her life.

“I'm so sorry this has happened to you, Ginny. I... I don't know what to believe anymore,” he said softly. “That partner of yours was in here a few days ago, he told us some things.”

She could only nod against his chest, even as her fingers dug into his shirt tightly. “I don't...” Her words failed as she finally let a few tears fall.

“They'll be here for you soon,” Ron said, pulling her back from him and inspecting her face, almost as if looking for something. Ginny absently wondered if he was checking for signs of potion use—then again, she didn't really blame him.

She shook her head slowly and released her grip on his clothing. “I resigned,” she admitted, rubbing tiredly at her eyes. “I'm... I'm going away for a bit, Ron.”

His eyes were dark and sad as he nodded. “Maybe that's best.”

“I just need... some time,” she lied, playing along with what would best protect her friends and family from the truth. One day she hoped to be able to tell them everything; one day when all of this was past and Harry was by her side again. That's what she *had* to believe; otherwise she might just go as crazy as everyone thought she was.

Ron nodded his head in a jerky way, looking over her head as George came into the room, pulling the curtain behind him.

“We're closed,” he said unnecessarily. Ginny bit her lip, feeling guilty that he'd probably given up

hundreds of galleons to close during the middle of a sale. But she was also touched that he had done that just for her.

"Ginny... Ginny's leaving," Ron informed George.

"I don't know when I'll be back," Ginny said, unable to control the crack in her voice. The emotions were just too much, and too close to the surface to ignore now. A single tear escaped and ran unchecked down her face as George stared at her.

As close as Ginny had always been to Bill, somehow, right now, she felt a tie to George that perhaps none of her other brothers could understand. He too had lost a part of his soul in the past few years. And she knew that if there were any possibility that he could get Fred back, even for just a moment, George would do nothing short of moving heaven and earth. Just as she was planning to do for Harry.

She could see the truth of it in his eyes, even if he was still a bit skeptical of her motivations. The small spark that might be truth was what he was clinging to.

"You take all the time you need," George nodded gently. His arms wrapped around her and for just a second, as Ginny clung to him, it wasn't *George* hugging her, but her entire family. "You just... you do what you need to. And... and then you... *you* come home."

The implied meaning behind his words pierced into Ginny's heart and she knew her family would believe her when it was time. They would understand, eventually.

She opened her eyes and saw Ron use the back of his hand to swipe angrily at his own tears. Silently, because she knew she couldn't really say the words out loud, she promised him that she'd bring his best mate back with her. He needed Harry almost as much as Ginny did. There was a spark missing from Ron's life over the past years, even if he looked like he was trudging forward, getting engaged and going on with his life. Ginny could see that in his eyes every time he looked at her, every time someone mentioned Harry. There was a vacant part of his heart that wouldn't be full until Harry was back with them again.

"I don't know if I'll be able to write," Ginny said, forcing herself away from George's embrace. It was time for her to go.

"Then don't," George shrugged. His eyes pierced into hers and he spun on his heel, startling Ginny as he disappeared behind the curtain. The bell on the till rang, echoing through the open shop and Ginny heard the drawer slide open. George was back a moment later, a heavy bag in his hands. He thrust it at her, blinking down at it as his cheeks heated.

"It's all I have here... I wish it were more..."

Ginny tried to refuse, but her hands reached out instead. She understood the gesture for what it was. "Thank you," she said instead, her voice soft. They watched as she put the money into her rucksack and then stood awkwardly, trying very hard to ignore the moment that had arrived.

"I don't have anything to give you," Ron said. He must have given up trying to keep his tears in check as they ran freely down his face.

"Then just give me this," Ginny said, wrapping her arms around his back again. She inhaled deeply, trying to memorize him. "It'll be enough." It would have to be.

\* \* \*

After extracting a promise from Ron that he would watch over Teddy and Kingsley, Ginny pried herself away from the shop, not bothering to hide the tears that streamed down her face as she made her way down Diagon Alley. If people thought she was breaking down completely, perhaps that would be better.

Trammel's note said to Apparate from a public area, so Ginny chose the steps at Gringotts. Enough people were around that definitely recognized who she was.

"Ginny!"

Cursing her luck for running into someone who actually knew her, Ginny slowed her steps.

It was Dean, wearing a very concerned face, who put his large hand on her shoulder and stopped her. His mouth dropped just a bit at seeing how upset she was and he fumbled in his pocket before producing a handkerchief and offering it.

Ginny grimaced and then quickly wiped her face before handing it back to him.

"Are you..." Dean began and then shook his head. "Stupid question. Of course you're not alright."

"I'm not," Ginny admitted with a chuckle. It felt good to admit just a bit of the truth, even though she'd probably have to lie to Dean from here out. "I'm not okay."

Dean nodded jerkily and glared at two Aurors who were weaving between the staring people. Ginny grimaced at seeing it was two of the group who had trained with Harry, Boele and Stinson. They had never liked her.

"I need to go," Ginny said, pulling her wand.

Several people around them backed away quickly, gasping.

"Can I... Is there anything I can do?" Dean looked as if he were in physical pain watching her and Ginny sighed, feeling a surge of friendly affection for the man.

"No," she shook her head. "I'm... I'm going, Dean."

The Aurors were close enough now that they had both pulled their wands. A red stunning spell shot across the crowded street and Ginny pulled Dean down with her.

"Bloody hell," he swore, pulling his own wand.

"Run, Dean," she advised him scrambling to hide behind a barrel of owl pellets as she shot her own spell back. "Get the hell out of here!"

"You're not alone, Ginny," he whispered, impulsively leaning forward and pressing his lips against

her forehead. "Just... just remember that."

She didn't have a chance to answer as he darted out, flinging spells back at the Aurors.

"Dammit!" Ginny cursed. She took one last look at Diagon Alley from the steps at Gringotts, trying to take it all in. She had no idea when, or even if, she'd ever be back here again. There were so many memories that assailed her now; the awe of seeing the bustling Alley when she was so young, and trying to take it all in, the day she had gotten her wand before going off to Hogwarts, eating ice cream at Florean's on a special day with just her dad, defending Harry in Flourish and Blotts.

Dean went down in a scream of rage and flash of light, making Ginny swear again. The barrel in front of her exploded, sending a shower of owl pellets into the air.

"Ginevra Weasley," Boole boomed out, glaring down at her where she huddled on the ground, "you're under arrest for Potions trafficking and distribution of illegal substances."

"Fuck off," she hissed, closing her eyes and pictured the coordinates that Trammel had given her. An immense buildup of heat and power surrounded her before she tore away from Diagon Alley.

\* \* \*

The interior of the place Trammel had sent her to was dismal and... dreary, although it *was* completely quiet. If she didn't trust Trammel, she would have had more than a momentary thought that he'd tricked her and sent her to a mental facility where she'd never get out again.

Ginny took a moment to inspect her surroundings and found all the necessities, yet nothing of luxury—not that that's what she expected at all. But it was a plain, clean place for someone to stay. A single bed. Two chairs. A small table and a door that, with a glance inside, she confirmed was a bathroom.

"You've made it then." A thin man wearing glasses and a pale green robe, suspiciously similar to a Healer's robe, stuck his head in the door, smiling with his small mouth.

"I made it," Ginny said warily, her wand tightening in her grip, hidden just out of sight behind her thigh.

Slowly, he entered the room completely, the door clicking closed behind him. His small eyes, hidden behind rather thick glasses that magnified them strangely, looked her up and down in a very clinical way before he bounced a bit on the toes of his feet. "Why don't you and I sit down for a bit and chat?"

Ginny rubbed her forehead impatiently, pressing the fingers there until it hurt. She had no intention of staying here a moment longer than necessary. It wasn't a prison, but to Ginny it wasn't far off. The adrenaline from the fight slowly bled off of her, making her fingertips tingle.

"Trammel said you had another envelope for me—another place to go."

The man grimaced slightly and adjusted his glasses, nervously eying her right hand and fumbling in front of him for the back of a chair.

"He... he wanted you to stay for a few days before you leave."

Ginny cursed quietly, making the man flinch. "I'm not staying here. I don't even know where 'here' is."

"It would be best if..." His words died out and he swiped his glasses off of his face muttering something under his breath.

Ginny relaxed just a fraction as she realized he too was cursing Trammel's name.

"Look, I know you don't want to be here. No one ever really does," the man said as he came around the side of the chair and sank into it, looking much less dignified than he had just a few moments before. "But this is a safe place for you. And as much as I don't want to deal with whatever it is you're mixed up in, I trust Trammel with my life. I have my instructions from him just as you do."

Ginny was shocked at the man's admission. Obviously he knew more than she'd expected.

"Who are you?" Ginny breathed as she too took a shaky seat.

"Someone who owed Trammel his life," the man responded with a wry shake of his head. "You can call me Healer Bettis. And, yes... I am really a Healer. This facility is a private hospital, not funded by the Ministry at all. We help when there are... issues that need to be kept private."

Ginny nodded, not fully caring. "How long do I need to stay?" she asked gruffly, eyeing the small, uncomfortable looking bed.

"I'd like to say a week," Bettis shrugged. "But I'm sure you'll blow my hospital apart before then."

Ginny smirked, wondering how many volatile ex-Aurors this man had seen in his day. From the stress lines around his mouth and across his forehead, she assumed a few had wandered through this place.

"I'll give you two days," she nodded.

Bettis' mouth tightened down into a straight line, almost making his lips disappear completely.

"Two days," he finally repeated, tilting his head to the side in a way that Ginny took as his acceptance.

"And I'm keeping my wand," Ginny put in as the thought occurred to her. "Don't lock that door," she nodded toward the door that she assumed led out toward a similarly unremarkable hallway. "Because if you do I'll simply blow a hole through the wall."

The threat didn't make him react nearly as much as Ginny was looking for, but he did nod his consent.

"I'll play Trammel's game for two days," Ginny reaffirmed. "And then I'll disappear on my own."

"Two days," Bettis agreed again, standing and sliding his hands up and down his thighs nervously as he studied her. "I... If you *ido*/i want someone to talk to..."

“Not bloody likely,” Ginny grunted out, glancing pointedly at the door.

Bettis nodded jerkily and turned on his heel. “Meals will be delivered three times a day.”

Ginny waved him off, the bed not looking as torturous as it had before. In fact, she was rather tired, and perhaps a good long rest would make things look better on the other side.

Once the door had closed and Ginny tested it to make sure Bettis hadn’t locked it, she sealed it from the inside and dropped her rucksack on the far side of the bed.

The springs in the ancient mattress protested violently when she sat down, squeaking loudly and poking her behind. But there was nothing for it; no where else to lie down, so Ginny took a chance.

She curled up, facing the sealed door, her wand still in her hand. The mattress certainly wasn’t the worst she’d dealt with—Auror camp still held that distinction—and it seemed to grow softer the longer she lay there staring at the door, not really seeing it.

The shaking and the tears started later—it might have only been minutes, or it might have been hours. It was like being cold all the way down to her bones, but being unable to do anything about it.

Dimly, Ginny registered that she might possibly be in shock, or perhaps she was just completely terrified.

Nothing in her life was predictable any more. She didn’t have a flat, or a job, or a family. Everything had been stolen from her, by the same people who had stolen everything from Harry.

Just as Harry’s face entered her mind, Ginny finally let the tears free.

The fear of what the next few months would bring, as well as the insurmountable task ahead of her, pressed down on her chest until even thinking of breathing hurt.

For years she’d carried this weight around with her—Harry’s death and now the possibility that he was actually alive—around her neck like a great stone, dragging her down to drown. And only finding Harry would remove it. That was the only thing in this world that she was sure of right now.

Harry was the key to everything.

\* \* \*

Ginny’s eyes were swollen and matted with sleep when she woke up the next morning. The sun filtered in the only window in her room, shining a rectangle of light onto the wall above her head and making it necessary to blink at the brightness.

Remembering where she was, Ginny fumbled her hand around her wand and glared at the door. But it was still sealed. And nothing had been disturbed from yesterday.

“You’ve got to get over this paranoia,” Ginny scolded herself, knowing that it wasn’t going to be happening very soon. That much was given. Paranoia was going to be her life, probably forever.

The thought was depressing and Ginny simply didn't want to deal with it any longer, so she pushed it away. Her stomach rumbled hungrily and she remembered Bettis mentioning the meals.

Hunger could wait, she decided, in favor of a trip to the loo and a nice, hot shower. That was a luxury that hadn't been afforded in far too long.

The needle-hot spray felt amazing on her shoulders, numbing the skin beneath it until she was cherry-red.

She wrapped a stiff, rather scratchy towel around her body and used her hand to wipe the steam from the mirror, causing water droplets to run down its surface.

Staring critically at herself, Ginny traced the edges of her thin face with her fingers. Not enough of Mum's meals, she scolded herself, only imagining what her mother truly thought of her appearance.

Her once-vibrant hair hung in strange, wet clumps around her head; the hairstyle that Emma Dobbs had cut into it long gone, in favor of being able to pull it back out of her face.

Ginny sighed, knowing she couldn't do much about that right now. Any spell she tried was likely to make things worse, so she simply twisted it up off of her neck and conjured a clip to hold it in place.

Perhaps when she wasn't running so much, she'd take the time to get her hair professionally done. And maybe one day she'd be interested enough in clothing and makeup and...

Yeah. Not likely.

"Time to get it together, girl," Ginny said, repeating the advice she had found herself on the receiving end of far too often. "You have far too much to do to be moping about, thinking about your hairstyle anyway. Would Harry really care? No, I think not."

The hilarity of talking to herself while actually hidden away in a hospital specifically meant for Mind Healing struck and Ginny chuckled the whole time she scrounged through her rucksack to find something decent to wear.

"Maybe you *do* belong in here, after all," she scolded herself.

Unsealing the door took her nearly five minutes; not because the charm was hard to do, but because it was taking a huge leap of faith to actually remove the warding. Once she was done, Ginny took a deep breath and peeked into the hallway. Just as Bettis had promised, there was a tray of food hovering outside the door.

Ginny pulled it into the room and set it on the thin table that sat against one wall of the room, eyeing it critically. It certainly looked better than any food she'd seen served at St. Mungos, but wasn't even half as appetizing as her mother's food. Then again, perhaps she was just being nostalgic as a trip to the Burrow was so far into the future as to be unthinkable right now.

Curling up into one of the uncomfortable chairs, her bare feet tucked underneath her, Ginny picked at the dry toast, pulling small bits off and eating them slowly. Nothing showed signs of being

contaminated with poisons, potions or charms. That, at least, was a good thing. Perhaps soon she'd be like Mad-Eye Moody and only eat and drink what she'd fixed herself.

The idea of the Burrow was a distant memory now, even though she'd been there just this week. The thought that she wouldn't be able to return there—possibly ever—made her chest tight and her empty stomach churn unpleasantly.

Once the toast had been sufficiently shredded, and half-eaten, Ginny made up her mind. She was going to have to write to her parents to try and explain the situation. Obviously, she couldn't write the truth, but a few well placed... half-truths could only help the situation. And she knew Ron and George would pass along news that they'd seen her.

*Dear Mum and Dad,*

The ink from Ginny's quill soaked into the parchment a bit as she decided what exactly to say. Long letters and goodbyes had never been her thing, really, but the words just didn't want to come.

What she really wanted—to appear at home and crawl into her mother's embrace, waiting for her father to fix everything for her—wasn't going to happen.

*I'm sure Ron and George have told you about my decision to leave for a bit. If not, I have no doubt the Prophet will take care of that detail.*

*I'm sorry I couldn't tell you myself, but I felt it was urgent to get help as soon as I could.*

Ginny cringed at the partial truth veiled in the words. But it was best this way.

*I hope to be able to come home as soon as possible, but I'm not sure when that will be. I... I need to work on getting my life straightened out, and healing.*

*I love you all. Please don't think I don't.*

*I'll write again as soon as I can.*

*Love,*

*Ginny*

Violently shoving the letter away moments after signing her name, Ginny stalked away from the table, muttering the whole way.

She *hated* feeling like this; like everything was out of control and the few things she'd always been able to count on in her life—Harry, her family, her identity—had been ripped away from her, leaving her completely bare and lost.

Her wand emitted pale, pathetic little sparks now and again as she twirled it in her grip; a habit she'd been less and less aware of lately. She turned and stared at the parchment that had drifted to the floor in her angry fit.

"Do I send it or not?" she asked no one. "And will they hate me more after getting it?"

As expected, no answer came.

Ginny sank down onto the thin mattress with a sigh, still staring at the small corner of parchment she could see. When her eyes burned, she allowed herself to blink, pressing her fingers into her eyes.

“What would Harry do?” she asked herself. “What would Harry want me to do?”

Time drifted away as the question swirled in her brain, pulling images from her memory and playing them over and over.

Strangely, it wasn't Harry's voice that answered her this time, but Jasper Doell's—a memory.

*“... I know he'd be disappointed in what you're becoming, Ginny. You're stronger than you've let yourself be... find something you love and do it, because you're wasting away doing what you're doing.”*

The words seemed just as appropriate now as they did back then. Because, really, she was wasting away not having the truth about Harry. Life had stopped in the moment when Bill stood in the corridor at Hogwarts and said the words. And it hadn't really ever started again for Ginny.

Yes, she'd gone on, trudging through an existence—a day to day struggle—without Harry.

“No more,” Ginny vowed. Life wouldn't really begin until she was either with Harry again, or at least knew what had happened to him. If he was...

The idea that Harry could possibly have been snatched away from her again, without her even realizing it, hurt deeply.

And, logically, Ginny knew that if he was really gone, she was going to have to find a way to survive. *iSurvive,/i not live.*

Thankfully, all of her tears seemed to be spent last night. However, the time it took for her thoughts to become less volatile had made the way forward much clearer.

The letter needed to be sent.

And Ginny needed to get the hell out of England and on to somewhere where she would be able to search for Harry without worrying that every shadow, every movement, was a threat.

\* \* \*

“Are you sure—”

“I'm positive,” Ginny over rode Bettis' disapproving look and held her hand out for the sealed envelope his reluctant hands still held.

The Healer's lips disappeared again as he locked his jaw. Ginny hated to tell him, but there was no changing her mind, no matter how unbalanced she seemed—or possibly, really was—this was not the place for her.

And they both knew that. But Bettis had no doubt taken some oath somewhere about doing his best to help people heal.

What he didn't understand—and had no way of knowing—was that Ginny's only chance to heal herself was out there, somewhere.

Only the truth about Harry, and the possibility that he could be back in her arms one day soon, could really heal the hole in her heart and soul.

"You know you're welcome to come back here anytime."

Ginny nodded and watched as Bettis stretched out his hand, the envelope shaking just a bit, to hand to her.

Even though it only weighed a few ounces, the envelope burdened her terribly. Enclosed were the coordinates for the next place she would be safe. Hopefully.

"Tell Trammel..." Ginny said, the words dying in her throat when she tried to decide what, exactly, to tell him.

But Bettis smiled then—the first time she'd actually seen him show real emotion over the past two days—and nodded. "He'll know, even without you telling him."

Ginny nodded, hoping that she could one day repay the man who had saved her life countless times. What he'd sacrificed for her...

No one since Harry had saved her that way.

And there was simply nothing she could say that would ever come close to conveying her feelings about the subject.

"You... you take care of yourself," Bettis said. His lips disappeared again and Ginny was reminded of Percy and the way he kept a tight reign on his emotions.

"I will," Ginny promised before sliding her finger inside the edge of the envelope and tearing it open.

Inside, scrawled in Trammel's horrible writing were the coordinates.

"It'll be a wonder if I don't end up in the ocean," Ginny muttered to herself, although Bettis heard, because he smirked slightly.

"The handwriting of a serial killer," he agreed softly.

Ginny took a deep breath and clutched the shoulder straps of her rucksack before closing her eyes and concentrating.

# Chapter 11: I Feel You

"Drop your wand and kick it to the side."

Ginny's heart clenched in her throat and she momentarily debated her choices before doing just what the man behind her asked.

"Don't think I'm going to forget that, Doell," she replied, glaring over her shoulder into the darkness.

"Why did you become an Auror?" he demanded.

The voice brought her back years, to a classroom where only she and Doell stood, talking about Ginny taking the Auror Entrance Exams.

"Because I wanted to be able to kick your arse," she muttered. A mild stinging hex to her back made her wince. "Because I wanted to make a difference," she said with a sigh.

"And did you?"

Ginny dropped her hand slowly and chanced turning around. "I don't know," she admitted. "I wanted to."

"Trammel said you did."

Doell stepped from the shadows and Ginny studied his face. He had aged too much since she had seen him. The creases on his face betrayed how hard his life had been.

"You look like hell," Ginny said honestly.

Doell's face smirked and he chuckled. "You always were brutally honest."

Ginny shrugged a shoulder and bent to retrieve her wand. "Why lie about it?"

"You're not exactly looking like a beauty queen."

Ginny ignored the comment and looked around the rather dull room. "You'd think you'd live a little, Doell. Buy some plush furniture. Put a few paintings on the walls."

"Why?" Doell asked, glancing around as if he couldn't see that the magnolia walls and beige furniture were lacking at all.

"Never mind," Ginny said, sinking into one of the chairs.

"How long since you slept?" he looked at her critically as he sat down across the table from her.

Ginny thought about it, laying her head back against the cushion. "Years?"

Doell nodded, as if he understood completely. Maybe he did.

"What are your plans?"

"I don't have any, really," she admitted. Now that she was... "Where the hell are we, anyway?" She glanced around, as if the dull room would offer any clue.

"France," Doell grunted. "Just outside of Paris."

"France," Ginny repeated. Once upon a time, she had dreamed of coming to France, seeing the sights and walking the streets, Harry's hand in hers as they pretended they understood anything being said around them. But the allure of a foreign city had faded along with Harry's memories.

"You'd better decide."

"I will," she assured him. "I just need a few days to get it all straight." They were quiet for a few minutes, faint sounds from the world outside that room reaching them. "You're sure I'm safe here?"

"As safe as I can make you," Doell shrugged. "I'm kind of an expert in disappearing."

"I remember," Ginny said. The thought of the Ministry following her here, hunting her until the day she died, or finally allowed them to catch up to her, made her stomach turn.

She needed to get to Harry before that happened.

"I'll give you two days," Doell said. "And then you're moving again."

"Great," Ginny answered dully. "Wait a minute... this is where I'm staying, isn't it?"

Doell's face stretched into a wide smile. "Finally caught on, have you?"

"Damn," Ginny said giving the room a more thorough examination.

"You don't honestly think I'd live somewhere so dull, do you?"

\* \* \*

The magnolia walls took less than three hours to cover with what notes Ginny could make about what she remembered in the Ministry file, along with the two notes she'd managed to, miraculously, hang onto.

There wasn't enough—rather a pathetic amount, truthfully—but at least Ginny had *somewhere* to start.

Lucas was a project originally devised in another country—Ginny couldn't remember if the file had specified a place or not—but the British Unspeakables were involved rather heavily in the fundamental research, if not the practical side of things.

Two Unspeakables, Veronica Marsden and Rhys Hughes, in particular, had been instrumental in discovering that first removing the memories of the subject seemed to help with the retention of the layered memory charms. Otherwise the sheer number of charms needed for complete memory loss had a tendency to addle the brain, severely affecting basic human functions.

Once Ginny made note of that, and tacked it to one wall, she used another piece of paper and scratched out a note on it.

*What happened to the extracted memories?*

That was a question that the file hadn't addressed at all—or if it did, Ginny simply hadn't understood all the departmental codes and phrases.

Doell appeared on the second day, and even though Ginny was glad to see another human, she also knew that it was time for him to do his 'magic' and make her disappear once more, as he had promised.

"Where do you start?" he asked peering at the walls and narrowing his eyes at her scribbled notes.

"Here," Ginny said, pointing at a paper that had the few names that she knew written on it. "The most important thing is to find Harry. I want to make them pay for what they did to him... to all of us, really. But I can't go after the Minister yet," she sighed. "I know he's involved."

"Probably more than you know," Doell nodded.

"You know something?" Ginny asked, studying him closely. He looked better today than he had the first day she'd seen him. At least he had slept and was clean shaven.

"Not anything specific," Doell shrugged. "But Trammel was never a fan."

"Guilt by suspicion," Ginny nodded, a small smirk on her face. "I agree completely, by the way. And Trammel's suspicions usually turned out right."

"He was trained by Alastor Moody himself, you know," Doell said, removing the sheet with the names from the wall and staring at it. He tugged one paper from its place and narrowed his eyes at it.

"That explains so much," Ginny said, shaking her head. Somehow, Ginny thought she might have known that, or suspected it at least. Trammel wasn't as old as his looks hinted at. Ginny suspected that he used that to his advantage, tricking people into thinking he was feeble and not able to keep up.

"This is nearly an impossible task," Doell said, raising his eyebrows to meet her eyes over the top of the sheet of paper.

Ginny was quiet for a minute, the weight of the task in front of her settling on her shoulders. "So was becoming an Auror," she finally defended.

Her point must have been made, since Doell dropped his eyes and went back to looking over the names.

"I always figured Williamson was dirty," he mused. "And if he was, then Stinson was right there. Thick as thieves those two were."

Ginny nodded, shivering when she remembered the icy stares of Williamson, and the way his eyes

would follow her through the Auror office.

"They've got their own agendas for the Aurors," she explained. "The only ones who manage to make it through are purebloods, or at least extremely sympathetic to that view."

Doell grunted and nodded slowly. "You can bet they have a hand in the potions trade over there as well."

"Can you—"

"I don't have any *proof*," Doell continued over her question. "Just suspicions more than anything, really. But you hear things."

Ginny nodded, remembering how she and Trammel had kept their ears open while investigating. Most good leads came from unknowing sources, opening their mouths to the wrong people, or bragging about things when the wrong set of ears was listening in.

"They've only been accepting recruits that will be swayed, or already agree with their agenda," Ginny said. "It's seriously hampering investigations and skewing the whole way things are done over there."

"That's what Potter and Shackbolt stumbled on?" Doell asked. His eyebrows rose as he contemplated that.

Ginny sighed and scratched at her head, tugging at the elastic that held her hair away from her face until it fell down and she could run her fingers through the tangled mess it had become. "I'm not sure how, because Kingsley doesn't remember much of anything, and Harry didn't confide in anyone about it." She was quiet for a minute watching him as he processed that.

"My guess is that they suspected Williamson and then took their concerns to Winters, not knowing that he was just as involved," Doell said. He set the paper on the desk and rubbed at his eyes.

Ginny took a moment to compare this man to the one who had taught at Hogwarts. That Jasper Doell had looked quite young and had been enthusiastic about life and his career. This Doell looked decades older; grey starting to show at his temples, and deep creases showed next to his eyes. He looked about like she felt.

"They underestimated him," Ginny said softly, tearing her eyes away from Doell and thinking of the Minister.

"Not really," Doell defended. "Potter and Kingsley suffered from a need to see the best in people. They trusted that Winters was worthy of the position that he held."

Ginny shivered, thinking of Winters' stare and how it seemed to penetrate right through her, seeing things that she didn't want to betray to anyone.

"You see, Winters was everything they thought he should be," Doell explained. "He was on the Wizengamot, and fought against Fudge at every turn. He grudgingly supported Scrimgeour, and then fought behind the scenes when the Ministry was taken over by Death Eaters."

Ginny remembered hearing hardly anything about the man until he'd been appointed to replace Kingsley after only a few weeks in office. Kingsley had been relieved and had even endorsed the new Minister publicly.

"It wasn't until he took office that things started to change," Doell said. "And everything seemed to be running right. Winters made sweeping changes, but there was always something going on under the current. I was out of the country for part of the time, assigned somewhere else—but that only means that I heard more of the rumors, the underground stories."

Ginny nodded, pressing her fingers to her temples, wishing, not for the first time, that there was a way to back in history to undo all the damage that had been done. But where would she start? There were so many beginnings and ends to this mess it was overwhelming.

"He fooled us all, really," Doell said quietly, scowling down at the floor.

A thought that had been held at the back of Ginny's mind—somewhat like an old item in a cluttered room, that you never fully appreciate for what it is until a beam of light allows you to see it completely—drifted forward, making her swear loudly.

"Bastard," she hissed, sinking to the edge of the unmade bed, where she had managed just a few hours of sleep both nights she'd been in this drab room. "No wonder he always knew everything."

"What?" Doell looked extremely on edge as he slid to the front of his seat and fingered his wand.

Ginny ignored him for a minute as she reviewed each time she had encountered the Minister.

"Do you know what Legilimency is?" she finally asked, staring down at her hands.

Doell opened his mouth and then closed it with a snap before standing and moving toward the window, looking out through the dirty glass. "That explains quite a bit then." She had to admit his mind was quick.

"I always felt... strange around him," Ginny admitted. "My mind was always wandering. And the headaches..."

"Sounds like he's not as accomplished at it as he thinks he is," Doell grunted from across the room. "Someone with decent enough skill could probe you and you'd never feel it."

"Good enough," Ginny huffed, the idea sending chills down her back. It was just such a violation to have him looking into her head the way he had. Now that she had made the connection, the sick feelings she'd gotten after running into the Minister at Harry's funeral mirrored the way Harry always felt when he came back from his Occlumency lessons with Snape; pale and shaking, with a pounding headache.

They were both quiet for a few minutes, lost in their own thoughts.

"They've already started covering up," Doell said quietly, looking back over his shoulder at her. "Veronica Marsden was killed two weeks ago here in Paris."

Ginny's stomach lurched unpleasantly.

"It was officially ruled an accident by the Ministry here," he continued. "We weren't allowed to do more than just look through the case file afterwards. Supposedly she was here on holiday and was in some sort of accident."

"An Unspeakable killed in France," Ginny said slowly, mulling over the idea. "And the Ministry didn't step into the investigation?" To her that seemed to tell more of a story than not.

Doell nodded, probably reading by the look on her face that she was following the idea. "I was told *specifically* to stay out of it." He sighed and wandered back over to the wall, staring at all the papers as he clasped his hands behind him and rocked on his heels.

Ginny took his place at the window, staring at the generic street. She heard rustling behind her and turned to see that Doell was beginning to gather the paperwork into meticulous little piles.

"Why did you end up teaching at Hogwarts?" Ginny asked. She'd pondered the question several times, but never had the courage when she was younger to ask.

Doell stared at the pile of papers in his hand, the muscles in his jaw working; grinding back and forth. "The truth?"

"Preferably," she shrugged one shoulder.

"Officially, I was there to watch over Hogwarts, be a Ministry presence to ease concern." This made sense, Ginny decided. The year with Snape as Headmaster and the Carrows raining hell down on them would definitely make parents concerned for sending their children back.

"Unofficially?"

Doell's jaw worked harder. "I was being punished."

The urge to snort at his petulant tone—so much like a three year old caught out of bounds—was great, but Ginny held back. "Er... punished?"

Doell rolled his eyes. "You don't think being locked in a school with hundreds of moody, pubescent teenagers is punishment?" He smirked when she laughed. "Wish I knew which offense I was being punished for, so I knew not to do it again."

"You were a good teacher," Ginny protested softly. He looked at her a long minute before continuing to gather things up. Ginny watched his methodical movements, her mind wandering back over the past.

"Do you know how many times I've woken up in the morning and wondered how I lived through another night?" Ginny asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "This isn't a game with these people. They're taking everything. And if they're involved in this death... they're *ikilling*/i people, Doell. Why not me too?"

He paused in his movements, possibly trying to come up with an answer—something that Ginny had

been doing for weeks.

*Why?*

"I think at first you were considered an asset," he speculated, his hands now moving again. "You're from a pureblood family—"

"Of blood traitors," Ginny scoffed, although there was no humor in it.

"Regardless," Doell said, adding the final papers to his pile and gathering it all up in his arms. "You were a high profile candidate. I know there was a bit of debate about accepting you as an Auror in the first place."

Ginny was surprised by the admission, but then again, it made sense.

"Harry and I didn't even try to keep our relationship a secret," she mused, remembering the times their pictures had graced the front pages, holding hands, or even stealing a kiss or two.

"In the end," Doell continued, "they decided the publicity you brought for the Ministry outweighed any risk your... tenacity might pose."

"You never said anything," Ginny said softly. She was mildly irritated that the hesitation on the part of the Ministry was just now being brought to light, but it was in the past, so she pushed it away.

Doell shrugged and handed her the stack of paperwork, bound with twine. "I knew it wouldn't matter, really. You were so bent on proving everything to the world."

"Instead," Ginny said, a scathing tone to her voice, "I've simply proven that they can continue to take from me time and time again, and that I do nothing about it. They steal my life, oblivate my friends, ruin my career—"

"The Bell girl made her own choices," Doell shook his head. "You can't take the blame for her."

Ginny wanted to argue that she felt entirely responsible, but she also knew it was an argument that she couldn't win. She'd said the same words to Harry in the past, and she recognized the signs of stubbornness enough in herself.

"She was in deeper than you'll ever know, I believe," Doell said quietly.

Ginny nodded, blinking back a small bit of moisture that had come to her eyes. Now was not the time to break down; she'd certainly done enough of that lately.

"Why Harry? Why did they do this to him? Why not just..." The words stuck in her throat and Ginny trailed off, not able to finish the thought. Even now, years later, the thought of Harry dying still made her chest feel constricted and tight.

"Opportunity," Doell shrugged. "Or perhaps greed. A hundred other reasons. Just from reading some of these, and talking to Trammel, my guess would be they were looking for someone to supply to this... Lucas... Potter fit the bill perfectly."

"How so?" Ginny asked, stowing the paperwork in her rucksack and gathering up the few items that she'd taken out over the past days.

Doell scratched his jaw in thought and then shrugged. "If you think about it, they'd want someone who had some fairly strong memories to overcome."

"Why Harry?" Ginny repeated, feeling a hysterical bubble of disbelief and anger swell in her. "Don't they have any respect for what he's done, all he's sacrificed and given over the years? Merlin, he *died* for all of us."

Doell nodded. "Frankly, I think they were scared of him. Potter represented change to most people. He was willing to fight for it, and scores of people were willing to follow him. He was a born leader, who was not only up to the task, and willing, but also worthy of it all. And that frightened them. Change is a constant, but not everyone appreciates that."

Ginny stared at him for a minute, knowing he was right, but hating the fact as well. It was... disgusting and vile. But it was the truth, most likely.

"They need to be stopped," Ginny said, steeling herself.

Doell studied her for a minute before nodding. "We'll work on that, yeah?"

"But first we need to find Harry."

He nodded. "First *you* need to find Harry."

The changing of the phrase was not lost on her and Ginny rolled her eyes. "Where are you taking me?"

"A little flat in Paris," he shrugged, holding out a slip of paper with the coordinates written on it. "This would be so much easier if you'd just allow me to take you—"

"This works better," Ginny huffed, knowing she was being completely unreasonable, but happy with it all the same.

"Fine," he sighed. "The flat belongs to a friend of mine. She's away on business for a few months."

Ginny eyed him carefully, but Doell didn't let his expression slip at all. "Is she aware that you're filling her flat with guests?"

"Have you ever heard the term 'need to know'?"

Ginny rolled her eyes at his smirk and studied the coordinates one more time. "And how long am I here?"

"A few weeks at most," he shrugged. "I'll keep you moving around. And you'll refrain from writing letters to anyone, or talking to anyone unnecessarily. And then Trammel will be happy because he won't have to censor the mail. And I'll be happy because I don't have to stun you and shove you under the bed. We'll all be happy."

"Except for me," Ginny grumbled.

Doell smirked. "Yeah, well, you don't count."

"That sounds about right," Ginny sighed, hoisting her rucksack over her shoulder and nodding to him. "You go first."

"I knew you were going to say that," he grumbled before Apparating out.

\* \* \*

It was hard not to be frustrated when every lead Ginny had remembered from the original file, and had diligently tracked down, had ended in even less information than when she had started.

Veronica Marsden's death did seem, at first glance, to be nothing more than a tragic accident of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, the knowledge that she had been involved in Lucas simply drew a straight line directly to her death in Ginny's mind. Perhaps it could be completely attributed to accident—but Ginny didn't think that many coincidences were possible, really.

Rhys Hughes seemed to have vanished off the face of the planet. That made Ginny worry more than if she'd been able to find him. Either they'd taken him out too, or he'd known enough to simply make himself disappear.

When she asked Doell about the possibility, he shrugged. "It's a very real possibility that he disappeared himself. It's not impossible, and as an Unspeakable he'd have more access to spells and things to help himself."

"Then you think..."

"It's highly unlikely that they've killed everyone involved, Ginny," Doell sighed, pushing aside his half-eaten breakfast and swirling the remains of his coffee in the cup. "Eventually it would catch up to them. And Marsden's death may just be what it appears—an accident."

Ginny wanted to believe him; wanted to believe that a government wouldn't be systematically annihilating everyone who posed a threat to them. But she'd seen it work that way just a few short years ago when Voldemort had taken over the Ministry.

"Let's talk about expanding your search," Doell said, pulling a piece of parchment they'd scribbled on back and forth toward himself. "So far, you've focused on the few names that you knew. It's time to go beyond that. Where should you look next?"

Ginny sighed, a little irritated that Doell seemed to think she needed a teacher in her life again. "You're not my professor, by the way." She went on before he could comment, "I'd like to get a look at the Marsden file, see where she came from, why she was here, and who the next of kin are."

Doell's face shifted from annoyance to appreciation. "Nice try, but you won't be seeing the official file. Don't forget you're not an Auror anymore. And your name is plastered all over the British

papers wanted for questioning.”

Ginny huffed and glared away from him. “There are other ways to see a file,” she said, thinking of the many ways Fred and George had gotten information when they wanted it. “You can do just about anything if you’ve got enough nerve.”

Doell chuckled and glanced around the deserted café. They were using a privacy charm, but it was always good to check. “And you think you do?”

“I’ve got enough,” Ginny assured him.

“Tomorrow then,” he nodded. “The French Auror’s offices—”

“I know where they are,” Ginny interrupted, a thrill of fear shooting through her. They were actually going to break into the French Ministry. She blew out a breath and silently cursed the lengths she was going to have to go. Harry was worth it.

\* \* \*

The river under the bridge seemed to be barely moving, although Ginny knew that was a trick that her eyes were playing on her. No doubt the current was fairly swift just under the surface. When she leaned over far enough, however, she could make out her reflection in the water, rippling and dancing on the surface.

At least, she assumed it was what she looked like now. The blonde hair made her peer at the reflection and decide that she wasn’t really cut out to be a blonde. Her cheekbones were higher than normal and her face longer and thinner.

Where Doell had gotten the Polyjuice from Ginny wasn’t sure she even wanted to know. Several times when they’d met, he’d been saying goodbye to some glamorous woman or other. It had been jarring the first few times, but Ginny had begun to discount it completely. It was either the way Jasper Doell was, or the way he pretended to be; sort of a James Bond character, she supposed.

“Paris is for lovers,” a man with a heavy accent and a rather sharp, pointed face said as he held a red rose underneath her nose.

Ginny smiled benignly at him and accepted the flower.

“You are too beautiful to be here alone.”

“Thank you,” Ginny said, feeling her face heat.

“You are alone?”

Ginny lifted her blue eyes to study the man, looking for anything she might recognize beneath the disguise.

“I’m meeting someone,” Ginny dismissed, taking a gentle smell of the flower. Her fingers wrapped tighter around her wand.

"Or perhaps you like lilies instead," he said, reaching for the flower.

Ginny let her hand drop to her side, knowing it was Doell now. Lilies was the code he'd set up.

"Which is, in my opinion, completely insane." The French accent slipped some, to be far less noticeable and Doell glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

"It depends on who is giving them, I guess," she said, twisting the stem of the flower until it broke off, and then tucking the rosebud into the buttonhole on his lapel. "A lily can mean so much more than a rose if the right person hands it to me."

"Ah, yes," Doell said, offering his arm, "but ze red rose is ze flower of love."

Ginny rolled her eyes at him. "Where in the hell do you get those lines?"

"I have a book," he admitted. She chuckled, but the idea wasn't completely dismissible. "You have the... er..."

"I have it," Ginny said, patting the baggy pocket on her designer coat. Harry's Invisibility Cloak was tucked inside perfectly. She hadn't used it often, and not ever while she was an Auror—no matter how handy it would have come in. But now that she was playing a completely different game, she knew that Harry would approve. In fact, he'd probably be disappointed in her if she didn't use it.

But having something that Harry had believed was so valuable this close to her gave her just that added connection to him that she really needed right now.

'I'm about to break the law... er, even more than in the past,' she told him in her mind. It had been awhile since she'd actually 'talked' to Harry in her head. It felt like talking to an old friend; a crazy, but very, very welcome old friend.

Harry's voice didn't answer her back, as she wished it would, so Ginny focused on the small side streets she and Doell were walking down. There were plenty of dark, hidden corners that she could easily melt into if needed. Strange how she now measured things that way; the quickest escape route, obstacles that might get in her way, and places to hide.

"You're nervous," Doell observed quietly as he patted her hand with his thin, long one, playing the part of a pandering boyfriend.

"You should be more nervous," she answered back.

"Me?" he chuckled. "You don't want to know how many times I've broken into this office."

Ginny glanced at him to see a smug smile split the unfamiliar face. "No, I don't."

"The French are notorious for being lax in their security," he explained. "I once walked in disguised as the French Prime Minister and no one even questioned what the hell he was doing there."

Ginny couldn't help but snort and laugh at that. "And you managed to get away with it?"

Doell smiled and chuckled. "Even signed a few autographs."

She shook her head. "Thank heavens you decided to go a little less... conspicuous this time."

"Had to," he shrugged. "I've never brought another with me on a mission like this." They stopped in front of the impressive building that seemed to rise straight out of the ground, pushing aside two massive structures in its wake.

"Well, I am trained for this, you know," Ginny said.

Doell eyed her for a minute. "Since when does the Ministry train their Aurors breaking and entering?"

Ginny smirked at him and shook her head. "The Ministry had nothing to do with it. I went to the school of Gred and Forge." She glanced down and Doell's eyes followed hers to where she'd pulled a set of lock picks out of her pocket, just barely though.

"I probably don't want to know the places you've seen then," he shook his head, motioning her toward a darker space between two buildings. Ginny used the shadow to pull out the cloak and duck under it, before following Doell into the Ministry.

\* \* \*

"Nothing," Ginny said, shaking her head at the file that Doell had handed her. Either the French hadn't bothered to be thorough at all, or someone had gone through and sanitized the entire file.

"Don't forget to use a fingerprint charm on that," Doell said, his eyes darting toward the closed door nervously.

"I'm not an amateur," she hissed, feeling more and more frustrated.

The trip into the French Ministry had been a colossal waste of time. Anything they'd found Doell had been able to tell her already.

"We need to move soon," Doell cautioned. "Someone's going to notice that closed door."

Ginny fought the urge to swear at him—reminding herself what he was really risking to help her in a cause that she didn't even know if he believed in or not. "Almost done," she said, placing the paperwork back in order and removing her fingerprints from the file, as well as obscuring her magical signature. The charm wasn't always successful, but it did cause enough of a distraction that if the person wasn't actively detecting it, they would have no reason to suspect anyone had been messing with the files.

"Come on," Doell urged, moving toward the door.

On a whim, Ginny ran her finger down the line of files, back from the letter 'M' toward the letter 'L'. "I need to check one more."

"We're going to get caught," Doell whispered. "I don't particularly want to spend the rest of my days rotting away in a French prison. You have no idea what they'd do if they caught me."

"Calm down," Ginny said. Her eyes skimmed the files and she almost pulled her wand to summon

what she was after, but her fingers found it first. "Lucas," she whispered, pulling the suspiciously thin file. Perhaps it wouldn't be anything after all, but she had to know if the French been involved as well.

"What?" Ginny said as she stared at the photo of a man and single paper detailing medical records. Her eyes skimmed the paper, searching out words that might trigger something. But there was no mention of the word 'Lucas' anywhere. The man's name was Robert Fournier and his file indicated that he had suffered from fairly severe medical problems.

Sighing, Ginny closed the file and stuffed it back where it belonged, casting the charms to hide their presence.

"What was it?" Doell hissed, coming closer to her and nudging her toward the doorway. "I hope it was worth us both getting killed."

"It was nothing," Ginny dismissed, telling herself that it really was nothing; just paperwork that had been misfiled.

"We need to go," Doell said, his jaw locking and his eyes growing dark. Seeing how intense he was, Ginny moved into a more defensive position under the cloak.

"You go ahead of me then," she urged him with a sharp poke to his back. "And I'll cover both of our arses."

Doell hesitated for a minute and Ginny prayed she wasn't going to have to argue with him about her ability to take care of both of them, but he nodded sharply once and moved ahead of her. With a slight roll of his shoulders, Doell opened the door to the file room and walked out. Ginny held her fingers against the plane of his back, assuring him that she was still there, invisibly following behind him, her wand sweeping the area all around them.

"Monsieur!"

Doell didn't turn as a woman down the hallway called for him. His pace continued to remain casual, even though Ginny could tell by the set of his shoulders that he was ready to defend them both if needed.

"Monsieur, arrêtez-vous s'il vous plaît! Vous n'êtes pas censés être ici."

Ginny swore silently and trained her wand on the woman as she caught up with them.

"Pardonnez-moi. Je semble être devenu perdu. Pouvez-vous me dire où la salle de bains est?"

Ginny didn't remember a whole lot of French, really just a few phrases now and again that she'd heard Fleur speak around the house. But she thought Doell had said something about being lost, and perhaps asking for the bathroom.

The expression of the woman changed so quickly, from harsh and unforgiving, to almost smitten with him that Ginny lowered her wand a fraction of an inch.

He'd... Wow. That was some impressive spell work.

"Il est autour du coin, vers la gauche." She pointed away from them toward the hallway that turned to the left, and then giggled softly, reaching up to straighten her perfectly coiffed hair in a flirtatious gesture.

Doell grinned at her and bent at the waist, reaching to take her hand in his before placing a kiss on the back of it. "Merci, madame," he whispered, making Ginny gag a little.

They backed down the hallway, Doell giving a few winks to the woman before they turned the corner.

"In," he commanded, motioning to the men's bathroom. "That spell only lasts a moment. She's going to raise the alarm."

"Damn," Ginny hissed, whipping the Cloak off of herself as Doell sealed the door. The ends of her hair were back to red and Ginny cursed their timing. Too much time spent searching for dead-end leads. Briefly she wondered why Doell's own Polyjuice hadn't faded away like hers had, but then someone pounded on the door.

"Parti maintenant!"

"How are we getting out of here?" she demanded, staring at Doell as he paced back and forth in the confined space.

"How much power do you think you have?" he asked, seemingly out of the blue. His eyes, even in disguise, were intense. "If I remember right, it's a lot."

Ginny shook her head, trying to keep up with his thought process. The pounding had increased and the door gave just a bit. Ginny spun around, holding her wand aloft.

"Think you can make it?" Doell asked.

Ginny swallowed thickly, her mind finally catching what he meant. Apparating out through Ministry wards. It was bound to be virtually impossible.

"I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"Not really," he said, shaking his head and closing his eyes as he took a breath. "Your place."

Ginny nodded and followed his lead, trying to block the sound of shattering wood out of her head as she pushed all of her magic and might into taking her out of the Ministry.

"Help me, Harry," she whispered. A deafening crack sounded all around her and everything went black.

\* \* \*

It was dark when she woke, and her head throbbed. Ginny kept her eyes closed most of the way, only stealing peaks here and there through her lashes.

Had they both managed to make it out? Or had only Doell managed to break through the wards, leaving her behind, a captive of the French Ministry?

"You're safe."

That was Doell's voice.

Ginny allowed her eyes to flutter open, taking in the small flat that she'd been living in for three weeks.

"We made it?" she asked, her throat feeling dry and scratchy.

Doell was seated on the bed next to her and he nodded as he held a small glass of water out to her. "Barely," he said, rubbing his hand over his face—which Ginny noticed was back to his normal appearance, although looking... different still. "But we need to go. Now. They may have been able to get a trace on me before you pulled us out."

Ginny let his words sink in and sat up, ignoring the way her head swam. It wasn't until she'd touched her feet against the floorboards and the room stopped spinning that she finally caught part of his meaning.

"What do you mean... I pulled you out?"

Doell didn't look at her, just stared ahead. "I don't know, really, what the hell happened. But I wasn't getting anywhere through those wards. The Aurors had broken through the door. But then... I looked over and you... you were just... glowing, Ginny."

"Bullshit," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I always knew you were powerful," he said, looking directly at her now. She'd seen a similar look on his face when she'd handed him her acceptance letter to the Auror Academy—although it had been somewhat different. Was it... awe and respect? "But you... Damn, Ginny. I've never seen anything like it."

Ginny thought about the way she had felt in that moment, the panic building just below the surface along with her determination, swelling and humming under her skin. Harry's face flashed before her eyes and Ginny sucked in a breath.

"I have," she mumbled, thinking of Harry's face as he defied Voldemort in the middle of the Great Hall. His power and determination had left his skin almost glowing, radiating light and goodness from every part of him.

Ginny stood on shaky legs and moved to stand near the window, wrapping her arms around her. For the first time in a long time, she could feel Harry's arms circle around her, pouring comfort and strength into her. "I have," she repeated again, letting it all wash over her.

How long she stood there, Ginny didn't know. But Doell finally came up behind her, holding out her rucksack.

"I've tossed everything in here." He handed the bag to her and Ginny reluctantly accepted it, feeling Harry's presence fading to the back of her mind once more, although she could still feel him. "I think it's best if we split up for a while. The place I have set up for you can serve for a couple of weeks before you need to disappear again."

Ginny nodded, not sure what to say.

"Trammel sent a letter this morning," Doell said. He wouldn't quite meet her eyes and Ginny shivered, wondering what he was thinking right now. It was unnerving, having him act so strangely around her. "I've already read it. I put it in your bag."

Ginny nodded once more and slung the bag over her shoulder. "Thank you, Jasper," she said softly.

"I should be thanking you," he chuckled dryly, letting the sound die in the silent room that now seemed eerie in its emptiness. "You saved me back there."

Ginny wanted to deny that it was her, but she just nodded instead. Perhaps it was best if she simply went on her way. Alone was better anyway.

"Ginny... I..." Doell stammered, something she'd never heard him do. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Thank you," she said. Even though she knew it was for the best—for both of them—that she continue alone, the idea made her knees shake. Alone seemed like such a vast expanse when you were staring at it from the beginning.

"Remember, a few weeks and then—"

"And then I'll move on," she nodded.

Doell nodded, his eyes searching her face again. "Can you... I can take you if I need to. You used up a lot of energy."

Strangely, she didn't feel nearly as drained as she had when she first woke up. Ginny took a deep breath and shook her head. "I'm going to be alright."

"Why do I believe that?" he asked a small smile gracing his lips. "You're going to do well, Ginny. I... I'm going to go and try to lay a track in the opposite direction, yeah?"

Ginny wasn't sure if he was lying simply to make it easier for him to leave her on her own, or if he was really as terrified of her as he seemed. "Yeah," she agreed, knowing she was going to have to leave first, because he was feeling entirely too guilty.

"Goodbye, Jasper," she said, staring at him as she prepared to Apparate out.

\* \* \*

The urge to rip into the letter that Doell had resealed was great. Then again, Ginny wasn't sure what she'd do if it contained something horrid.

“Just get it over with,” she scolded herself, wrapping her arms around herself once more in a now-familiar gesture. Since she’d arrived at the small, deserted, country cottage, it was the only thing that had given her any kind of comfort-looking forward to reading that letter.

But the cottage was now warded better than the French Ministry had been. In fact, Ginny wasn’t even sure she could get *iout/i* if she needed to, it was warded so heavily.

Taking one more deep breath and sinking into the generic wooden chair at the generic wooden table, Ginny ran her fingers over the edge of the envelope.

Imagining the way Ron would take the mickey out of her for the way she was acting spurred her on and Ginny slid her finger into the edge, ripping the envelope open at a crazy angle.

Weasley,

I thought it was time that I contacted you. I hope you’re behaving yourself in that hospital and not burning the place down. Although, I wouldn’t put it past you.

I visited your brothers the other day, just to make sure that shop of theirs is running honestly, you know.

Ginny shook her head, both amused and annoyed. It was obvious from Trammel’s use of her name and nonsense that he’d written about being in a hospital that he was sure the Ministry—or someone else—might have access to the mail.

The mention of her brothers made her scratch her head however. It seemed completely out of place for him to say something like that.

They showed me some of the most... unusual charms. Anyway, I want you to take care of yourself while you’re in there. No getting out of line. And you must promise, solemnly swear even, that you’re not up to anything bad. Trammel.

It was almost as if a light had gone on in her head and Ginny threw back her head, laughing up to the ceiling. Both Trammel’s brilliance and George and Ron’s deviousness was... well it was just about the best thing that had happened to her in a long time.

“I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” she whispered, unable to make her voice rise above a whisper.

The words on the parchment shifted around chaotically until George’s handwriting appeared, melting from the surface.

Took you long enough. I’m going to write for all of us, first because I have the best handwriting, and because I’m the one who knows the charm. Well, besides Hermione, but she’s not here right now.

Ginny’s fingers traced each letter as her eyes feasted on the words. Tears flowed down her cheeks freely, dripping onto her shirt and soaking in. Each letter, forming words and then sentences, was like a shot of courage and love straight into her.

I hope you're doing the Weasley name proud and raising as much hell as you possibly can. Otherwise we might be forced to track you down (stop frowning at me) and kick your arse. Ron says he doesn't think that's possible. But I think with both of us we might be able to just manage it.

Ginny laughed again, using the edge of her sleeve to wipe the moisture from her eyes.

And if we brought Percy with us, he could bore you to death until you were a puddle of goo on the floor, then we could lecture you until you regained consciousness.

Honestly, Gin, I hope you're taking care of yourself. You've gone and turned the whole family upside down with all of this. Good on you. We could all use a little shake up now and again.

Dad and Percy have been lobbying the Ministry to drop the case against you. Surprisingly, they've been successful. Hermione almost lost her position in the Law Division—oops, Ron says I wasn't supposed to say anything about that.

But, everything turned out well—or as well as can be expected—because the Ministry officially dropped all charges against you last week. It looks as if you're going to be in the clear soon. But Trammel warns that it's still not a good idea to come home.

In fact, he says that while you can relax some, don't ever think they'll stop looking.

That's going to break Mum's heart. And mine. But I'll manage.

Keep your chin up, Gin. You're the strongest of all of us and we support you, no matter what you do. By the way, Dean's going to be okay. He spent two days in Ministry custody, but Hermione managed to get him out without too much damage.

There were a few more words of goodbye, but Ginny couldn't bring herself to read them.

"Mischief managed," she muttered, tapping the parchment with her wand and watching as the ink dissolved back into Trammel's scratchy handwriting.

"Merlin, Harry," she whispered to the empty room. "I could really use you here right now. I... I just miss everyone so much."

# Chapter 12: This Time

It shouldn't have surprised her that, of all her friends and family, Bill tracked her down first.

But the fact that he'd managed to breach her wards and was now sitting in the shabby flat she'd rented, his feet up on her coffee table and drinking the last butterbeer she had in the place, annoyed her.

"When I was eight, you came home and found me where?" Ginny demanded, her wand held right at his neck.

"You were in that old tree fort by the pond."

Ginny continued to stare at him and he rolled his eyes. "And you were crying because Mum had yelled at you for turning Ron's hair blue."

A bit disappointed that she wouldn't get to hex him anyway, strictly on principle, Ginny put her wand away.

"Didn't expect to see you here." She sank down onto the edge of the twin-sized bed. It had been months since she'd seen anyone in her family, even though she knew they were probably out looking for her. Christmas had been particularly hard to spend alone, and only the thought that she was protecting her family by staying away helped. That and a bottle of Firewhiskey.

"Didn't expect to actually find you," Bill shrugged, draining part of the bottle before offering the rest of it to Ginny. She scrunched her nose up at it, used the edge of her shirt to wipe it off and then drank the rest.

"How did you?"

"Trammel," Bill shrugged. "He came to see Dad, told him that you were alright, even though you couldn't come back right now. Mum wanted you to come home for Christmas. She stayed up all night at the kitchen table... just waiting. I started tracking you after that."

Ginny winced, adding another thing to the list of things she'd have to thank Trammel for one day, and knowing she could never make up for the worry she was causing. "And you've all decided I'm not a complete nutter?"

Bill stared at her before looking away. The tips of his ears were bright red and Ginny smirked to herself.

"Can you blame us?" he asked, before deflating a bit.

Ginny sighed deeply and brushed her hair out of her face. It had been growing lately and she'd not bothered to cut it again; it always seemed to be in the way now. "No, not really," she conceded.

"We could only believe what the papers were saying because *you* weren't telling us any different," he shrugged. "And you have to admit you were acting like a crazy woman at times. That wall..."

"Wasn't my doing," Ginny defended.

Bill nodded. "But you can see why we'd jump to conclusions."

Ginny ignored his comment. "How is everyone?"

"Good," Bill shrugged. "Victoire is growing like a weed. She's pulling up on things and will be walking any day now."

A pang of regret shot through Ginny and she sighed. Her niece was growing up and she wasn't there to see it. And the rest of her family... But dwelling on what she couldn't have right now did nothing but give her nightmares and make her stomach hurt.

"How about Teddy?" she asked, dreading the answer a little.

Bill smiled fondly. "He's a cute little sprog. Running all over the place. Andromeda and Kingsley have their work cut out for them there."

The way he said their names struck Ginny as odd and she opened her mouth to ask. Bill beat her to it, though.

"They got married, Gin. Strangest relationship, really. But... to each their own."

The idea took a minute to rattle around Ginny's head before it settled in and caused her to smile. "Good for them," she nodded. "Someone deserves to be happy in all this mess."

Bill nodded and awkwardly shifted in his seat. "They are, I think."

"Good."

"Ron and Hermione... well, they're planning the wedding. They really want you to be there, Ginny. They keep putting it off, hoping that you'll be able to come back."

Ginny sighed and pressed her fingers into her closed eyes. "I can't, and you know that. Surely Trammel explained why I left."

"A bit," Bill nodded, his lips tightening into a thin line. "He said you had gotten caught up in something at the Ministry and that they wanted you out of it." Ginny shrugged. It wasn't the best explanation, but it would do for now. If Trammel hadn't confirmed the detail of Harry's survival, then she'd keep it quiet too. Maybe they just weren't ready for the truth yet. Judging by their reaction when she'd mentioned it that day at the Burrow, it was better that they didn't know.

"I wish I could come home, Bill," Ginny protested, looking out the window at the darkening alleyway outside. Soon the bright neon lights of the bars and pubs would start flashing on, lighting up her cheap flat.

"Mum and Dad are good," Bill continued, ignoring the unspoken hurt in the room. "They don't really understand why things have to be this way."

"They just do," Ginny protested, standing and pacing around the small open space that the room

offered.

"I know," Bill said, holding up his hands defensively. He stood and Ginny could tell he wasn't completely comfortable in her presence. She didn't understand that exactly, but she sympathized. She wasn't fully comfortable around herself right now either. "Just... just take care of yourself, yeah?"

"I'll try," Ginny nodded, biting the corner of her lip. "I'm going to have to move again. If you found me... chances are the Ministry is not far behind."

"You think they're still looking?"

"I don't know," Ginny shook her head. "But it's better to be safe than sorry."

Bill studied her for a minute and nodded jerkily. "George sent this," he said, offering a thick envelope to her that could only contain money. "He said he wished it could be more."

Ginny reluctantly accepted the money. She didn't want to, but accessing Harry's money would draw attention to her. And if she was going to have to move again, she'd need something more to live off. The money that George had first given her had all been used up now. Three flats in two different countries would do that to you.

"You have any clue where you're headed next?"

"No clue," Ginny shrugged. Although even if she did, she wouldn't tell him. Bill had a family at home and he didn't need the Ministry tracking him down and trying to get information out of him.

And she was stuck here in a dumpy little flat, having exhausted almost of the names she had remembered from the Ministry file and tracked down every other lead she could think of. Frustration was a daily—sometimes hourly—battle.

"Take care, little sister," Bill said, leaning forward and kissing her forehead. "Good luck with everything."

'I'm going to find him, Bill,' she promised silently. She knew he thought she was still borderline crazy. Saying aloud wasn't going to help that assumption. He'd just say she was chasing after false hope.

And perhaps that's what it was. No lead she'd followed so far had led her anywhere close to anything related to Harry. But she just couldn't give up.

"I will," she nodded finally.

"I hope you do," Bill said softly before disappearing out the door.

Ginny wrapped her arms around herself and pressed her forehead to the window, watching out the window at the rainbow-bathed street. Bill's hunched shoulders exited her building and moved into the hustle and bustle of the crowd below. She watched him until he melted into the blackness of night and shadow, feeling just a bit better for his visit.

The sunlight glinting off of the water was blinding as the red orb sunk slowly into the bay, pushing away the gloom from the cold rain that had just ended. It seemed to be the same ritual every night, Ginny observed, watching the people around her as time stopped and everyone stood completely still, watching the sun slip into night.

And then the moment would end, and people would begin to walk and talk again, going on with their business, which, in San Sebastian, seemed to be eating.

The sheer amount of food that people consumed here boggled Ginny's mind. They often ate six meals in one day, although the portions weren't like the feasts back home in England.

In fact, eating was what she was doing right now, although her attention was more on the people packing into the bar, pushing forward toward the heavy wooden structure at the center that was literally groaning under piles and piles of fresh seafood, taken straight from the Bay.

They wore bright colored jackets and were friendly as they waved and smiled at Ginny, as if she were an old friend, rather than someone seeking refuge in their bustling city.

Then again, Ginny fit right in. She was the perfect age to blend in with the university students that milled around the older part of the city every night.

For two months, Ginny had traveled in France, skirting along the coast and varying her appearance enough that she prayed no one had been able to track her. Frequently, she would Apparate around the countryside, laying false trails while tracking anything that might lead her toward Harry.

But there were no more leads. And hiding in Spain while she tried to figure out what she was going to do next seemed to be the only thing to do.

Two rather excited revelers bumped into her table, sloshing her glass of wine slightly and Ginny laughed at their excessive apologies.

She was just about to ask them to join her table, with her marginally acceptable Spanish, when a strange man slid into one of the empty seats. His eyes darted around the bar, taking in everything as he leaned closer to her. "Don't look around. Talk to me as if we're old friends."

Under the table, Ginny gripped her wand tight enough that her fingernails made little half-moon shapes in her palm.

"Who are you?"

"When we were in France," he said, his black eyes still tracing every movement in the bar under thick, bushy-black eyebrows set deep in an olive complexioned face, "you saved my arse by pulling me out of the Ministry. You burned the cottage pie the night you made it at my flat in Paris. Lilies was one of our code words. You have a horrible foul mouth and a nasty, mean right hook when you want to."

"Doell?" Ginny hissed, almost worried more now that she knew who he was. "How the hell—"

"They've tracked you, Ginny," he said, reaching over and picking at the spicy sausage on her plate before shoveling a bite of it in with his bare fingers. "Don't make it obvious, but... over at the bar, woman and a man in blue jumpers."

Ginny nervously took a sip of her wine, barely tasting the bitter drink as it swirled in her mouth. Her eyes traveled over the room and she silently swore when the two people he had pointed out looked away from her quickly.

"Let's go," he said, tossing some money on the table and reaching for her hand as he stood. "We can lose them in the crowds. The poteo-ir-de-pinchos," he explained. "Hundreds of bars full of people."

"I know," Ginny said irritably, looking over her shoulder as Doell tugged on her hand, weaving in and out of the people pouring onto the sidewalks.

They ducked into a rowdy bar where a band was just starting to warm up and Doell pulled her toward the shadowy back hallway and out into an alley that smelled of discarded fish.

"Change your hair color," he demanded, pacing in the alley. "And... alter your clothing, if you can."

"How did they find me?" Ginny demanded as she charmed her hair to be a dark brunette and used a band dug out of the pocket of her jeans to pull it up off of her neck. "How did *you* find me?"

"I've been following you," Doell shrugged unrepentantly. "Come on," he demanded, pulling on a cap that he conjured and leading her back into the same bar, wrapping his arm around her back as they went in and moving entirely too close.

"We're a couple," he whispered into her ear as his other arm came around her waist and his chin rested on her shoulder. "They just came in."

Ginny's whole body shook in his embrace, the adrenaline that demanded she run, or fight, building up inside her, threatening to explode out at any minute.

"There's a table behind us, follow me backward and sit in my lap so that you can shield my wand."

Ginny swore again but did as he asked, knowing if she was going to get out of this alive, she was going to have to trust him.

"They're British?" she asked, feeling her face heat as Doell pulled her down into his lap. She took a minute to study him and found none of the features he wore right now betrayed who he really was. Once again, Doell amazed her with his deception abilities.

"Yeah," he said. She could feel his wand now, braced against her spine as his dark eyes found the two—were they Aurors? If so she didn't recognize them.

"They're either new blood," he grunted, "or in disguise."

The two Aurors moved closer, searching the bar, possibly for Ginny's distinctive hair, before shaking their heads.

Ginny looped her arm over Doell's shoulder and around his neck so that he could have a clean shot if needed.

"How do we get out of here?" she asked.

"We walk right past them," Doell said, looking directly at her with a look that made her shiver inside.

'It's a part he's playing,' she reminded herself, swallowing harshly against the way her stomach clenched in discomfort.

"Come on," he urged her up, placing a kiss on her cheek while whispering. "No spells or they'll find us for sure."

She tried to smile while hanging on him, pretending to be a loving girlfriend. Thankfully, wrapping herself around another man didn't make her stomach churn like she always thought it would. Then again, her adrenaline was running so high right now, she wasn't sure she even knew fully what was going on.

They rose as Doell pressed a kiss to her ear and he led her right past the two Aurors, who were scanning the bar in frustration.

"Down two doors, duck into the alley and change back to who you are."

"Won't they track the magic?" Ginny could see the muscle in his jaw tense and he nodded jerkily.

"Maybe, but if they're going to keep following, it'll be best to get them to a secluded spot and ambush them. You have the cloak?"

Ginny nodded absently, her mind racing with the possibilities. How had they found her here? Why now, after months of silence? Her mouth was dry and an acrid taste that reminded her of bile spread across her tongue. But she nodded anyway, ducking into the dark alley as Doell stood guard, his dark eyes constantly moving under the brim of his hat.

"Alright," Ginny said quietly after she had turned her hair back to its normal color and let the other charms she had cast drop.

"Get under the cloak," Doell said, turning back around. Ginny startled to now see the face she remembered in the dim light of the alley.

"I thought you used Polyjuice..." But she let the question drop when he scowled at her and tossed his cap to the side of the alley.

"Now!" he barked, bracing himself as the two Aurors passed the entrance to the alley.

Ginny whipped the cloak out of her pocket and covered herself completely, backing into the shadows, leaving Doell seemingly exposed.

It irritated her that Doell had been following, but at the same time, she was grateful. Yes, she probably could have handled herself in a fight against the two Aurors, but not if they'd cornered her

in that crowded bar, and not if they had others waiting just a call away.

Her magic built and swirled just below the surface, waiting for a fight—waiting for the release she'd been months looking for. Ginny used the frustration of futilely searching, chasing down dead end leads, and night after night of loneliness to fuel her determination.

Doell turned toward the front of the alley, tensed for a confrontation. They stayed like that for several minutes before Doell began to swear under his breath. "Thick as a post," he muttered. "I'll go lead them in, you be ready."

Ginny nodded and then felt stupid, because he couldn't see her. "Yeah," she whispered, watching Doell lope out of the alley.

The minutes he was gone—and it really only could have lasted a few—seemed to drag forever and Ginny felt her focus tunnel toward the opening of the alley. Doell ran by once, the Aurors in the matching blue jumpers—honestly, who chose their clothing anyway?—giving chase behind him.

The next time he passed, Doell ducked inside. The Aurors were closer this time, almost directly on his heels as Doell found himself cornered at the end of the dark corridor, just past Ginny. Now they had the Aurors boxed in.

"Where's Weasley?" one of them demanded and Doell only smirked and shook his head. Ginny crept in behind the Aurors, trapping them between herself and Doell, with nowhere to hide if things went badly.

"Who?"

"Come off it, Doell," the second—the man—barked. "We've been trying to find her for weeks, and only just managed to catch up to her here."

Doell's face split into a cruel smile, one Ginny had seen several times before, the most memorable when he'd been a professor and had systematically destroyed a student's dueling technique.

"Oh, you caught her, alright."

Ginny lifted the cloak and shot two bright red stunners directly at the Auror's backs. Their bodies flew toward Doell, who shielded them from hitting the wall he was up against and then bound them once they were on the ground.

He whistled slowly as Ginny smirked. She had put a lot of power into that spell, but it felt good to use more than just glamour spells and tracking spells. Her magic liked the more powerful ones, and always had.

"That should hold them for a few hours," Doell nodded appreciatively. He crouched down and began searching through their pockets.

"We need to be fast," Ginny cautioned. "If someone else is watching—"

"I know," Doell nodded. He sighed heavily when no identification was found. "Come on. I have a car

a few blocks away.”

Ginny looked back at the unconscious Aurors as they left the alley, hand in hand. The cloak was tucked back into her pocket, and her wand was in its wrist holster, just under the edge of her sleeve.

“How did they find me?” Ginny asked, having to almost jog to keep up with Doell’s pace as he led them down street after street, backtracking frequently and taking crazy turns in the middle of crowds.

“Dumb luck, I suppose,” he shrugged. “They swarmed Paris after the Ministry fiasco, but their search kind of fizzled from there. These two have been back and forth all along the French countryside searching.” His eyes caught hers for a minute and he smirked. “Don’t worry; it wasn’t your hiding skills that betrayed you.”

“You kept up with me,” she huffed, feeling more than a little annoyed that she hadn’t realized he was tracking her. Surely she was better than that.

“Nah,” he dismissed with a hint of a smile as his pace finally slowed to a more casual speed. “I’m just really, really good.”

Ginny nodded, watching as he pulled a set of keys from his pocket and pushed a button on it. The lights on a car down the block flashed twice and Doell led her that way. Now that they were mostly out of the situation, Ginny’s adrenaline was bleeding off, forcing her to face the tiredness that she felt. It had been creeping slowly in lately, feeding off of the frustration and anger, causing her to make stupid mistakes like being caught in a public place with no disguise.

“Where are we going?” she asked as she slid into the small car. Doell got in and the engine roared to life, lurching the car forward out of its parking space. He drove like a maniac, weaving in and out of lanes without signaling, taking wide turns and going incredibly fast. Then again, he blended right in with how everyone around here drove.

“Why San Sebastian?” Doell asked, his eyes not leaving the road.

Ginny studied him for a minute, shocked to see small changes in his appearance from when she’d left him in Paris. His face seemed... younger, like it was back at Hogwarts. The grey was gone from his temples.

“How do you... You’re not really *that* good at charms are you?”

“What?” he demanded, raising an eyebrow at her and then turning back as he took a sharp turn, making Ginny slam into the door next to her. “Oh, the appearance?”

“Yeah,” Ginny said, blinking at him. “You look different from the last time.” If she wasn’t sure it was him, Ginny might have pulled her wand on him, he was acting so oddly.

He was quiet for a minute before a slow smile stretched over his face. “Jasper Doell has a certain reputation to uphold. At Hogwarts, I was able to look more like myself, because I’m really not that old.” He chuckled and Ginny shook her head, trying to keep up. “But in France, I needed to look

older—it's part of the whole persona that I have to play."

"Shite," Ginny shook her head, her mind finally catching on to what he was saying.

"Perhaps you're used to seeing something more like this," he said, screwing up his face until his hair was black and spiky, with bright pink tips.

Tonks.

Doell laughed and let his hair turn back to its normal sandy brown color. "She and I were cousins, you know. Well... in a way, I think. Third cousins, maybe."

"No wonder I haven't seen you tracking me," Ginny shook her head and relaxed a bit. "I didn't know there were other metamorphmagi around, actually. Tonks was kind of a unique thing." Her chest tightened when she thought about Teddy back at home. A wave of homesickness came over her and she had to swallow past the lump in her throat.

"As far as I know, she and I were the only two around. Although now her son—"

"Teddy," Ginny nodded.

Doell's comment died out and his eyes searched hers before pulling onto a wide street that led out of town.

"I took the liberty of gathering your things before I came to get you. If you're going to hex me, please at least wait until we're not moving at this speed." He chuckled, but the sound died in the small space between them.

Ginny stared out the window at the blurry lights that they whizzed past, not really seeing them at all.

The events of the evening crawled into her brain slowly, but all jumbled together, the scenes not fully making sense. She knew that the emotions of almost being caught and having to fight her way out, as well as seeing a familiar face again, and talking about home, were messing with her head. And a breakdown was sure to come eventually. But not yet. She wanted to hold on until she was alone, at least.

They were quiet for a long time—hours even, before Ginny took a breath to speak.

"Marsden was here before she showed up in Paris," she said, her voice breaking due to her dry mouth.

"Maybe she *was* on holiday," Doell said softly. He was slumped toward the steering wheel, arching his back against the seat and twisting his head side to side, making a sickening popping sound that Ginny winced at.

"I can't find that she went anywhere considered 'touristy'. She didn't visit museums or shopping centers. Didn't even go near a beach, as far as I can tell."

"Hmm," Doell scowled at the road ahead of them. "Maybe she was meeting someone."

"I think she was," Ginny confirmed. "I just can't figure out who."

"Maybe Hughes," he shrugged. "While I was following you, I've also been trying to track him."

"I think that's a dead end," Ginny sighed, pressing her forehead to the chilled glass. Small spatters of rain splashed loudly on the window and Doell jerked the wheel, pulling them across several lanes toward another town. "I haven't been able to get any response from anyone about him."

"You might be right," he muttered. "All I've heard are whispers. But I think he's out there."

"You think he's involved in Lucas?" Ginny sat up straighter in her seat, blinking at him.

"Up to his eyeballs," Doell nodded. "If he wasn't involved in something, why is he covering his tracks so well?"

"I have no idea," she said, sinking back down and closing her tired eyes. "I'm at a dead end, Doell." She shook her head, aggravation finally giving way to the emotions of the night as tears filled her eyes. "I'm no closer to the truth than when I started. And Harry's out there, all alone. I'm not succeeding in anything."

Ginny grabbed the door handle and braced herself as Doell swerved the car to the side of the road, pulling it half onto the edge, with the end still in the lane.

"You're still *alive* Ginny," he scolded, glaring at her out of eyes lit with determination. "You're still *free*. You need to keep fighting, keep striving toward finding him. Because if you give up..."

"I know," she said, taking a deep breath and resting her head back against the seat, staring up at the dull grey upholstery of the car's roof. "I'm not giving up."

"Good, because I think I stumbled on something," Doell said with a firm nod. "It might not be anything, but... it might give us another lead to follow."

Ginny stared at him as he tugged on the wheel and entered the mild flow of traffic, earning him two blaring car horns, which he responded to with a rude finger gesture.

"We?" she asked, wondering where the change in his plans had come.

Doell growled softly and scratched at his head. "Yeah... we. Happy?"

"I don't know," Ginny answered honestly. "What changed your mind? Because I can take care of myself, you know."

"I know," he answered irritably, ruffling his hair in the way that Harry always had when he didn't know what to say or what to do. "I don't know why I'm doing this. I just..." He trailed off and stared out at the night before pulling off and into the dimly lit parking area of a small inn. "I just feel like this is what I need to be doing right now."

Ginny nodded, a part of her grateful that she wouldn't be alone and on the verge of hopelessness, anymore.

"This is what I found," Doell said as he dropped a newspaper in a very foreign language in front of Ginny, just as she was about to take a bite of her breakfast.

They'd both been too tired last night to do more than collapse into their beds at the little inn Doell had chosen for them.

"I suppose you translated it?" Ginny asked, letting her eyes trace the strange letters.

"It's Croatian, actually," Doell said. "And I can read it. But I'll gladly use a translation spell if—"

"Just give me the basic idea, please," Ginny said, staring down at the letters.

"It's a research article on brain injuries due to Memory Charms," Doell said, his gaze intense. "And there was a Healer quoted in it, Aubrey—"

"Aubrey Thiemann," Ginny breathed, shaking her head in astonishment and pushing aside her breakfast in favor of staring at the newsprint.

"That's the one," Doell nodded.

Thiemann's name had been listed in the Ministry file Ginny had looked at, and she'd scribbled it down on her notes, not knowing what he was involved in.

"The good Healer is working in Germany," Doell explained, "and even won an award for assisting witches and wizards with memory loss. He's, apparently, made huge strides with his research and is the world's leading authority on regaining memory."

"Ironic," Ginny said dryly, "because he seems to be mixed up in all of this mess that has to do with erasing people's memories."

"Exactly what I thought," Doell nodded, drinking the remains of his tea. "I thought you and I might make a visit to the Healer and see what we can find."

Ginny nodded enthusiastically and summoned the file she kept in her rucksack, tucking the newspaper away in it. "When can we leave?" she asked.

Doell chuckled and stood. "Right now, if you'd like."

"The sooner the better," Ginny said, scooping her eggs into a sort of sandwich with the edge of her toast and taking it with them. "He may have more information for us to go through."

"We can only hope," Doell agreed, tossing some money onto the table.

"I'm giving you one month, Weasley," he said quietly to her when they were alone. "And then I'm going back to my life. Whatever we find—"

"One month," Ginny nodded, knowing it was more than she could have ever hoped for. One month with the two of them working quickly might just find Harry.

"One month," he repeated with a smile.

\* \* \*

"Why is it, exactly, that the one of us who can be recognized the easiest is the one doing all the work?" Ginny grumbled as she pulled on the plain brown uniform they'd transfigured and picked up the box containing... well, she wasn't really sure what it had in it, because Doell had been the one to pack it.

He sighed, as if dealing with a petulant child. "Because I'm dealing with higher security at the Rhineland Institute," he explained. "That place is a fortress."

Ginny stared at him a moment longer and shrugged. "That old lady next to Thiemann's place is getting suspicious. It's like she's got some kind of internal censor when I come into the building."

"She's not going to be a problem, is she?" Doell asked, his eyebrows arching high.

"Not at all," Ginny shook her head and checked to make sure her wand was securely strapped to her arm. "I told her that the 'good doctor' is writing a novel and that I work for the courier service between him and his publisher. I swear her face when forty shades of red before she asked if it was a dirty novel."

Doell laughed and fell back on the sofa. "Please tell me you—"

Ginny grinned. "Of course, I told her it wasn't my place to say anything, but... that there better be a book in all these packages I've been lugging about. I'm sure she's been spending the last few days having very different ideas about her neighbor."

He chuckled again before standing. "Alright. We meet back here no later than three. If you're compromised—"

"I'm not an amateur," Ginny huffed. Working with Doell was a double edged sword; he was great at finding things that Ginny just didn't quite see, but he also mothered her horribly.

"And don't forget to disguise your magical signature."

"Are you finished?" Ginny asked dryly. "Because I'm about done listening."

"Fine," Doell snapped, glaring down at her. "I'm not breaking you out of some German prison when they catch you mucking around in his flat."

"And I'm not breaking you out of some fortress when you get pinched for breaking into a secure research facility."

They stared at each other for a minute before smiling and shaking hands on the deal.

"Seriously, Ginny... be careful," Doell cautioned once more before Ginny walked out of the flat Doell had 'borrowed' from someone he knew.

They'd spent two days tracking down the reporter that had written the article about Thiemann. And

after two bottles of wine he'd gladly given the Healer's home address as well as the name of the place he based his research out of in Hamburg.

Another four days were spent scouting each location, without even catching sight of the Healer, before they decided they needed to break in to both places. Ginny was actually grateful that Doell wanted the challenge of breaking into the Rhineland Institute. She simply had no idea where to begin in that place, with the guards and the wards and who knew what else lying inside.

A flat she could handle. A flat was fairly predictable as far as places to anchor wards and how to protect it.

This particular flat had several strong wards she would need to get through, as well as one very lonely neighbor lady. Ginny felt bad for the old lady, she really did, but today there would be little time to chat and discuss the woman's ideas of what the doctor might be writing about. If needed, Ginny would simply cast a sleeping charm on her and levitate her to the sofa in her own flat.

Thankfully, it wasn't needed today. The blaring television leaked out the doorway and into the hall, covering any sounds that Ginny's approach made.

Dispelling the wards protecting the entrance was another matter. Ginny very nearly tripped them all in her haste to get out of the hallway, but a deep steadying breath helped her to calm down and focus.

Once inside, Ginny stared at the opulent décor, goggling at the heavy velvet fabrics and silk brocade everywhere. As far as they'd been able to determine, Thiemann wasn't married. Perhaps he had a girlfriend they'd not been able to unearth, Ginny told herself as she looked at the fine artwork covering the walls.

She started with the desk in front of a large window that overlooked much of the city. But locked drawers and stacks of files provided nothing important to Ginny.

On the corner of the desk was a framed photograph of a rather ugly older woman and her dog, who looked remarkably similar to each other. Ginny guessed it was Thiemann's mother, due to the puffy grey—almost blue—hair.

A small leather-bound date book with meticulous notes about practically everything the Healer did in his life yielded nothing as well. It might take weeks for Ginny to decipher it also, since there were abbreviations for almost everything she could see noted in it. She quickly flipped through it, making note of anything significant he was working on, and flipping back to the beginning, swearing when the date was too recent. But, perhaps... if he was so meticulous about keeping everything in there, he'd surely still have ones from years ago.

Ginny growled in frustration and moved into the opulent master bedroom of the flat. This was going to take forever to search, she realized, looking at all the stacks of books and shelves of files.

"Shite," she glared, beginning to search for something out of the ordinary. If she were keeping files, or other information about a project she didn't want anyone else to know about, where would she keep them?

"If I had a safe full of things I didn't want anyone to see, where would it be?" Ginny whispered to the room, staring into the darkened corners and thinking about where the most likely place to keep his hidden secrets.

"Over there," Ginny nodded to a darker corner of the room partially shielded by heavy, red velvet curtains. "But I'd disillusion it... or charm it." She canceled any charms in the room and grinned when a heavy safe appeared where a small, ornate table once stood.

Ginny grinned to herself and knelt before it and looked down at the old fashioned combination lock and key mechanism. "Thank you Gred and Forge," she whispered, removing several objects from her pocket and working on picking the lock.

"I'm impressed," Doell said from the doorway, making Ginny gasp and grab her heart.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she hissed, glaring at him. "The plan was to—"

"I remember," he said, striding across the room and eyeing the things she was unearthing from the safe. "But Thiemann's office didn't have anything."

"Damn," she sighed. "I think this might be more promising," she agreed.

"That was well done," he nodded, pulling out a book of receipts and starting to copy them.

Ginny didn't take much time to bask in the accomplishment as she found three thick daily planners.

"Yes," she hissed, finding one with the right dates and flipping it open. Unfortunately, whatever Aubrey Thiemann was working on he'd only made very brief notes, punctuated by horribly frustrating notations with initials and letters that Ginny didn't understand. But the name *Lucas* jumped out several times.

She quickly started copying the pages, recreating them with her wand and stacking them neatly into a bundle.

When she finished with the planners, she reached in to retrieve the small stack of files in the bottom of the safe. Hopefully something in these would give her enough of a lead that she could track down exactly where they'd held Lucas, or give her some idea of Harry's fate.

Careful not to disturb much, Ginny laid the files on the edge of the bed and began looking through them. These files were definitely related to Lucas, as there were similar initials and markings as in the daily planners.

There were three medical files, but the notations were generic enough as to hide the identity of the patients. Ginny quickly duplicated the files and set them aside. There would be time to study them later, when they weren't in the middle of breaking into someone's flat.

One of the pages in the last file was wrinkled and torn on the corner, as if someone had grabbed the file by the edge. On a hunch, Ginny performed a fingerprint charm and found two very distinct prints there, although they were smudged. She searched for magical signatures on the records as well, but the traces were so muted that they hardly registered as existing. But that was to be

expected after time passed. Inanimate objects rarely kept a signature for long.

After recording both results, Ginny flipped to the last page of the file, a weak gasp coming out of her as four photographs were there. Each depicted a generic bare body part, although each had some sort of scar prominently on them.

“What is it?” Doell demanded, dropping the book of receipts and coming to stare over her shoulder.

“No, No,” Ginny mumbled, her hand shaking as she reached out and traced the one that showed a scar that jagged to one side in a distinctly lightning bolt shape.

“That’s him?”

Ginny could only nod and duplicate the page with her wand. Her copy came out more smudged than it probably should have.

The urge to rip these photographs out of the file—to remove the files completely—was overwhelming. Betrayal and anger filled her until her stomach heaved. If Doell’s steady hand hadn’t been on her shoulder, Ginny was sure she would have vomited everywhere.

“It’s Harry,” she repeated over time and time again, not even sure if she was saying it out loud or just in her head.

“You going to be okay?” he asked, eyeing her warily.

She couldn’t tell if Doell’s question was to her, himself or just in general. With a few quick movements, he duplicated the remaining paperwork, wiped it clean of prints, and began to stuff everything back in the safe.

Ginny took a deep breath and nodded, unsure herself. “All this time... I think I actually didn’t think...”

“Those photographs don’t prove anything, really,” Doell added as he reset the safe and added the illusion charms back onto it. “It just...”

“They missed one,” Ginny mused, thinking about the four scars they had photographed on Harry’s body. “Right behind his left ear, there’s a lighter patch of skin.” She closed her eyes remembering giving Harry a haircut just days after the Final Battle and discovering the scar.

“He got it when he was little, and his cousin pushed him down the stairs. He hit his head on one of the spindles and the wood made the skin slide back.”

Doell looked more than little disturbed by Ginny’s rambling, and his uncharacteristic silence startled her into motion.

“I need to get out of here,” she mumbled, gathering her things into her rucksack and straightening the room up. She used her wand to cast a charm that diminished her magical signature in the room. If someone checked, it should be low enough not to alert anyone that magic had been performed anytime recently. Unfortunately, it also diminished all other traces of magic, which *would* alert

someone who knew what they were looking at.

Somewhere behind her, she knew that Doell was doing the same, although she didn't really care much.

Flashes of the photographs, of Harry's scars, obscured her vision.

"Get to the flat," Doell said firmly. "I'll clean up here."

# Chapter 13: Running Out Of Days

Harry tightened his arms around her and Ginny snuggled back into his embrace, smiling at the familiarity of the position. Harry loved to hold her like this—not that she minded at all.

“I’ve missed you.”

His voice sounded harsh, like he’d been asleep too long and his throat was dry.

Ginny smiled again and ran her fingers along his arms, making the small hairs stand up. The bright late morning sunshine filtered in through the windows, and it was entirely too warm in the bed, but Ginny couldn’t bring herself to get out. It was too perfect right here.

“I’ve missed you too.”

“You’ve been distracted,” Harry said as he pressed small kisses to her shoulder. “You’ve forgotten about me.”

“I have not,” Ginny protested, trying to turn in his grasp, but Harry was holding her too tightly. “I’ve just been... I *haven’t* forgotten about you. I could never do that.”

Harry didn’t say anything, but nuzzled her neck in that way he had.

“It’s okay, you know, to sometimes forget to remember.”

“No,” Ginny said, feeling that she had been distracted by the mystery of it all. Harry was out there somewhere—the real Harry, not the one in her dreams—and she’d let herself get caught up in something that really didn’t matter. She needed to stop dwelling on what might have happened to him and focus on where she needed to go next to actually find him. “It’s not okay.”

“But it happens,” Harry said, resting his chin on her shoulder. She could feel the stubble on his face scratching on her skin, making goosebumps rise. “And I understand. I’m a patient person.”

Ginny couldn’t help but snort out a laugh at that thought. Harry had always been anything but patient.

“You’re a liar too.”

“But not about how much I love you,” he protested, finally allowing her to turn so that they could face each other.

Ginny couldn’t stop herself from wrapping her arms around him tightly and breathing him in. This is exactly what she needed—an affirmation that Harry still loved her and that he was waiting for her to find him. Even if it was only in her imagination; that was all right. Anything was more than she really had right now.

“I’ll find you soon,” Ginny said, placing small kisses on his face and grinning as his bright eyes flashed at her. “I promise.”

"Don't take too long," he said, his words ghosting across her skin as he moved their bodies together, skin sliding along skin.

Ginny sighed in pure happiness and held her to him as Harry kissed her neck and shoulder.

"I've missed being with you," she admitted, rubbing her hands up his bare back. "I... I think about it all the time."

"You think about me?" Harry's voice was strange, but Ginny brushed away her concern because his face was buried in the crook of her neck. "All the time?"

Ginny giggled at the awe in his voice and nodded. "All the time."

"I think about you too."

Suddenly, the bed she was in was cold. And Harry was gone. Ginny struggled to cover herself with the sheets rubbing her face. Maybe now the dreams would stop torturing her and she could get some real rest, and not see Harry's body in those pictures, and worry about what they'd done to him.

"Stupid dream," she growled out, horrified when her eyes filled with tears. "It's just a stupid, stupid dream."

"Dreams usually mean something," Doell said, coming up behind her. His large hands settled on her shoulders. Ginny shivered under his grasp.

"They don't always," Ginny protested, trying to pull away finally.

"Ginny..."

It was Harry's voice that called to her, and Ginny spun, seeing that Doell was gone now—replaced with Harry.

"I thought you'd left again," Ginny said, moving toward him again. "Please don't leave me."

"I'm falling away," Harry said, casually. He looked rather resigned to the fact and Ginny blinked, trying to figure out what he was meaning. "I can feel myself falling."

"Don't fall!" Ginny yelled as a huge cliff opened up, directly in the center of the room, the bed they'd been on only minutes before tumbling down the steep rocks and shattering on the jagged edges.

Harry blinked at her and took a step backwards, toward the cliff. Ginny clutched at him, holding his hand tighter and tighter until she was sure she'd broken at least one of the bones. But Harry seemed apathetic toward it all as he studied the abrupt edge.

"It's cold here," he mused, looking out around them.

The bedroom had disappeared completely, leaving them standing on the face of the cliff, perched on the only narrow ledge in sight.

“And I can’t see the sun anymore.”

There was such despair in his voice that Ginny started crying again, great sobbing heaves shuddering her chest.

“Stay with me, Harry, please,” she begged, allowing just a heart-wrenching glance at the incline before turning to him.

“I’m not sure I’m supposed to,” Harry said, looking down the ledge again. “I think... I think I need to be there.”

“NO!” Ginny screamed, her voice bouncing off of the rock and echoing around. “You need to be with me. You need to stay here.”

Harry turned to her then, his face softening as she moved closer to him. “You can come and find me. I know you can.”

“I can’t,” Ginny protested, clinging to him.

“Yes,” Harry assured her, his hands coming up to trace her face. “I believe in you, Ginny. I know you can find me again.”

“I’m trying!” Ginny called out in anguish. “But I can’t!”

Harry removed her arms from around him and took a step backwards toward the edge. Ginny tried to follow him, to beg him not to leave, but her arms and legs were now being held down with chains.

“I can’t, Harry,” she pleaded, crying almost hysterically. He narrowed his eyes at the restraints that held her and shrugged a shoulder.

“Just break them,” he offered. “I need to go, Ginny,” he said, looking over his shoulder at the cliff. He turned then, standing on the edge with the toes of his shoes—when had they both gotten dressed?—hanging over. “You’ll find me.”

With that, he jumped, disappearing as Ginny screamed and fought against the binds that held her in place—held her away from Harry.

“NO!” she screamed over and over, pulling at the chains. Her wrists were bleeding now from where they held her, fat drops of blood splashing onto the ice-cold rock. But the pain didn’t bother Ginny; her heart was twisting enough that minor cuts couldn’t match the agony.

“Ginny...”

“NO! Don’t leave me here! Take me with you—”

“Ginny!”

It wasn’t the chains anymore that held her down, but Jasper Doell’s strong hands. They held her wrists and Ginny scrabbled against him, kicking out and clawing to get to the edge.

"I can't find him," Ginny cried. But Doell wouldn't let her go. He got between her and the cliff, gathering her to his strong chest.

"Ginny, you're not going anywhere. You're safe now."

"NO!" She dropped to her knees, ignoring the pain that flashed as her skin broke.

"Ginny!" Doell grabbed her shoulders and gave her a shake, making Ginny blink up at him. "Wake up, Ginny."

Gasping for air, Ginny rolled in her bed, away from his grip. His hands were like a vice on her shoulders.

"I'm awake," she choked out, curling away from him the best she could. It was semi-dark in the room and Ginny allowed herself glance at him, afraid of what she might see on his face.

"Shit," he barked out, fear and exhaustion seeping from his voice as he sank back on the edge of her bed. "You scared the life out of me, Weasley. I nearly had to break the door down to get in here. What the hell kind of ward did you put up?"

Ginny didn't answer, but took great gulping breaths and pressed her fingers into her eyes trying to blot out the images of Harry jumping off the cliff.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Ginny mumbled, staring into the darkness of the room, which was just being lit by the very early morning light.

Doell stared at her; Ginny could feel his gaze like a lead weight. But she didn't want to deal with questions right now. She hadn't said a word about the photographs, or the files, since they'd left Germany two days before. Ginny kept all of her emotions bottled up inside her, swirling below the surface.

Instead of talking, they'd buried themselves in trying to decipher Theimann's notes and build a time line from what they had managed to decode.

"Sometimes it helps," Doell said softly. His fingers played with the buttons on his silk pyjamas, tugging at the loose strings.

"And sometimes it just drives me more insane," Ginny said. Knowing sleep would be a lost cause for the rest of the morning, Ginny untangled her legs and stood, stretching. "I'm going to get an early start."

"At least take a shower and eat something," Doell prodded.

"Stop mothering me, Jasper," Ginny muttered, gathering clothing from the rucksack that was beginning to get more and more worn.

"Then stop forcing me to," he called back as he ducked into the hallway. "You're no good to anyone if you're dead, Ginny."

Ginny sank onto the end of the bed, glaring darkly at the open door, knowing he was right. She really needed to shake this funk that gripped her like icy hands, dragging her down toward depression. Harry needed her to find him, just like in her dream. And sitting, staring at old photographs didn't accomplish anything.

What they really needed was a good solid lead about Lucas, instead of the flimsy, pieced-together bits that they'd managed to scrap together.

Harry's face, soft and close, as it had been in her dream, returned to Ginny now and she closed her eyes, shivering at how real the dream had been. She had felt the heat between their bodies, the wrinkles in the sheets beneath them, seen the dust motes as they danced in the sunlight beams.

"Help me out here, Harry," she pleaded, praying more than anything. "We just need a bit of luck to find you."

\* \* \*

"I think I might have something," Doell said later that morning, a piece of half eaten toast dangling from his hand.

Ginny looked up from the file she was decoding, her quill hovering over the parchment and threatening to drip ink onto the note she'd just made. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he nodded distractedly, tossing the toast toward his plate and flipping through the pages. "Did you find the name Marius anywhere in your file?"

"Hmm," Ginny said, squinting down the page, scanning the length of it looking for a letter 'M'. Nothing jumped out at her. "There are a few references in that last book to a patient with the letter 'M', but nothing after the summer of ninety-eight. I think it was in late ninety-seven, even."

"Okay," Doell nodded. "The timing would fit then."

Ginny set her file aside and stood, moving across to sit next to him. "What have you found?"

"It might be nothing," Doell dismissed.

"Then you wouldn't have said anything," Ginny accused.

Doell smirked and nodded his agreement. He pointed to the name Marius in the middle of the page and explained. "Last year, I was in Africa trying to track down a Frenchman by the name of Henri Moreau. He's heavy into the illegal potions trade in France and it's possible he's connected to the underground market in England." Ginny nodded as he continued. "While I was there, I questioned a man about Moreau. At the time, I thought his brain had been addled by too many potions, or whatever. But... now, I'm wondering if he wasn't part of Lucas."

"What makes you think so?" Ginny demanded. "Did he say something?"

"Not in so many words," Doell shrugged. "He just didn't act like the others who take those potions. He went on and on about a government conspiracy, and then he changed his story part of the way

through, claiming to have been taken by aliens. He kept talking about imilingo, which is Zulu for illusion.

"I didn't think much about it then," Doell said again. "But... I think his memory might have been altered. Perhaps he was involved in the early stages of this project," he finished by jabbing his finger at the file.

Ginny stared at him and then the file again, her mouth going dry. "Do you think we could find him again?"

"It's possible," Doell shrugged. "He wasn't exactly hiding the last time I found him. And if he's stuck to his story about aliens, then everyone will know right where he is."

Ginny nodded again. "We need to find him," she said softly. "I have a feeling about this one."

"It could be nothing," Doell warned.

"Or it could be the key to everything," Ginny defended. Something about this idea, the whole idea of an illusion of some sort intrigued Ginny.

"Wait..." She dove across the table, shuffling through the files until she came up with Theimann's photographs. One of the patients had skin that was black as night. "Do you think this might be him?" she asked, turning the page toward Doell.

His face quirked strangely as he stared at it. "Might be," he shrugged. "There's really nothing there to tell me if it is or not. The skin color matches what I remember. Are there any dates listed in that?"

Ginny scowled down at the file and scanned it, looking for a series of numbers that might translate into dates similar to the date books that Theimann had kept. Several sets of numbers looked like a possibility, and Ginny found that they matched on the charts.

"These photographs were taken in February of ninety-eight," Ginny said. "That was months before they took Harry."

Doell nodded. "Marius might have been one of their first."

Ginny nodded, her mind reeling with the possibilities. "We need to find him."

"I agree," Doell said, his face stretching into a smile. "It looks like we stumbled upon some luck."

\* \* \*

"Are you sure—"

"Doell, if you ask me that one more time if I'm up to this, I'm going to get violent. And it won't be pretty."

"Will it involve... knives?" She could hear the smirk in his voice. That was one good thing about having him around, he always had a way of making her forget that they were walking into a possibly

dangerous situation.

"Possibly."

"I don't like knives," he commented casually. That was ironic since he carried one with him, Ginny thought.

"Then it will definitely involve knives," Ginny assured him, giving him a look in hopes that he would read her mind and know that he very much needed to shut his mouth right now.

Taking a deep breath, Ginny used the key to open the door. Instead of being met with some crazed lunatic, which is what Doell's description had led her to believe waited on the other side of the door, a tall man with almost pitch black skin and pure white teeth stood, smiling.

"Welcome," he said in a very heavy accent. Ginny blinked several times and then strode in, Doell behind her.

"Thank you for seeing us."

"Mr. Jasper said you had questions for me?" the man said, bowing his head just slightly.

Ginny raised an eyebrow at Doell who smirked, probably very amused that he'd been able to make her worry. "Mr. Jasper?" she asked, looking between the two men.

"That was hard enough to get him to say," Doell shrugged.

Ginny nodded absently and took the offered seat, watching as the man literally folded in on himself to sit in a chair.

"Your hair, it is like fire," he commented, staring at her. Strangely, it didn't make Ginny nervous. His voice was soft and his accent lilting enough to make her focus on him completely.

"Thank you," she said, remembering how Harry had compared it to a setting sun. "My name is Ginny Weasley."

"And I am called Marius."

"Can you tell me about Lucas, Marius?" she asked after Doell nodded his head at her to get on with it. He'd been highly agitated ever since they tracked Marius down in South Africa, muttering about Aurors and Bounty Hunters and other people out for his blood.

Marius flinched visibly and blinked his black eyes several times.

"It was not called that when I was there," he said softly, staring just over her shoulder. "It was... imilingo... The illusion."

"Why would you call it that?" Ginny asked, glancing over to make sure that Doell was taking notes.

"Because all was not right there. It was... not safe, even though they say it safe. Magic all around. Bad, bad magic."

Ginny took a shuddering breath, feeling her skin prickle at Marius' description.

"When I was small, I was in hospital. Imilingo like there, but bad."

"They made you do things?" Ginny pressed, trying to understand. "Bad things?"

Marius' eyebrows contracted until they were almost one line over his wide face. His fingers wove themselves together and then pulled apart; together, then apart.

"No," he finally said. "They make me *think* bad things." Ginny nodded. Part of her wanted to reach out and touch this man, give him some kind of comfort if she could. "I am different now. Before I go, people say I have scars. Now, no scars. They think I die."

Ginny urged him onward, bile rising up in her throat.

"I do not remember before... only parts. But I remember imilingo."

"Were there others there?" Ginny asked. "Others in that place."

Marius seemed to get agitated at the question. He unfolded and took huge steps back and forth across the room. "Maybe."

Ginny retrieved a picture of Harry from her pocket, watching it shake as she held it up to show Marius. "This man, Marius? Was this man there?"

The picture looked tiny in his huge hands as he took it and stared at it, his eyes searching every part of it. "I cannot say," he said, finally handing it back. "I was not there long—months only."

"How did you escape?"

He smiled widely and Ginny was afraid she had missed something funny. But Doell stared at him with the same expression that she did.

"I am fast," he held his hands wide. "They try to make me forget," he said, holding his finger to his temple. "Pull silver from me. But... I remember. I get on boat, hide and come here."

Bile rose up in her throat and Ginny forced herself to swallow it back down, even though she thought Marius would fully understand the need to empty her stomach.

"They do not know I remember," Marius said, winking slowly. "Marius is crazy, they say."

"You're not crazy," Ginny said softly. "These are evil men who need to be stopped. What they did to you... what they've done to others... They need to be stopped."

Marius looked at her and Ginny thought she saw a spark of fight in him, but it drained out quickly. And she really couldn't blame him. Marius had fought enough.

"There were others," he nodded slowly. "People to care for us."

"Healers?" Ginny asked, wracking her brain to think of any notes on a patient that might have been

Marius. From what she could remember Thiemann's notes hadn't included him directly, but it *was* him.

"And nurses," Marius nodded.

"And other patients," Ginny nodded.

"Some die," Marius said. "I see the bodies. But... I did not see your man."

Ginny took a deep breath, pushing away her dread.

"Where was this? Here, in Africa?" Ginny pressed, needing to know what direction they should move next.

"No," Marius said, scowling as if he were trying to remember something very small, a long time ago. "It was hot, and there was water. I think maybe America. The boat was long ride. I was hungry for many days."

"We need to go," Doell said softly, coming and putting his arm around Ginny's shoulders to lift her up and out of the seat. "If they catch us here..."

Ginny allowed herself to be led toward the door, her mind still reeling with the possibilities.

"When were you there, Marius?"

"Four years ago," he answered softly as he looked down at her. "Too many years."

"Why do you tell people it was aliens?"

The wide grin returned, even though Ginny could see his hands shaking. "It is easier," he said softly, "for people to believe."

The idea seemed ludicrous, yet at the same time, not. Like hidden witches and wizards among the Muggles. People would believe what they wanted to believe. And no one wanted to think of a world where the government kidnapped random people and made them disappear.

Just before they walked out of the door, Marius reached for her hand, enclosing it in his ice cold palm. "You will find your man," he said, his eyes not really seeing her at all. Ginny shivered, both from the touch, and from his words, before Doell tugged her forward.

"It was him," Ginny said softly as they made their way to the car Doell had rented. "He was there. And he escaped."

Doell was quiet for a few minutes while they weaved in and out of traffic.

"Are you... alright? I mean, do you need to... cry, or anything?"

Ginny blinked up at him, horrified at the whole idea. "Do I look like I do?"

He smiled and shook his head. "You actually look a little green."

"This is good news," Ginny protested. "I mean... we know that Lucas existed. And we know it might have been in the States."

Doell let out a frustrated breath. "Ginny, have you ever been to the United States?"

"No," she admitted, her mind reeling.

He pulled over to the side of the road with a jerk on the steering wheel, ignoring the horns of the cars around them. "We're talking about more than three and a half million square miles, Ginny."

Ginny stared out at the busy highway next to them, cars whizzing past. "But we know it was hot."

He sighed and shrugged one shoulder. "That doesn't really narrow it down." After waiting just a moment, he pulled back out into traffic and Ginny winced as they almost hit a huge lorry. "That could still be just about anywhere."

"It's more than we had," Ginny said, staring out the window where thick black clouds were beginning to build. Every so often, a flash of light would spark across the sky, lighting up the inside of the small car.

Doell pushed a button when the rain began to splatter across the glass and the wipers began to shudder back and forth across it, not doing much to help.

"It is," he conceded.

"Do we have anything on where Marius was found? Or what condition he was in?"

"I have my original interview notes last year," he offered. "They're not much because I completely discounted his story. I was questioning him for potions trafficking... although I understand why people might think he was mucking around with something."

Ginny slid the edge of her fingernail in between her teeth, rubbing the edge back and forth along between two of them. "But it might help."

Doell looked at her, concern written all over his face. She knew he didn't like her pinning all her hopes on one lead, but she couldn't help it. And now they were closer. All they needed was one good lead—one mention of a location, or even the weather at a specific time of year.

"It might," he nodded. "I'll dig them out when we get out of this damned country."

"Why are you so worried about this place?" Ginny demanded, turning in her seat. "You've hardly sat still the whole time we've been here. And this isn't just the usual Jasper Doell jumpiness—this is almost full blown panic."

He was quiet for a minute, his eyes darting between the three mirrors on the vehicle. "Haven't you wondered why I'm not worried about work?"

"Not really," Ginny shrugged. "You work for the British Ministry, and I know you have issues with them."

"I do... and I don't," Doell shrugged, looking over at her, a cryptic smile on his face. "See, I'm more of a... freelancer, I guess you would call it. I do specific jobs for the Brits, but I also do more of the dirty work."

Ginny chewed the inside of her lip and turned to face forward again. "Do I want to know what you mean by that?"

"It's probably best if you don't," he shrugged, changing lanes erratically and forcing Ginny to dig her fingernails into the edge of the seat. "Basically, I clean up the messes that they've made. If I hadn't been involved with Hogwarts at the time, I probably would have taken care of cleaning this whole Lucas mess up."

Ginny's mouth went dry and she stared at him.

"I'm not exactly proud of what I've done in the past, Ginny," he said softly. "And maybe that's why I'm helping you now. Because I've done some awful things that I'll never be able to atone for."

Her heart thumped heavily in her chest and she nodded. There was really no response she could give to that right now. Whatever his reasons for being here, she was grateful for the help.

"Marius was one of the early ones," Ginny said, stating the only thing in her head that made sense. "They underestimated him, and... he made it out."

"It's possible," Doell shrugged. "Or perhaps Marius was the one they got right. Maybe the others aren't—"

"No," Ginny refused, tracing her finger down one large drop as it raced down the glass. "I have to believe he's out there and alive."

"But you also need to be realistic, Ginny," he cautioned. "What if he is alive out there? What makes you think you'll even have a place in his life anymore?"

"I *have* to believe he's out there and alive," she repeated, the coldness of the rain and the similarity of the sky outside to the dream she'd had a few days ago making her shiver.

"Alright," he nodded. "We'll look through my notes when we get back."

\* \* \*

Doell's notes of his first meeting with Marius were very sketchy, and it looked as if poor Marius had been harassed by a number of people before Jasper got to him. Having seen Doell's intimidation tactics, even though Marius was easily a good foot taller than Doell himself, Ginny knew that whatever Marius had said could only probably be half-truths at best. He probably told Doell just what he wanted to hear.

When he was dumped on a dock in Northern Africa, Marius had only the clothes on his back. He claimed to not remember anything of where he'd been before, but Ginny wasn't sure how much of that was true and how much Marius was simply protecting himself.

He'd disappeared for almost six months, turning up here and there along his way back to South Africa. Somehow he'd gotten mixed up with some illegal potions brewers and ended up being put in prison for several months.

Nothing more was heard about him until Doell happened along, searching for Moreau.

Pages and pages of rambling notes that made no sense if read straight through, stared back at Ginny, and she pressed her fingers into her eyes, welcoming the blackness. She wished Doell was here to help her decode not only his writing but his cryptic notes scattered here and there through the pages and to give his impression of body language and tone. But he'd decided that it was time for him to make some kind of contact with the outside world.

Ginny had a feeling he was Apparating all over Europe, trying to disguise his trail from Egypt to France. Until he showed back up, Ginny was on her own.

Ginny blinked away the spots in front of her eyes and decided to take the notes out into the small, balcony that overlooked the street. Maybe some fresh air would help her see something that she hadn't seen before. Ginny took a deep breath and let the air clear her head. She blinked up at the bright sky above her, peering into the blueness.

Settling herself into the small bench that occupied the balcony, Ginny let her eyes wander, catching a word here and there. It was a bit about being injured that caught her attention.

*D: Where were you injured? Where did you lose your memories?*

*M: I did not lose them. They were taken from me.*

*D: Yes. But where did you say—*

*M: I did not say. I do not remember. It is... imilingo.*

*D: Illusions. Right. And you don't remember where?*

*M: Not here. Far away. I remember... travel. Long time travel.*

*D: And who took care of you while you were injured? You were in a hospital?*

*M: No. Momma take care of me.*

*D: Momma? Your mother? Who is Momma?*

*M: She—*

The writing trailed off here, almost as if the charm had worn out on the Dictaquill. Ginny narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out what she was missing here. Some called 'Momma'. Was that the name of someone, or just what they were called?

*D: And they took care of you?*

*M: No. Make me see bad things. My head hurt all the time.*

*D: Can you tell me more about that? Were you taking potions? Using magic?*

*M: No magic. It was not allowed. Momma Jessen give potions. They make pain go away, but it always come back.*

*D: The bad things came back?*

*M: Yes. I see them now sometimes.*

*D: Do you take potions now?*

*M: No.*

The questioning changed then, but Ginny's heart leapt into her throat at seeing 'Momma Jessen' written there. Doell probably had not thought anything of it, not having believed Marius' story in the first place. And he certainly didn't remember the name, or if he did, he hadn't said anything.

But here was a name—a unique, tangible name that they could work with.

"Damn!" she hissed, wishing Doell were back already so that she could talk to him. Perhaps the name would refresh his memory of the conversation.

\* \* \*

The moment Doell walked in the door to the small flat, Ginny pounced on him.

"I think I found it!"

He blinked at her a few times, handed over a parcel of letters and smiled. "Hello to you, as well. I'm fine, thanks for asking. I only had to outrun two Auror squads, from two different countries. But I'm doing well."

Ginny's jaw dropped and the papers fell slack in her hand. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," he shrugged. "I left them standing on a street corner in Bulgaria, wondering where I went," he laughed. "Those are from your family, by the way. Trammel's been collecting them and forwarded them on to a safe place I have for post."

"Thank you," Ginny said, staring down at the three inch stack of post. She wasn't sure what to say now, because there was so much information in that small rant of his. "There's no way they could follow—"

"No," he interrupted, flopping back dramatically on the small sofa. "Now you'd better show me what you found, because I may need to sleep for a week. I think I wore myself out Apparating so many different places."

Ginny stared at him and then set her post on the table behind the sofa before handing him the file. "I've marked the section," she told him, watching as he squinted down at it. "I think this might be the break we were looking for, Jasper," she said quietly, staring intently at him.

"Momma Jessen," Doell repeated as he stared down at the notes, shaking his head. "It doesn't ring any bells. I don't remember a lot about this interview, actually, because I was really searching for Moreau, not Marius."

"It can't be that popular a name," Ginny commented. "And if we make a list, start with those in warmer climates..." she trailed off as he stared at her.

"This could take weeks, you know," he said softly. "Months even."

"I have no where else to be, Jasper," she answered him back, accepting the papers he held out. "And Harry's out there, I know it."

He nodded woodenly and then turned to stare out the window. "I don't have anywhere else to be either." The way he said it made Ginny's stomach turn. Had something happened? Beyond the two Auror squads? She had a feeling he wouldn't tell her even if it involved her, and it probably did.

"Jasper, I appreciate everything—"

"You know why I'm doing this," he said tightly. Ginny did. She remembered his words about penance and the things he'd done in the past.

There wasn't much more she could say, so she nodded. They stared at each other for a few minutes before Doell stood.

"Pack your things," he said decisively, striding from the room with sure steps.

Ginny waited for him to go before she let out a relieved breath. "I'm coming," she silently promised Harry. Promise number four thousand and twenty-eight. But she wasn't counting.

\* \* \*

Homesickness wasn't something Ginny had really dealt with extensively while she had gone to Hogwarts. There was just always so much going on, something to take her mind off of thinking about her warm, safe home.

During her first year, the year with Riddle's damn diary, Ginny had cried herself to sleep more than once, wanting to go home and climb into her parents' bed, like she'd done when she was very little. Her mother would rock her side to side, drying tears with her nightgown and offering cups of warm, sweet tea. Her father would light the tip of his wand and search her wardrobe, and under her bed, for monsters before proclaiming her bedroom a monster-free zone. And things would be all better.

But Tom Riddle wasn't a monster her father could dispel. No, it was only one boy who could do that; a knobbly kneed, bespectacled boy who owned her heart was the only one who could save her—save them all, in actuality.

Ginny swiped moodily at the tears that dripped from her face onto the letter her mother had painstakingly written. She could tell this one had gone through several versions before this one had been sealed in the envelope. There were no crossed out words, and no spots of ink where her quill had dwelt, deciding on what she most wanted to say.

*My Dearest Ginevra,*

*I write in hopes that you will one day be allowed to answer, or to make your way home. But after all these months, I'm fearful that I may never be allowed to see you again.*

*I pray that you are well and safe, because that's all I feel I can pray for right now.*

*Ginny, we love you. So much.*

*This house feels so empty without you here. I ramble about all day, seeing little reminders of the way our family once was, and held the promise of being. And I wonder if it can ever be complete again. But I know that's a foolish old woman's dream.*

*Just know that we love you, Ginny. Wherever you may be in your life, please take that with you.*

Ginny had to stop reading there, because her eyes were too blurry. She set the letter aside and pulled herself off the bed in her room, moving to stand by the window, but seeing nothing that distracted her mind from where it wanted to be.

So she closed her eyes, welcoming the picture of the Burrow in her mind. It was all done up, like it had been at Bill and Fleur's wedding. But this time, in her imagination at least, it was Ron and Hermione who were getting married.

Ginny took time picturing all the guests in their wedding finery; Luna floating around the reception in her bright yellow dress, Neville stumbling around the dance floor—maybe he had someone special to stumble around with, her family, all smiling as Ginny entered the marquee with Harry on her arm.

The dream of having everyone together again was so vivid, yet so far away in her mind that Ginny forced it out. It just hurt too much right now to think about it.

Logically, she knew that Ron and Hermione would be marrying soon, if they hadn't already. But Ginny wasn't sure if she could have survived going back to the Burrow without Harry. If she were there alone, his absence would resonate so fully inside her that everything else would be drowned out.

No, it was best for her not to be there if she couldn't bring Harry with her.

Even if the worst were true—that Harry had no memory of any of them—just to know he was alive and well was enough for Ginny.

"Stop lying to yourself," Ginny scolded herself and dried her eyes with the back of her hand.

It *wouldn't* be enough, she knew. But she couldn't dwell on that right now. They were leaving for America in the morning, taking an impossible route of Apparition jumps that Doell had been working on for hours, and then a Muggle flight to disguise it all.

She made a new promise this time, to her family; whispered on the breeze that ruffled the sheer

curtains and whipped out into the warm Egyptian air. "I'm bringing him home."

# Chapter 14: It's The Only One You've Got

It turned out Jessen wasn't that uncommon of a surname. But at least they were in the United States, Ginny reassured herself. And if you paired it with the title of 'Momma', the name became just a bit easier to find.

They started in the south, remembering Marius' comments about heat. Doell seemed to think it made the most sense right now.

"This could take months, if not years," he repeatedly warned on their first day looking.

But Ginny had shrugged off his cautionary mood and enthusiastically gone about tracking down the names on their list.

So far, they had tracked down five women who used the name Momma Jessen, but none of them had given them any clue that they were involved at all. One had worked at a school for many years, handing out lunches. Another was a librarian who lorded over a small county library and, frankly, made Ginny nervous with all her own questions.

Several had been elderly housewives who knew nothing of consequence for their investigation.

"I told you not to—"

"Shut up," Ginny pleaded from her place, face down on the hotel bed. They'd been at it for four days and hadn't turned up anything remotely connected to their search.

"It might not have been her name at all—"

"I told you to shut up," Ginny yelled. "Please, Jasper, my head is killing me and I can't even think straight, let alone try and decide where we should go next."

Doell stared at her, but finally nodded before standing up. "I'm going to get food."

Ginny's head finally stopped hurting long enough for her to move, in the dark of the hot hotel room, to the small balcony overlooking a rather sprawling bit of Jacksonville, Florida.

"Where are you, Harry?" she asked aloud, her eyes simply skimming over the buildings and shopping malls. "I need you to help me out. I know you said I was strong enough... but I'm not sure I am."

The sounds of the city settling down for the night answered her back, but gave no further insight into what she needed to do.

All she really could do was continue on with the plan; tracking down these women one at a time and showing them pictures.

Jasper pointed out that they might have already talked to the right one, since they were dealing with memory charms. But something told Ginny that they hadn't found the right one yet.

The next morning, they moved up the coast, stopping at three small towns that held any Jessen's at

all. None of them were the right one.

They arrived in Savannah late in the evening and Ginny collapsed into bed again, mentally drained. Doell disappeared that night also, coming back in well after Ginny had fallen asleep. She wasn't exactly sure she wanted to know what he was doing. When she pressed him, he would just grunt out, "Security." She left it at that.

"How many here?" Doell asked the next morning, his eyes bloodshot and looking as if he hadn't slept in weeks.

"Four," Ginny said softly, ignoring the way he still watched her and picking at the breakfast he'd ordered up and then didn't eat.

"Good," he said. "We should be able to get through those fast today."

"Do you have somewhere else you'd rather be?" Ginny asked irritably.

He stared at her for a minute before deflating. "No, I didn't mean it that way."

She stared at him a moment longer before an unsettling thought crept in. "They're following us, aren't they?"

"No," he said, his head jerking to stare away from them and his eyes searching the small restaurant.

"Does that really mean 'yes, Ginny, they've found us and we have only minutes before they break down the doors and drag us off' or does that mean 'no, Ginny, they're really not following us'? Because I can't read your thoughts, Jasper."

"It means," he drawled, his eyes still not meeting hers, "That you don't have to worry about anyone following us right now."

Ginny rolled her eyes and almost told him to elaborate, but she held her tongue. His admission of what his job actually entailed at times was a chilling reminder of just what type of man he was. And although Ginny trusted him with her life, Doell's past frightened her.

"Fine," she said slowly. "Let's get started, before it gets too hot."

The heat *was* oppressive; moist and clawing. Ginny usually pulled her hair up to get it off her neck, and almost considered having it cut when they wandered by a shop advertising a special. But it seemed indulgent to stop searching to pamper herself.

By lunch they had ruled out two of the women, finding one in a local cemetery, and wasting hours with the other one, having glasses of iced tea shoved into their hands while they swallowed thickly and tried to choke it down.

"We need to find someplace to eat," Doell said, swiping a handkerchief across his forehead to remove the layer of sweat.

"One more, then we will," Ginny prodded.

"This would be so much easier if we could rule out the Muggles," he grumbled, motioning Ginny to a secluded space between buildings to Apparate.

"Well, we can't," Ginny protested. "Marius didn't say anything about magic usage, other than it wasn't allowed. That doesn't mean—"

"I know," Doell protested irritably. "What are the coordinates again?"

Ginny stared at him for a minute before showing him the piece of paper she was carrying.

"See you there," he said before disappearing.

Ginny pressed her fingers into her temple and then closed her eyes focusing on the numbers.

\* \* \*

"We're sorry to bother you," Ginny said, for what seemed the hundredth time already today. "But we're looking for a woman who goes by the name of Momma Jessen."

The young woman who answered the door stared at them, her dark eyes appraising the two strangers standing on her front porch. And Ginny really didn't blame her for being suspicious. This was a nice, middle class neighborhood, where the gardens were well kept and the neighbors all knew each other.

"The woman we're looking for may have worked as a nurse several years ago."

"That sounds like my Grandma," the woman said, staying behind her porch screen door. "She retired almost two years ago after almost forty years of being a nurse."

A spike of hope shot through Ginny's heart and she reached down, clutching Doell's hand for just a second. He stiffened behind her and glanced warily around the neighborhood.

"She may have taken care of a friend of ours and we're trying to find him."

The woman's eyebrows shot up. "In that many years, she took care of a lot of people."

Ginny smiled, trying to be patient. "I'm sorry, you must think we're crazy, but... this *friend* is very important to us."

The woman hesitated only a moment before slowly opening the door. "Come on in," she nodded them forward. "I'm Tessie Miller."

"Ginny Weasley," Ginny said, holding out her hand to shake.

"Jasper Doell." Doell did the same as his eyes traveled the room and took mental notes. Ginny was actually surprised that they'd been allowed in, considering how stiff and imposing Jasper was acting right now. Like a bloody bodyguard, or something.

"Come in and have a seat." Tessie led them into a rather jumbled living room, littered with brightly colored toys among the furniture. "Sorry about the mess. I can't seem to keep up with my son."

"It's okay," Ginny dismissed quickly. Her heart was pounding at the idea that they might have just found the right woman.

"I don't mean to be rude," Tessie said once they were seated. "But I just don't know if my grandmother is the woman you're looking for. And before I let you talk to her—"

"She's here?" Doell asked, sliding forward in his seat. Ginny's hand on his arm made him pause in standing.

Tessie watched the byplay between them before nodding. "After she retired, Momma Jessen started to have some health issues. I trained as a nurse before I got married, so I took her in. She lives with us now."

"Health issues?" Ginny asked, worrying about what that might do to what she knew, if she even still knew anything at all.

Tessie nodded. "Actually, it was the last few years while she was working. She'd forget things—whole parts of her memory would come and go. I'd take her dinner in the evening and she couldn't remember what she'd done that day. She knew she went to work, but beyond that was just... lost."

Ginny glanced at Jasper and knew he was thinking the same thing she was. It sounded very much like a memory charm.

"Your friend," Tessie continued, "he was British? Because Momma Jessen worked for the government, out at Stewart/Hunter. It's a military base."

Ginny's throat closed over and she took a deep breath. It sounded like they'd found the right woman. A military base would be the perfect place to hide these men away from the world.

"Did she ever tell you what it was she did?"

Jasper's question made Tessie scowl and for a moment Ginny thought they might have upset her.

"Well, that's the thing. For almost all of those years, she worked at the base hospital, treating the soldiers and such. But then, the last few, Momma Jessen told us she'd been given a special job, but that she couldn't talk about it. We assumed it was some sort of research project or something."

"And how long ago was that?" Ginny asked, completely enraptured by the story, along with the possibilities.

Tessie screwed up her face for just a second, calculating. "It must have been five, or even six, years ago now. I remember my mother wanted her to retire early, but Momma Jessen kept talking about 'her boys' and how they needed her." She smiled softly. "That's what she always called the soldiers she worked with, 'my boys'."

Ginny smiled, praying that Momma Jessen had been one of the ones taking care of Harry. She sounded like she actually cared about these people, past their use as a science experiment.

"Momma Jessen was like that," Tessie explained. "Always mothering everyone."

"She sounds very special," Jasper said, smiling tightly. Ginny could tell his mind was tracing every possibility, calculating everything precisely in that way he had.

"Oh, Momma Jessen was always... special," Tessie said, shaking her head ruefully. "She had a temper, I'll tell you. And she was always mumbling things, strange words. When we were children she used to tease us and tell us she was a witch. Children's stories."

Doell and Ginny exchanged a look and he reached out, taking her hand in his to stop her from shaking. Or perhaps it was to keep himself grounded.

"I think she may have been the one," Ginny said softly. "Or maybe she knows something that could help us find him."

Tessie studied them a minute more. "Your friend is missing?"

Ginny nodded, closing her eyes to keep the emotion back. "Several years ago," she nodded. "We... we've been trying to find him, and think he may have ended up here."

Tessie nodded her understanding and then stood slowly. "I'm not sure how much Momma Jessen can help. Her Alzheimer's is starting to really escalate lately."

Ginny forced herself to nod and speak. "Anything she may be able to tell us."

"Mostly it's a lot of nonsense," Tessie dismissed. "But at times she's very clear." She was quiet for a minute, watching the both of them, before nodding. "I'll go and get her."

Ginny relaxed back into the sofa, finally letting herself take a full breath. "It's her."

"Yeah," Jasper agreed, giving her hand a squeeze. "Ginny don't... don't pin too much on this—"

"Too late," Ginny sighed, her heart pounding away with hope. This could be the real thing—the thing that led her straight to Harry.

"Look Momma Jessen," Tessie said cheerfully as she wheeled a kind of chair through the doorway, a woman sitting inside it, "someone has come to see you. You always like visitors."

"Don't know them," the woman said plainly, staring at Ginny and Doell through thick glasses before taking them off to polish on her terrycloth robe.

"Mrs. Jessen," Ginny started, leaning forward on the seat, "I'm Ginny Weasley, and this is Jasper Doell. We think you might have taken care of a friend of ours several years ago, when you worked for the government."

Momma Jessen stared back at them before looking over her shoulder at her granddaughter. "We havin' chicken for dinner?"

Tessie sighed and patted her grandmother on the shoulder. "I'll see if I can't make some fried chicken for you. Would you all like some iced tea or—"

"Water is fine," Doell offered. Ginny had to hide her smile down to her lap before focusing back on

Momma Jessen.

"Mrs. Jessen—"

"Momma Jessen," the woman corrected automatically, as if she'd been correcting people all her life. "Everyone calls me Momma Jessen."

Ginny smiled at her fire and nodded. "Momma Jessen, then. We'd like to show you a photograph and see if you remember the man in it. He may have been at the hospital you worked at."

"I took care of soldiers," she nodded. "And they loved me."

"I'm sure they did," Ginny smiled encouragingly while she reached into her back pocket and pulled two photographs out. She kept one in her palm, but held out the other one out to the elderly woman.

Gingerly, and with several studying glances at them, Momma Jessen took the picture and pulled it close to her face.

Tessie returned carrying a tray of ice waters and set them down on the small table at their knees. "She might not—"

"That's my Africa Boy," Momma Jessen smiled widely. Her fingers traced over the dark face of Marius and Ginny sucked in a breath. "He was so sweet, so polite."

"Your Africa Boy?" Tessie said, staring at her grandmother. "You never told us about him."

"He was special," Momma Jessen nodded. "My Africa Boy had magic. He could make things fly around the room and make things disappear."

"Momma Jessen," Tessie scolded. "You're talking nonsense again."

"It's alright," Ginny shook her head. "I... I think I understand what she's trying to say."

Tessie scowled at them as if they were pampering an indulgent child. Ginny thought it was rather sad that Momma Jessen had never been able to convince even her family that she was a witch. Having to hide your magic all those years must make for a hard life.

"What happened to your Africa Boy?" Doell prompted.

"It didn't work," Momma Jessen said, holding out the photograph in a very shaky hand. "What they were trying to do. He was too strong." She nodded with a fond smile, as if that explained everything.

Strangely, for Ginny, it almost did.

"He was my first boy," Momma Jessen said, staring out the window. Ginny looked at Jasper who gave the smallest nod, tucking that information away in his mind.

"How many boys were there?" Ginny asked. But no one answered. Momma Jessen continued to stare

out the window.

"She does this," Tessie sighed, rubbing her grandmother's shoulder. "She'll drift off from time to time. We might not get her back for hours, or sometimes it's only a few minutes."

"We used to play hopscotch," Momma Jessen grunted softly. "Out there on that sidewalk."

They all started when she spoke again, and Ginny nodded.

"There was Millie and Alice and me. We were so young and feisty back then." She trailed off again and Ginny glanced at Doell, who shrugged one shoulder. At least they knew Marius had been here for sure.

"Was he really from Africa?" Tessie asked, her eyes on the picture of Marius's smiling face.

"South Africa," Doell nodded. Tessie stared and then shook her head, as if trying to make sense of it all.

"There were eight boys," Momma Jessen continued, snapping back to the conversation as if she'd never left it. "Eight boys."

Ginny shuffled the picture in her hand before holding it out to Momma Jessen.

"Was he one of them? One of your boys?"

Momma Jessen took the photograph and brought it up so that the tip of her nose touched it. "That's my Joe," she said, smiling again like she had with Marius' picture. "Oh, he was a fighter."

Ginny's fingernails dug into Doell's arm, but he didn't pull away. She bit down on her lip hard enough to draw blood, rather than keep from crying out.

"He was always yellin' about somethin'," Momma Jessen drawled, shaking her head and tracing the outline of Harry's face in the picture.

"He was strong too," she nodded, a hint of pride in her face. "My Ordinary Joe."

"Why did you call him that?" Jasper asked.

"That's who he wanted to be," Momma Jessen dismissed quickly. "Just an Ordinary Joe. My Boys didn't have names. Just numbers." She nodded, as if that all made sense. "So I named them. But we never said the names outside in the hallway, otherwise I'd get in trouble. Africa Boy. Ordinary Joe. Johnny Appleseed. The Frenchman. They were all my boys."

Ginny swallowed the lump in her throat and swiped at the tears that had run down her cheeks.

"What happened to Joe, Momma Jessen? He... he was important to me."

Momma Jessen's face lifted and she stared at Ginny, as if truly seeing her for the first time.

"My Joe was strong. He was a fighter. Oh, he was a willful child. And they didn't like that. Not at

all. Wouldn't take his medicine. Kept blowing things up. But he was always a good boy for me."

A small sob escaped Ginny and Doell put a stiff arm around her while Tessie narrowed her eyes at them.

"But they broke him," Momma Jessen said sadly. "He stopped fighting and let them do their tests."

"What tests, Momma Jessen?" Tessie pressed. "You're not making sense. They don't do that sort of testing at Stewart/Hunter."

"Their brain tests," Momma Jessen said with a firm nod.

"What happened to Joe, Momma Jessen?" Ginny pleaded. "I have to know."

But she faded out again, staring off in the other direction. Doell dug in his pocket and handed a handkerchief to Ginny, who wiped her eyes. Her chest felt tight at the thought of anyone 'breaking' Harry.

He sounded like he fought long and hard until he just couldn't take it anymore.

"He was more than a friend," Tessie said, her voice cracking with emotion as she stared at Ginny. But the words to answer her were stuck in Ginny's throat, so she just nodded.

"They would have been married," Jasper explained. "They were in love."

"Then how did he end up over here?" Tessie asked, tilting her head to the side.

Doell sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "We're not really sure what happened, but most of these men were... taken from their homes to be part of some... experiment."

"Kidnapped?" Tessie gasped.

"We believe so," he nodded.

Tessie scowled at the back of her grandmother's head and opened her mouth several times, nothing coming out.

"We don't think your grandmother knew what she was dealing with," he dismissed. "She was tricked into helping, or she really had no idea what they were doing."

"It's a secret," Momma Jessen whispered, turning her head back to them. "I'm not supposed to tell. They don't want me to tell."

Doell looked at the women in the room and nodded, answering for them all. "We won't tell."

"Ordinary Joe," she said, her voice soft with remembrance. "I cried and cried. He was my last boy."

"Tell them what happened, Momma Jessen," Tessie said, her eyes never leaving Ginny.

Ginny inched forward in the sofa, clutching the handkerchief and mangling it in her hands.

"He died."

The words were so quiet, yet at the same time, Ginny flinched at the booming, thunderous sound of them.

"No," she moaned, shaking her head over and over. It couldn't be. All this time and he was... gone? It couldn't be. Ginny wouldn't let it be true.

She pressed her fingers over her eyes, leaning forward until her forehead touched her knees, still repeating the same word over and over again. "No. No. No."

"You're sure?"

Doell's voice sounded like it was underwater and Ginny took deep gasping breaths to try and find it—find anything but the pain to grasp onto.

"He died."

The words cut through her mind again, ripping and tearing away any hope that Ginny had of finding Harry.

"I'm so sorry."

*He died.*

"Is she going to be alright?"

"She's just... lost him all over again."

*He died.*

"Should I call someone?"

"I saw the body."

"No, she'll be fine. Just..."

"I cried and cried for my Ordinary Joe."

"Perhaps it's best if we just go."

"We used to play hopscotch."

The conversation swirled around her but Ginny could only see Harry's face, as it had been in her dream the moment right before he flew off of the cliff... fading out of sight as his body disappeared into the clouds.

\* \* \*

"Ginny!"

“Ginny, don’t do this.”

Doell’s voice floated to the top of her consciousness, and then back into the darkness again. But his arms were around her tightly, rubbing up and down her back and then turning her over in the bed—they must have made it to the hotel, she decided—and wrapping around her while she continued to cry.

“Let it out, Ginny,” he whispered softly. “You’ll feel better when it’s all out.”

She wanted to scream and yell at him, and tell him that she bloody well would not feel better. She never would. But it just took too much energy that she just didn’t have right then.

The darkness of sleep beckoned to her, an old friend when paired with her grieving. Those early days, when she had first lost Harry, were wasted away in darkness and with fanciful dreams of times that were long gone.

The morning light filtering through the curtains of the hotel room woke her, and Ginny blinked away the brightness, lifting her head. The room was empty, but Jasper’s things were scattered everywhere still—like normal.

She rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling, keeping the painful thoughts at bay until she could slowly analyze them one by one.

Harry was gone again—torn from her life when she’d just began to really believe that he could be out there again.

Harry who had lived for months, if not years, as ‘Ordinary Joe’, taken care of by someone who had no idea who he was, or that there were other people in the world looking for him.

Momma Jessen’s words about how Harry had fought back against those imprisoning him gave her heart a small victory as she closed her eyes and pictured Harry in the sterile environment of some sort of hospital, resisting where he could—that was her only comfort at the moment.

The rest was just too raw to deal with. Ginny knew that any progress in grieving she’d made over the past years was now gone; the pain rushing around her head until it throbbed.

Ginny curled around her knees and didn’t move, staring straight ahead. Even when Jasper came in carrying a tray of breakfast for her, Ginny didn’t shift.

“You need to eat, Ginny,” he said firmly, sitting on the bed next to her and holding a plate with various things on it. “You need to keep up your strength.”

Ginny looked up at him and then rolled over, her eyes watering. “I’m not hungry,” she lied, wrapping tighter around her body that was responding to the smell of the food.

He sighed and set the plate on the bedside table, resting his hand on her arm. “I know it’s hard. When my mother died—”

“It’s not the same,” Ginny protested, shaking her head.

"No, it's not," he said quietly. "But... and I really don't mean to sound callous about this, but you survived it before."

The comment spurred Ginny forward, off of the bed and toward the bathroom. "You're an arse, Doell," she said quietly, her voice shaking with building rage. "You're probably glad he's... gone." The compulsion to avoid anything having to do with the word 'dead' flooded back in, reminding Ginny of how she'd spent months wandering the halls at Hogwarts, refusing to acknowledge the word. "Now you can go back to shagging all the women in Paris and... and back to whatever the hell it is that you do."

"I'm *not* glad," he protested.

Ginny looked back over her shoulder and saw the stiffness in his shoulders. She wasn't sure if he was lying or not.

"And I happen to think it's too early to think that he's dead."

She shivered at the word, staring at the closed door in front of her, her eyes tracing the grains of the wood. "I can't stop hearing the words."

Doell was silent for a minute before he cleared his throat. "Ginny, you saw what those bastards did to that woman. They've mucked up her mind so badly that she can't even focus. Her family thinks she's insane. If you think about it logically—"

Ginny snorted. "Logically?" she demanded. "How am I supposed to do that?" She spun on her heel and stared at him. "The man I've been in love with *forever* has been ripped from me again—and where was I when all of this was happening? At Hogwarts? Training to be an Auror?" The fight slowly drained out of her, leaving her weak enough that she stumbled to a chair and sank down into it.

"I failed him."

"You only fail if you stop trying," Doell said. In a second he was standing in front of her, his strong hands wrapped around her shoulders, shaking her slightly. "You're stronger than you think you are."

"I'm not strong at all," Ginny protested. "I don't know how to live without the thought of him," she admitted in a small voice. It was the truth—the first time she'd acknowledged it in a long time.

Doell pushed away from his crouch and growled into the room. "You're giving up too easily," he accused. "We don't even know that he *is* dead, Ginny. You've held on this long, you can keep going."

She knew he was right. The truth of it rang inside her, even though it felt so tiring to move toward accepting it.

"You need a plan," he suggested, as if it were a bright, shiny idea set before him.

"A plan," Ginny said dully. The whole concept was lost to her right now, despite the past few years living her whole life around 'a plan'.

"Yeah," Doell said firmly. "We're not giving this up, Ginny. I'm not walking away from this, and I won't allow you to either."

"You promised me a month," Ginny said, staring at him. "It's been longer than that."

He stared at her and then looked away. "I don't have anything else right now, Ginny. Whether your pride wants to admit it or not, you need me here."

They stared at each other for a long minute before he nodded decisively. "I'll give you a day to clean yourself up, but then we're going to start searching again."

He closed the door between their rooms behind him and Ginny stared at it, wishing she could feel as passionately about anything right now.

\* \* \*

Ginny was really beginning to hate dreams. Rarely did they allow her a peaceful night's sleep, and often they brought about such horrific visions and thoughts that she was completely thrown off for days afterwards.

Considering some of the things she'd dealt with in the past—Riddle's seductive tones, waking in the icy Chamber, losing Harry—she should have expected that her solid nights of sleep would be over very soon.

The corridor that she opened her eyes to stare into was half lit by a ghostly green light, long shadows moving, darting between doorways that were spaced every few feet. Vaguely, Ginny realized that this must be a Muggle place as the fluorescent lights on the ceiling buzzed loudly in her ears, and one at the far end of the hallway flickered on and off jarringly.

A hissing, slithering sound came from behind her and Ginny gasped, spinning with her wand held aloft, ready to defend herself.

"Ginny."

It was whispered, but made Ginny shiver with the eerie tone.

"Harry?" Ginny asked, stepping toward the only shadow that stood completely still in one of the doorways down the hall.

"Ginny."

The hissing sound that reminded her of the Basilisk came from behind her again, so Ginny started to run, still unsure what was ahead. Anything was better than what was behind her.

"Harry, I'm coming!" she called again, crying out when the distance between her and the doorway increased. Soon she was running, the other shadows in the doorways pointing and laughing and calling to her.

"Come in, Ginny," one called, gesturing toward the room. "You'll be safe in here." Ginny slowed down and stopped, staring as the shadow changed into Doell, smiling seductively and gesturing

toward the room again. "I can protect you in here. You'll never worry again." But it was all wrong, because Jasper wasn't like that, at all. He was much more like Bill—like an older brother who watched out for her.

Ginny stared at him, the warmth and comfort pouring from the room. But she also knew that it wasn't for her, so she shook her head. "I can't, Jasper. I'm sorry."

"Please, Ginny," he tried, moving further into the hall and reaching for her hand.

Ginny pulled away from him, looking over her shoulder to find what she knew must be Harry's shadow.

"I can protect you, Ginny!" he called as she turned, crying now as she ran toward Harry.

The hardest door to pass, however, was one that looked like the backdoor of the Burrow, Wellington boots and rusted cauldrons cast all around the step. Her parents were there, smiling anxiously as she approached.

"Welcome home, Pumpkin," her father called, spreading his arms wide. All of her brothers were there—even Fred—with their families.

"Come in," her mother prodded. "I made all your favorites."

Ginny faltered at seeing the people she loved, and missed, more than any others, besides Harry.

"We haven't heard from you in forever," Hermione scolded, reaching out to take Ginny's hand.

And Ginny almost gave in, almost followed them into the warmth and welcome that the Burrow offered, before she found George, standing on the outside edge of the vision, his eyes narrowed at Fred.

"George?"

"Run, Ginny," he warned, shaking his head to break out of the vision. "It's not real. Just... just run."

With a longing look over her shoulder, Ginny did as he commanded; leaving her family behind and going into the pitch blackness that overtook the hallway. All along the way, accusing eyes stared at her and faces turned away.

Ginny had never felt so all alone in her life. She took a shuddering breath and kept moving, one step at a time, toward Harry's shadow.

Finally, when she reached the doorway, Harry's shadow was gone. But the room had people in it, so Ginny went in.

"You came!" Harry was beaming at her from a narrow hospital bed. He made to get up, but there were chains holding his arms and legs down. "I'm sorry," he said, looking sadly down at his restricted limbs.

"It's okay," Ginny said softly. Her eyes seemed to drink him in, memorizing each feature, and finding him exactly how she had left him so many years ago.

Momma Jessen bustled into the room a few minutes later. "How is my Ordinary Joe today?" she greeted with a cheerful smile—it was almost creepily cheery, Ginny noted.

"I've been bad again," Harry beamed at her. He took the glass of iced tea that she offered—Ginny couldn't help but notice that he was no longer held down by restraints—and drank deeply from it.

In the far corner of the room, was a chess board that was illuminated by a bright, white light. Someone's pitch black hand came out of the darkness and moved a piece. Marius' smiling face came into focus for just a minute before he got up and switched seats, studying the board as if his very life depended on the next move.

"Ginny."

Ginny turned back to Harry and quickly moved toward him, taking his hand in her own.

"I've missed you," she said.

"You've been gone a long time," Harry agreed. Ginny scowled, trying to count how long they'd been apart.

"It was *you*, Harry," she corrected him. "*You* were the one who was gone."

Harry smiled and reached forward, brushing his fingertips along the edges of her long red hair. "It doesn't matter."

"No," Ginny agreed. "It doesn't."

"It's time for you to go now," Momma Jessen said, coming forward and trying to usher Ginny away from Harry, who clung to her hand.

"No," Ginny demanded. "I need to stay. I can't leave."

"You must, child," Momma Jessen said, shaking her head sadly. "They won't like you being here. Not one bit. You must leave."

"I can't," Ginny protested. "I just found Harry."

"This isn't Harry," she scolded softly. "This is Joe, my Ordinary Joe."

"Harry, do something!" Ginny demanded as they finally lost contact with their hands.

"Ordinary Joe can't do anything to help you, Ginny."

Everyone in the room turned to look as a shadow entered the room. It was too dark to tell who it was, but Ginny felt a chill go down her spine. Somehow, she felt as if this may be Death itself, walking into the room.

The shadow lifted its arm and Ginny felt that everything was moving entirely too fast, and yet horribly slow, to be able to do anything.

A flash of light lit the room and Ginny clasped her hands over her head, ducking down. The spell crackled loudly, making her ears ache.

Not another sound echoed after that and Ginny stood up straight, trying to figure out what had happened.

All across Harry's chest a large red stain spread, like ink spilling out of a forgotten quill. Harry looked down at his chest, a shocked and slightly awed look on his face as he watched his pyjamas go from white to red.

"NO!" Ginny wailed, throwing herself toward the bed. But Marius and Momma Jessen caught her before she could get to Harry.

"Haven't you done enough damage?"

Ginny recoiled in horror at the accusing tone in Momma Jessen's voice.

"You were not here for him," Marius' deep voice boomed out, his easy smile gone now as his dark eyes bore into her.

"What are you talking about?" Ginny demanded. "I'm right here."

She tried to look over their shoulders to Harry, who was still watching blood pump out of his body in time to his heartbeat.

"Maybe you'd better go," he told Ginny softly, his eyes darting between her, the wound on his chest and the dark figure who had hit him with the spell.

"No," Ginny whispered in agony. Leaving Harry like this, while he was dying wasn't something she could do. Not ever.

"Just go!" Harry's tone was harsh and he looked at her disgustedly before he rolled over in the bed, a gaping wound on his back, even more blood covering everything.

Ginny was horrified, and clutched her hand over her mouth for fear she might scream.

"Just go," Harry pleaded quietly. "I loved you. And you did this to me."

"I... no," Ginny protested weakly. "It wasn't me. It was..."

Her words died in her mouth as the stranger's shadow lightened to show Ginny a mirror image of herself. The only differences were the wand held in one of their hands, and the shorter, stringy dark hair.

"You killed him," Ginny accused, wanting nothing more than to strangle this impersonator.

"I *am* you," the other Ginny said in a perfectly pleasant voice before fading out.

Ginny awoke with a start, gasping and crying into her pillow as she tried to press her fingers into her eyes long enough to make the images disappear.

Feeling the meager contents of her stomach rebel, Ginny dove out of bed, tripping on the sheets and skinning her knee on the carpet.

The bathroom felt leagues away as Ginny clenched her teeth together. She barely made it in time to vomit, shaking her head and coughing. Her stomach heaved one more time, but she managed to swallow it back down while fumbling for a small cup set on the bathroom sink.

After rinsing her mouth, Ginny stood up and looked directly in the mirror. Her hair was at her shoulders, stringy and almost maroon in the darkness. The similarities to the Ginny that had killed Harry in the dream were too much for her and she vomited again, this time into the sink.

Her legs and hands were shaking when she was finally sure she wasn't going to be sick again.

The bed almost seemed foreboding as she climbed back inside, pressing her back to the wall behind it and wrapping the blankets around her like a nest. Her whole body shivered in the aftermath of the dream, and her stomach rolled uncomfortably, although there was not much left in it to come up again.

Whatever Doell's plan was—he'd promised that in the morning they would sit down and discuss where he thought they needed to go next—it had better be good. Because Ginny wasn't sure how much longer she could hang on like this.

# Chapter 15: Going Down In Flames

The dream from the night before haunted Ginny and she only managed an hour, at most, of dozing with her back propped up against the wall before Doell knocked on the door connecting his room and hers.

"You look like shite," he proclaimed loudly, startling Ginny from her prone position on the bed. "Your day of feeling sorry for yourself is over."

Ginny stared at him, knowing he meant well. That didn't mean she thought he was anything less than a prat, however, but listening to him as he rattled off things for her to get done before he returned with breakfast seemed easier than arguing.

He was gone in a flurry of motion and Ginny stared after him, praying she could find his mood infectious.

A hot shower cleared away much of the gloom and Ginny spent the long minutes breathing in the steam and thinking about what Doell had said yesterday.

He was right, of course, and it rankled to admit it. They didn't know anything for sure about Harry. Ginny could only claim exhaustion and frustration as her excuse to accepting what Momma Jessen had said about Joe so easily.

But, she'd too easily accepted Harry's death in the past. Had she learned *nothing*?

Harry was a fighter. And if anyone could survive, it would be him.

Doell had ordered almost the entire room service menu, it seemed, and Ginny hungrily grabbed a plate of eggs and bacon, devouring it while he smirked at her.

"Ready to hear the plan?" he asked, sitting back once he was satisfied.

Ginny wiped egg yolk off of her lips and nodded. "Do I really want to?"

He was quiet for a minute before his eyes took on a dark, dangerous quality. "We're breaking into the base."

Ginny swore and nearly dropped the plate she held back onto the small table between them as she stared at him. "Are... are you *insane*?"

"I've been told so, often," he nodded, a smug smile painting his face.

"You are," Ginny said, standing and pacing while her hands buried in her wet hair. "You're... certifiably insane. Gone 'round the twist completely."

"We don't really have a choice here, Ginny," he defended. "Somewhere on that base is where they kept these men. You've heard how they were treated."

Ginny flinched at the picture that entered her head—a flash of the dark hospital corridor from her

dream. Her arms dropped to rub the goosebumps that rose on her arms and she rolled her neck, willing the stiffness to leave.

"I bloody well can imagine it," she muttered.

"We have nothing left, Ginny," Doell said softly. His tone surprised her more than anything.

She stared at him, her whole body shivering as she contemplated the idea. They were really going to do it. They were going to break into a United States military base.

"You think we'll really find something?" Ginny asked. The gloom and doom of yesterday and last night were slowly starting to dispel; like clouds being pushed aside to allow bright beams of light to descend through them.

"I have no idea what we'll find," Doell shrugged and reclined back in the chair, lacing his fingers behind his head. "But I know we won't find anything sitting here in a hotel in Savannah."

"You're right," Ginny said, sinking back down into her chair. "I mean, I still say you're a nutter, but..."

Doell laughed and Ginny actually found herself chuckling a bit with him.

"But you'll help me?" he asked hopefully. "Because I really feel like this is a two-person job, you know. We're walking in there completely blind, as it were. We have no idea how much they know about magic and if they'll be looking for it. Neither of us has ever been to the base, so we don't know the layout and such."

Ginny nodded and sank into the chair. "I'm going with you," she affirmed. "Regardless of the fact that Harry was there... these people tortured other men too. Someone has to stand up and stop these things from happening."

Doell grinned. "Remember when you told me you wanted to make a difference?"

She stared at him. "I might have changed my mind about that."

He laughed mightily and started to spread out papers with notes sketched everywhere, pushing away the remains of their breakfast.

"This is what I have planned..."

\* \* \*

Ginny stared at Doell in the uniform he had nicked, and then down at herself, wearing a similar one.

"I can't believe that worked," she muttered, staring around at the base as they passed out of the guard station and got into the car Doell had somehow procured.

"The gun is real," he cautioned with a smirk. "Try not to shoot anyone, yeah?"

"What did you do to the two people we're impersonating? Wait... I don't want to know."

Doell grinned and motioned for her to get into the car. "That's probably the best policy, you know. Now, the building that Momma Jessen described for me should be recognizable—whether they've cleaned it all up or not remains to be seen."

Ginny nodded silently. "How is she?" she asked. "She was pretty shook up when we left the other day."

"Worried about you," Doell admitted with a shrug. "That's how I got back in the door in the first place."

"And Tessie didn't object?"

Doell gave her that knowing grin again and Ginny shook her head. "She kind of... took a little nap while I talked to Momma Jessen."

"Nice."

"Thank you."

"Alright, what are we looking for?" Ginny asked, peering at the base surrounding them. A group of men jogged by their car in precise lines, all wearing shorts and t-shirts that matched. She tugged her uniform hat down lower as they passed, but none of them paid any attention to the two impostors.

"Low building, set mostly underground," Doell said. "She went on and on about how green it was, but I'm not sure what she meant—everything out here is green."

"I can't imagine it being in the middle of everything," Ginny muttered as she searched everything they passed. "It would draw too much attention."

"You would think," Doell agreed. "Oi..." He pointed to three narrow, long buildings that were no more than two feet off ground; their metal roofs a dull grey-green. They were on the edge of the base, up against a tall chain fence with coils of wire at the top of it.

They seemed abandoned as weeds and debris rolled around them and there were no cars parked anywhere near them.

"Worth a look," Ginny said, swallowing the thickness that had overtaken her throat. Their car rolled past slowly and continued on another block until they found a place to tuck the car between two others.

Ginny pulled out the Invisibility Cloak and shook it out. "It won't be easy for both of us under here," she muttered, remembering one time when she and Harry had used it to sneak out of the Burrow, only to be caught because Ron saw the edges of Harry's shoes.

Doell nodded grimly and locked his door. "We can't risk using magic unless we have to. They might be monitoring."

He moved in behind her and Ginny stiffened when he pressed himself against her back. She whipped

the cloak around them, grateful that no one was around. Doell's arms came around her waist to help guide them together and he hunched down.

Walking together was awkward and slow, but Doell's reassuring whispers gave her something to focus on, rather than the way her stomach rolled at what they were doing.

"We'll have to search all three," he whispered when they came to the first narrow building. Huge chains were wrapped through the door handles, securing the doors. "There were windows on the side," he muttered.

They froze when a car drove by slowly, the letters MP painted on its side in big black letters.

"Think you can slip into one of those?" Doell asked, directing her attention to one of the four dirty rectangles that served as windows on the building.

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, I can fit. But you never will."

He chuckled. "Good thing I can make myself smaller then, isn't it?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. His constantly changing appearance had become something she was so used to that it rarely bothered her that she spoke to a different face often.

Ginny unlocked the window with a spell and they waited almost fifteen painstaking, agonizing minutes before Doell nodded that it was safe to enter. No one, it seemed, had been alerted to her small spell. That was a very good sign.

The window was tight, but Ginny managed to slide in. The room was some sort of office and the fine layer of dust on it suggested that no one had been in it for quite some time.

"Clear," she called back after scanning the office and hallway for security cameras.

She watched as Doell stuck his huge boot into the window and then swore softly as he magically stretched the window so that he could step right through.

"You cheat, Jasper," she grumbled.

"Of course I cheat," he smiled. "Come on, let's start searching."

"I don't feel any magic here," Ginny said, closing her eyes. "I can usually feel it in my skin when we're somewhere there has been magic."

Doell eyed her and then shook his head slightly. "It's been years ago, from the looks of this place. It might have faded."

"Maybe," Ginny said.

This building seemed to be full of dull grey offices only, each of them identical in size, shape and contents; but the file cabinets were empty when Ginny opened them. Every last paper had been taken out. It was more than eerie and Ginny shivered at the resemblance of the hallway to the one in her dreams. It ran the length of the building, right down the center, and every door opened to it.

At the far end of the building was the only locked door in the place and Doell quickly opened it.

The room was full of office equipment, but it was all smashed and broken, parts and pieces scattered all over the room.

"Someone was angry," Doell said, lifting the top of a copier that had the glass smashed on it.

"Jasper," Ginny said, opening another door and seeing huge rubbish bags full of shredded paper. The entire room was stacked floor to ceiling with it. "Damn," she muttered, running her hand over the plastic surface of one of them. "These files might have had something in them."

"Which is why they shredded them," Doell shrugged. "There are too many to go through—it would take us months, even *with* magic—and they may not have anything to do with why we're here."

Ginny nodded, glaring at the bags. She had the feeling that the information they needed was right there in those long strips of mangled paper. But it was worthless now.

A slow anger began to build low in her belly and Ginny nodded, closing the door and marching out.

"Time for your next dose," Doell said, holding out a vial of sickly green potion that made Ginny wrinkle up her nose.

"It's completely unfair that you don't have to do this, you know." She drank the foul Polyjuice, nearly gagging on the taste before handing the vial back to him. Ignoring his smirk, Ginny strode purposely down the hall to the room they had entered through.

"Come on, it's starting to get dark and we need to get those other buildings done."

"I knew you'd get into the idea once we were here," Doell commented absently as he stretched the window again.

Ginny clambered out and held the cloak over herself so that Doell could join her for the thirty meters they had to walk to the next building.

"You hid us?" Ginny muttered.

"No fingerprints, no magical signatures," he answered back. "Even charmed dirt and mud back onto the window where our hands touched it."

She nodded, glad he was a professional, because in her anger and haste to find evidence, Ginny might have forgotten something that would give them away.

They entered the second building a similar way, only to find that the drop from the window wasn't a mere four feet, like the last place, but nearly fifteen.

"Shite," Ginny hissed, dangling from the edge before she used her wand to slow her fall.

"Wow," Doell said once he'd dropped down next to her and they looked around at the massive inside of the building.

"It's magic," Ginny muttered in awe. It had to be, because this building, from the outside, was identical to the last one, but the huge open, concrete area before them was easily as large as a Quidditch pitch.

"Yeah," Doell agreed. "Look over here..." He wandered away toward one end of the room, where there were huge black circles charred into the concrete walls. "This is residue from spell fire," he mumbled.

"I remember," Ginny nodded. Auror training seemed to have been years and years ago, and the memory shifted forward in her mind. This was a spell casting range, used to practice spells with varying forces and effects.

She moved toward the wall and held out her hand, wincing when it got to within six inches of the stone. "Wards... layers and layers of wards. Anything cast in here would be absorbed completely. No one outside would ever know what was going on."

"There's no dust on the floor," Doell observed, his borrowed face screwed up strangely. "Shite... they still use this place, Ginny."

Ginny's heart hammered in her throat. Was it possible that Project Lucas was still running? If they *did* find the place where the men had been kept, what would they find there?

She felt naïve and stupid for a minute—they'd both just assumed that the Project was over, and the last building seemed to verify that.

"You don't think..."

"No," Doell said decisively. "I think someone still uses this place, but not for what they did then. It's been years, and we haven't seen anything telling us that it's still going on."

She nodded, although her chest tightened.

"Let's move on." Doell prodded her in the back toward the doors at the far end of the room.

The rest of the building was searched, but they only came up with smaller rooms that showed spell damage as well, and made Ginny's skin prickle.

"I'm not sure I want to know what they were doing to these men," she said as Doell levitated her toward the window they had come in.

"My guess is that they wanted to make sure their magic still worked after they took their memories," he said once he'd joined her back under the cloak. "One more to go," he said, helping her move toward the last building, which was set further back from the road than the others.

There were no windows in this one at all and Ginny stopped walking when she saw the small cameras mounted to all four corners of the building.

"This must be the place," she said, pointing them out to Doell.

"They sure don't want anyone in here," he agreed. "Have you ever done a screening ward?"

"No," Ginny said, scrunching her forehead. She'd heard of them, of course, but Bill said they were nearly impossible to maintain and required a lot of skill to construct. "I don't think we have time for one," she said.

"You're right," he agreed, looking around. "How about a wind charm?"

Ginny cocked her head to the side, trying to follow his train of thought.

"There's a lot of loose dirt and debris around here right now," Doell said thoughtfully. "A sudden whirlwind obscuring the cameras wouldn't be completely out of place, yeah?"

Ginny's smile stretched her face. "Yeah," she agreed, pointing her wand out past the chain fence a ways and turning her wand slowly as she built up a gust of whirling wind and brought it toward the building. As it moved into the path of the cameras, she and Doell slipped next to the door and he unlocked it just as the mass of dirt and debris passed them.

Ginny gave a final flick of her wand as the door closed and the whirlwind teetered left and right, and then died out near the road.

"Nicely done," Doell commented softly. He looked all around whistling low at the room that looked like a hospital waiting room. But there were papers everywhere, scattered over the dusty, messy floor, strewn on top of overturned chairs. "No cameras in here."

"Of course not," Ginny said with a scowl. She lit her wand and a beam of light lit up the dark room. "They didn't want anyone to actually see what they were doing in here." She picked her way through the small entry room and slid through a door that was barely hanging on its hinges.

The residual magical energy when she did, however, knocked her back a step; it stole her breath and made her heart jump into her throat. She had always been sensitive to large bursts of magic and wards, but this...

"Something horrible happened in here," she muttered, staring at the destroyed corridor.

"Marius was right," Doell said from beside her, his own eyes narrowed as they took it all in. "This place is evil."

More papers were scattered everywhere, and the whole place had a feeling like a closed in tomb that had been raided. The antiseptic smell mixed with the dust of years forgotten to make Ginny gag slightly.

She took a step forward and something crunched beneath her feet: tiny pebbles of glass from one of the windows in a door that was completely torn off its hinges and lay discarded inside the small room it had once secured.

The thin, metal hospital bed that was inside was tipped over as well and the mattress slit open, vomiting its stuffing out onto the floor.

Ginny shivered and moved on, stepping over medical paraphernalia discarded there, shredded paper piles, more broken glass, and a large rust colored stain on the wall.

"That's blood," Doell said, tracing the smears down the wall to where the liquid had pooled on the floor. There were several distinct bare footprints preserved in the color, and then trailing off down the hallway.

Ginny's stomach rolled and threatened to send the meager breakfast she'd been able to choke down back up. She grit her teeth against the feeling and chanted 'for Harry' underneath her breath.

"What the hell happened here?"

Doell's whispered words seemed to come from far down the corridor, even though she knew he was only steps behind her. This was taking her whole focus not to either vomit spectacularly, or explode in fury.

"It was hell in here," Ginny said, shaking her head.

Just past the blood stain, she turned her wand into another room, sending a circle of light to illuminate it. The only thing not destroyed in the room was the hospital bed that had thick leather straps on the sides and at one end.

Ginny lost her battle with her stomach and emptied the contents to one side of the doorway.

Although the energy was residual, Ginny recognized it at once. "Harry was in here," she muttered. "I can still feel him."

"Don't go in there," Doell said, sliding his strong hands around her biceps from behind and giving her a little tug toward the corridor. "There won't be anything in there."

"That was his room," she said absently, her eyes tracing the shredded privacy curtains and that torture device of a bed in the center.

"I think there are some untouched rooms further on," Doell said, pulling her along with him.

Ginny nodded and tried to force the image of Harry strapped to that bed, his back arching as he screamed and fought, trying to get away, out of her mind. Her stomach heaved one more time and she bent at the waist, coughing and choking on the thick stomach acid that came up, burning her nose and throat.

Doell held her up and handed her a handkerchief to wipe her face with when she was steadier.

"I shouldn't have made you do this," he muttered. "I'm sorry."

"I need to know," she shook her head. "Even if he is..." The words stuck in her mouth and she ground her teeth together. "Someone has to know what they did here... so they don't do it again."

"Let's try and find some proof, okay?" he said, awkwardly patting her back.

Ginny held herself up against the wall and nodded. "They have to be stopped, Jasper, they need to be held accountable for what they did here."

"I know," he said, his face a twisted version of what it had once been. Ginny supposed that his

focus on keeping his appearance what it was supposed to be to fool the guards just couldn't be maintained in a place like this. She was starting to see features in his face that she believed were the true Doell—similar to what he'd looked like when he was teaching at Hogwarts.

Six other rooms showed some damage to them, although nothing like the few they had first encountered. The paperwork scattered all around was simply nothing more than blank papers—nothing that was incriminating at all.

At the far end of the building—which was also magically enlarged on the inside—they found offices for the Healers.

Doell began tearing things apart with gusto, not bothering to hide any damage he was doing to drawers or locks, simply shattering them if they wouldn't open. Ginny watched for a few minutes before shaking off the stupor and joining in.

"This may be something," Doell said, handing her a small square piece of paper that looked rather like a prescription pad. But Ginny couldn't make out the handwriting on it. "The names across the top," Doell pointed out. "It was stuck to the bottom of this drawer."

Ginny's heart jumped in her chest and she nodded and slid the paper inside the uniform she wore, tucking it in between the thick fabric and the tighter t-shirt she wore underneath.

Finding something gave them greater energy, it seemed, because they tore into every piece of furniture, discarding broken bits here and there.

"There's another room back here," Doell said as he disappeared through another set of doors. "I think it somehow loops back to the corridor with the patient rooms."

"*Inmate* rooms," Ginny grumbled. Nothing but sheer fury and disgust was fueling her now, and it wasn't being appeased by tearing apart desks and empty file cabinets anymore. This place wasn't a hospital—it was a prison.

"It's some sort of surgical room," he called back.

Ginny stopped pulling drawers out of the last remaining desk in the room and stepped over the debris to follow his voice.

Something inside her screamed that she really didn't want to go inside that room, but she did it anyway.

She shivered, rubbing her arms the moment she stepped into the room. It felt like an ice chamber—hollow, and metallic, and freezing cold.

In the center of the room was a bed of sorts, flat with very little cushioning—in fact, it looked more like a table, really, with thick leather straps hanging from the sides. All around it were smaller stands and tables, covered with blue cloths and shiny surgical instruments that made Ginny's chest grow tight. All round the outside edge of the room were drawers and cupboards that Doell was searching.

Everything was covered with a fine layer of dust, indicating that no one had been in here for some time.

Ginny stared at the table in the center, imagining Harry strapped down there too. Perhaps this is where Theimann—or whoever it was—had done the procedure to remove Harry's scars. Whatever they had done seemed to be a mix of magical and Muggle—some bastardized version of the Healing arts.

"Ginny."

She looked up when she heard Doell's voice and blinked at him. He was staring at her and she got the impression that he'd been trying several times to get her attention.

"What?"

He looked at her a minute more before twisting up his face in a grimace and staring down at a metal cupboard, the size of a wardrobe, which had been tipped over.

"I think you need to see this," he muttered, shaking his head.

Ginny took a deep breath and tried to steel herself before she stepped around the center table.

Brittle glass snapped beneath her feet, but Ginny didn't care. Her eyes were fixed on the pool of silvery liquid that reflected light in the middle of the floor.

"Those are memories."

Her brain registered the thought as it slipped out of her mouth and Doell nodded. "That's what I thought."

Ginny's heart beat somewhere near the vicinity of her throat and she crouched down, reaching out her hand before Doell jumped over the silvery puddle and grabbed her wrist.

"Don't touch it."

"But... if we can salvage them..." she said, shaking off his grip. Searching around her through the broken glass vials for one that might be able to contain the substance, she didn't notice the cuts on her fingers until she wiped her hands on her trousers and saw the blood stains.

"They're ruined," Doell said softly. "There must have been dozens of those vials, Ginny, all stored in that locked cabinet. And there are potions and... It's ruined."

"NO," Ginny yelled, ignoring the pain in her fingers as she found one vial that was cracked, but not broken. She tried to scoop up some of the memories, sliding the edge of the glass along through the pool. "If we can save them... maybe they can be put back in. We can give them back." But the brittle vial caught on something and shattered, cutting her again.

"It won't work," Doell said, grabbing for her hands and squeezing them tightly. "They're completely contaminated with these potions, and the dust and who knows what else. Look around you, Ginny! This place was destroyed! It was destroyed and abandoned. Someone fought one hell of a fight to

get out of here."

A loud sob escaped Ginny, because she knew he was right. The memories were ruined and there was no way to salvage them now. She stared down at the pool, reflecting back a carnival-like mirror image of herself. Small waves rippled through it when her tears splashed into the liquid.

"I would give anything to have those back for them," Doell said, his voice softer and more emotional than Ginny had ever heard it. "But all we can do for them now is to give them some justice, Ginny. They deserve it."

Ginny nodded, her eyes tracing the edges of the memory pool. Closer to the upended cupboard, Ginny found another bloody footprint, obscured by the silver. In her mind, regardless of how slim the chances were, she assigned that print to Harry. It was his foot that had traveled into this room and either tried to salvage memories, or destroyed them so that no one could have them.

"Come on, we need to get out of here."

Doell pulled her to her feet and Ginny balled her hands into fists, welcoming the pain that the cuts and scrapes shot up her wrists into her arms. The pain made her focus on here and now.

"There's one more room," Doell said, pointing to a door in the hallway that was narrow, more like a cupboard than a full room. "Do you want me to do that one alone?"

"No," Ginny said, shaking her head. "I'll help."

She stepped to the side and watched as Doell prepared to unlock the door. Before he could complete saying the spell, however, Ginny dove forward and lifted his wand. A small ripple of magic—feeling faintly like a ward—had reached out to her.

"It's warded," she warned and Doell blinked at her.

"Nothing else in here has been."

Ginny thrust her hand out, feeling along the edges of the magic. "It's definitely a ward of some sort."

"That means there's something in there to hide," he pointed out. "Can you determine what kind? And if so, can you break it?"

"I don't know," Ginny said honestly, tracing the magic and kneeling at the floor. "But I'll try."

For nearly fifteen minutes, Ginny worked while Doell finished scouring the other rooms one final time, turning up nothing.

"Well?"

"It's an alarm of some sort, I think," Ginny said. "I think I've managed to create a hole, but only my arm fits through."

"Just an alarm?" Doell asked, his tone hesitant.

"I don't know for sure," Ginny snapped before sighing and rubbing her forehead harshly. "I haven't seen this kind of ward before. It's woven tightly and I'm not sure if I've already alerted someone when I began tampering with it or not."

"We would have known by now," Doell dismissed, staring at the door as if it were an immovable object in his way, rather than a simple door.

They stared at it in silence for a minute before Ginny took a deep breath. "I'm going to bring it down completely." The words hung in the air for a minute before Doell nodded.

"Do it."

Ginny nodded firmly and took a deep breath. She traced three runes in the dust on the floor and brushed her hands on her trouser legs before thrusting her wand into the ward and concentrating on the words she said to collapse the ward.

She felt the energy in front of her drain away and hesitantly smiled at Doell.

"Let's see what they're hiding," he suggested, reaching for the door handle. It swung open with ease and they both sighed in relief.

The room opened up before them and revealed a single desk, neatly kept and completely free of dust. Off to the side were two small file cabinets.

Ginny moved toward the cabinets while Doell attacked the desk. Not caring that the room seemed to have been accessed since the rest of the facility had been abandoned, they tore apart the office with haste, dumping whole drawers onto the linoleum floor and scattering the contents around, searching for clues.

The cabinets were heavy with files and Ginny swore under her breath time and time again as she pulled file after file out. She laughed, almost hysterically and Doell dived to her side.

"It's all here, Jasper," she said, her chest heaving. "It's all here."

His eyes went wide and he grabbed a handful of files out, flipping them open himself. "Banish these back to the hotel," he suggested. "We don't have time to go through them all here. And... Ginny... when we get back, let's copy everything we have and send them to people—Granger and Trammel, at least."

Ginny nodded absently and began sending stack after stack to the hotel, praying that her focus was enough that they were actually making it to the hotel and not getting scattered all over Georgia.

"Merlin," he said as he pulled open the last drawer and stared at it. Ginny joined him and her breathing nearly stopped.

"They're all here," Doell said softly, his fingers shaking as they trailed along the names on the tops of the files. Marius Ndebele. Robert Fournier. Harry Potter. John Simkins. Name after name repeated in a whisper that seemed to echo down the halls of this prison and seep into the very pores of the place.

With one huge motion, Doell scooped up the files into his arms. "I think we need to—"

His words were interrupted by the sound of someone yelling from the front of the building.

Ginny's chest tightened and she stared at the open door to the hallway, seeing beams of light dancing on the walls of the corridor. It was mesmerizing watching them grow larger and larger as they danced, and the angry voices coming closer and closer.

A sudden buzzing startled her and Ginny looked around, feeling her skin crawl. "Anti-Apparition wards," she muttered, eyes staring wide at Doell.

"Take these and go," he commanded, not bothering to keep his voice down as he thrust the files into her arms. "You can make it through them."

Ginny stared at him. "We'll both go, like before." She wanted to reach out and grab his hand, pull him along through the wards—if she could manage it—but the files in her arms were cumbersome and Doell stepped away too fast.

He looked at her one more time before giving a tight smile. "I'll distract them while you get away. Don't let their sacrifices be in vain, Ginny. Go and find him."

"Come with me!" Ginny pleaded, frantically looking back at the lights. A red spell shot into the room and they both ducked.

"GO!" Doell roared at her before he dived away toward the door, sounding like a lion charging his foes.

Ginny swore loudly and closed her eyes, wrapping her arms tightly around the files and picturing the hotel room they had left hours before.

\* \* \*

She screamed when she actually made it to the room—the pain of ripping through the wards, and the agony of leaving her friend there to face whatever was charging in those doors, almost overtaking her.

The files scattered to the floor, joining the ones she had banished here, and Ginny fell on top of them.

Logically, she knew she had to run, to leave as soon as she could, just in case they had managed to track her Apparition. But the events of the day, playing in her head like an out of control film, flashed over and over, random scenes that made her dizzy.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there, crushing the files beneath her—it might have been minutes, or even hours—before she finally began to move. Doell's words about not letting sacrifices be in vain echoed through her head and she began muttering them over and over as she gathered everything into her rucksack, cramming papers and scattered clothing in until it bulged, even with the charms on it.

Ginny took one last look into the room before moving on to Doell's, and stuffing the few things he'd left out into his own rucksack and slinging it on her shoulder.

She drew her wand and held it tightly against her leg as she peeked out the door into the hallway. Loud voices down the way made her jerk the door closed, and lock it, frantically searching for any way to escape.

Closing her eyes, she pictured one of the alleys she and Doell had used while trying to find Momma Jessen. It was far enough from the hotel that anyone tracking her would take a few minutes to do so.

The alley materialized around her and she hurried down it a few meters before Apparating to yet another alley. The repetitive motion was numbing, but welcome, after all the emotion of the day. Ginny let it take over as she spent the next few hours laying Apparition tracks all over the city, sometimes even Apparating to the same place twice to confuse the trail.

Finally, after hours, she was exhausted and found a cheap motel to check into for the night. She curled up onto the bed, wrapping her arms around her knees and staring at the rucksack that bulged with files. The wards she had cast were powerful and hummed under her skin, making it itch uncomfortably.

The reality of the hell Harry had lived, and hopefully survived, was too much to take in. Ginny tried to imagine herself waking in a place like that—strapped to a bed and struggling to understand why her mind was blank and why people were hurting her.

The tears of disbelief and anger were almost cleansing when they finally came, and Ginny allowed them to consume her as she huddled on the bed.

\* \* \*

Sleep didn't come easily that night and Ginny ended up making stacks of files and copying them three times, shrinking them down into three tight packages that she addressed to Hermione, in care of her parents, to Trammel, and the last one to Kingsley.

Doell's idea was a good one, considering how much information they had been carrying around with them, and Ginny more than once cursed herself for not taking the precaution earlier.

She'd put them in the post tomorrow and hope that the Ministry wouldn't expect someone to be sending things through the Muggle post system.

Once she was done with that task, she took a shower and found an apple in her rucksack, which she ate while staring at the table that was covered with stacks of files.

While this was exactly what they'd been hoping to find, the idea of diving into them—actually reading what they'd done to these men—was daunting.

She started with Harry's file—the most painful one—but it shed no light on where he might be now. The only positive thing was that there was no notation of a death or any other significant injury listed, as there was in several of the other files.

Robert Fournier's file—Ginny assumed this was the Frenchman that Momma Jessen had mentioned—had died of heart failure while they were trying some sort of memory treatment on him. When she reached the last page of his file, giving the circumstances of his death in monotonic, dry and emotionless words, Ginny felt the need to vomit again. This man had *died* and yet there was no remorse or regret at all shown in this file; no admission of guilt or wrong doing.

Ginny swore and tossed the file away from her, staring at the words as they practically rose off of the page, screaming the crimes that had been committed.

"I'm so sorry," Ginny apologized to the stack of pitiful files that were all that represented the people most damaged by this whole mess. "If no one else ever says so, I am," she finished, shaking her head at the waste of it all.

The idea of reading about more "patients" nauseated Ginny, so she pulled out another file, letting her eyes skim over it and not taking in much at all. There were names and dates, places and research notes that made no sense. She set the file in one pile and pulled another random one from the middle of the stack and scanned it as well. This one, however, made her sit up and swear loudly.

It was about as clear as the research notes, but the underlying theme of this file was where the funding for Project Lucas had come from.

Over and over again, the name of Norman, D. Norman, Donald Norman, was repeated along with a list of others. The last page of the file was a letter with a gold embossed seal at the top from the offices of Donald L. Norman, Senator for the State of Georgia, demanding that Lucas cease and desist all operations. It was dated April of 1999.

"Damnit," Ginny hissed upon reading it. Norman was in this up to his eyeballs.

Ginny found his name in several other files, proving that he'd not only helped arrange funding, but knew about the "experimental medicine" they were practicing there at Fort Stewart.

Ginny flopped back on the bed and tried to piece it all together in her mind—but it seemed too big.

Punishing these people was something she wanted, now more than ever, but finding Harry—and helping Jasper, if she could in any way—was what Ginny needed to do most.

Staring up at the ceiling, Ginny decided that the best place to start would be the top.

She needed to track down Senator Norman.

# Chapter 16: Give It To Me

Tracking a United States Senator should have been much harder than it was, Ginny thought. Then again, tracking people who had habits and patterns of behavior wasn't hard at all.

Donald Norman was nothing if not a habitual person. The local library provided a life sketch of him for Ginny, and listed his home as being in Athens, just outside of Atlanta. But after staring at the house for two days, Ginny determined Norman wasn't actually living there right now; his wife and children came and went frequently enough, but she had yet to see the man himself.

Perhaps he was away in Washington D.C., attending to his job. Or maybe he had a flat he kept somewhere away from his family life.

It didn't take too long to track his movements to an expensive loft-style apartment in downtown Atlanta, where a woman, rumored to be his mistress, lived.

So, Ginny waited for him in the dark of the apartment, after distracting his rather shapely young lady and sending her away for a few hours.

The anger and determination she felt far outweighed the danger of what she was about to do, and Ginny actually relished the opportunity to put a bit of fear into this man.

"Cherise?" Norman called as he used his key to unlock the door.

The dark interior must have confused him, but the lights didn't click on when he reached over and flipped the switch several times.

"Cherise?" His tone seemed more concerned now, but he chuckled lightly when Ginny moved in front of the window lit from the outside, giving him a view of a feminine silhouette. "Did you plan this?"

His tone nearly made her vomit, but she remained quiet, moving toward him as he tugged at his tie and discarded it on the back of the sofa. When his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he stopped his forward movement and blinked at her.

But it was too late, because she had her wand pointed directly at his forehead.

"On your knees, Norman," she commanded.

"How did you get in here?" he hissed out.

Ginny could see the tense way he held his body, preparing to flee or attack. Slowly, she circled him and shot a spell at the back of his knees, forcing him to collapse onto the plush carpeting. Another quick binding spell and his ankles were wrapped in ropes; his wrists as well.

"That's not really important," Ginny said, staring at the back of his head. "What *is* important is what you're going to tell me about Project Lucas."

The silence was deafening between them and lasted so long, that, to Ginny, it confirmed everything she'd suspected of this man.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he answered finally.

"Don't even try and lie to me," she said in a bored voice, "because I've seen the paperwork, Senator. I've even been there in the facility."

"Who are you?" he demanded, trying to look over his shoulder at her.

Ginny sent a stinging hex to his shoulder blade. "Someone you shouldn't be lying to," she answered. "Now... I want to know what you know about Lucas."

"I don't know what—"

His words were cut off when Ginny sliced through his shirt, blood spreading onto the fabric from where her spell cleanly cut into his back.

"Don't fuck with me," she hissed.

Norman panted and swore himself, flopping face-first onto the carpet and screaming. Ginny was glad that she'd remembered to sound proof the room before he'd come in. She really didn't need to have any nosy neighbors calling the police to report the Senator screaming.

"Are you ready to talk yet?" she asked, leaning over so the Norman could just see the outline of her. "Or do you need to be persuaded."

"No," he gritted out. "No more."

"Good," Ginny said with a satisfied nod. She was prepared to go much further than she had in getting him to talk, and was surprised that he'd given in so easily.

"I don't know much," Norman panted out and Ginny rolled her eyes. "When I found out... I shut it down."

Ginny sliced across his back again and watched as he arched against the pain.

"Want to try that again, without the lies this time?"

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded through clenched teeth.

"I'm someone with nothing to lose," she whispered, leaning down and patting his cheek nicely. "Let's try it one more time."

"Okay, okay," he said, panting as she pressed down on the deeper of the two cuts in his back. "I... I knew about it... knew that they were... researching..."

"And you funneled money to them," Ginny nodded.

"Yes," he sighed as she let up and moved away from him a little. "Yes. I did."

"When did they shut it down?"

Norman groaned into the carpet and breathed heavily several times. "Spring of ninety-nine," he grunted out.

"And what happened to the men?" Ginny said, nudging his thigh with the toe of her boot when he didn't answer right away.

"I don't know," he said, sobbing.

Ginny lashed out in anger and sent a spell crisscrossing his back, shredding the shirt and making blood spray out onto the carpet in crimson splashes.

"Were only three left," he managed to say as he rocked side to side against the pain. "One died... two ran."

Bile rose in Ginny's throat at the thought of what she was doing—what she'd needed to become to deal with these people who had ruined not only her life, but countless others.

She reached down and pulled the Senator up by his bound hands until he was kneeling. His dress shirt was in bloody tatters, falling away from his body and the wounds she'd created seeped blood slowly down into the top of his trousers.

Norman shook his head to clear it and panted mightily. He flinched when Ginny shoved a photograph of Harry in his face. "Was this man there?"

"I don't know," he shook his head. "I was never there."

"But you know about them," Ginny clarified, shaking the picture. "Your name is all over those files and you only terminated the program to save your own arse."

His chest rose and fell in a shuddering pattern several times as he shook his head.

"Where are they now?" Ginny said, leaning down to speak directly into his ear. "Where are the men that got away?"

"I don't know."

His answer turned into screaming again when Ginny sent a stinging hex to his back.

"There's no way you'd allow them to get away completely. You've either dealt with them, or they've managed to elude you long enough to be marginally left alone," Ginny clarified. "Don't make me hurt you, Donald. I don't want this anymore than you do. But if you don't start telling the truth, I'm going to pour Veratiserum down your throat and get the answers anyway," she lied. She had no potion with her, but it was enough to make him flinch. "And I won't stop at just Lucas, Senator. I'll ask questions until I can't think of any more."

"He was there," Norman finally admitted. "They haven't caught him yet... he's gone... underground."

Ginny smiled, her stomach twisting in relief that Harry was still alive. "And where did they lose him?"

"I don't know," he sighed, his head hanging low between his shoulders. This time, however, Ginny believed him.

She stared at him a minute more before quickly healing the cuts along his back and tugging at his arms, lifting at his bound wrists, to get him to stand. "You're going to call your people and find out where he is."

"I can't do that," he answered back, panicked. "They'll know something is wrong."

"I have faith in your ability to lie through your teeth, Senator," Ginny said, patting him on the shoulder as she led him to a desk where the telephone sat.

He peered at her, perhaps trying to focus on what she looked like, but Ginny simply removed the binds at his wrists and slid the telephone closer to him. "Do your job, Mr. Senator," she said sarcastically. "And don't try and be smart about it, because I haven't even begun to pay you back for the hurt you've caused."

He glared into the darkness surrounding her face and picked up the telephone, punching numbers blindly.

Ginny listened to the one-sided conversation and tried to piece together as much as she could.

"Bob... I need to know what the situation on the Lucas boys is... No, now. Okay, okay."

His hands shook as he quickly wrote down words on a notepad, staring in Ginny's direction periodically.

Ginny stared down at the paper. New Orleans. Oyster Bar. Joe Lucas. San Francisco. Hotel. Lucas Johns.

When he finished talking, he stared at her. "Tell them to stop searching. Everything ends right now," Ginny said softly, pressing her wand into the fleshy underside of Norman's jaw. "No one following them. No one watching them. It's over."

He nodded and conveyed the message. Ginny could hear the silence at the other end and Norman barked the commands again, punctuating his message.

"It ends tonight," he said into the phone. "Get lost for awhile too."

Ginny's arm shook, inadvertently pressing the wand tip further into his throat, as he rang off.

"Are you going to kill me now?" he asked, his hands flexing on the desk in front of him.

"You have another job to do," Ginny said, shaking her head, even though he couldn't see it. "Somewhere you are holding a friend of mine. Jasper Doell. I want him released immediately. Don't bother trying to follow him, because you won't succeed. And if he's severely harmed, I'll have to repay the damage back on you personally."

"You're nothing but a terrorist," Norman hissed, swearing under his breath.

"I wouldn't be," Ginny defended, lifting the tip of her wand slightly, "if you people hadn't forced me into it. And you're really one to talk, Senator. These men that you stole for your little experiment—they had homes, they had families and people that loved them."

The look on his face betrayed that he either hadn't thought about that or he hoped that it wouldn't come to light.

"You are the terrorists, sir," she punctuated by sending a stinging hex to his throat. "You and your little Project Lucas. Tell me why, Norman. Why did you take *these* men? Why did you do this to them?"

"I didn't do anything," he said, although his heart wasn't in the pathetic whine. Ginny slid her wand tip around the side of his throat and jabbed it into his spine, sending a mild shock through his body.

"What was the point of Lucas?" she demanded. In all of her reading in the files they'd recovered from Fort Stewart, Ginny still couldn't understand why they had done this.

"John Simkins is my brother," Norman bit out in a hushed voice.

Ginny gagged at the idea. "You did this to your own brother?"

"It wasn't... it was supposed to *help* them, not harm," he said, staring down at his hands which were tense on the surface of the desk, the fingertips almost white from the pressure he was putting on them. "Their minds were damaged from the wars they were in. John... he couldn't even sleep for more than an hour without waking up screaming. I... I had to do something for him. When I heard that there might be hope, about what they were supposed to be able to do for these men..."

Ginny swore loudly. "Did you even bother to go there before you locked your brother away, Norman? They weren't helping them at all; they were torturing them—stealing who they were and strapping them to beds and tables!"

His jaw clenched tightly and Ginny had the urge to reach out and physically strike him for how stupid he was being.

"It went wrong," he finally said. "They didn't take the treatment well and..."

Ginny slapped her palm down on the desk next to him, growling at both the pain and how completely unbelievable he was being.

"I can feel the magic inside you, Norman. Does anyone else know?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "My family knows. And... John. He's magical too."

"Do you even know who you had there?" she asked, shoving the photograph back into his face. "This isn't just a number on some file somewhere, Norman. This is Harry Potter."

Any color that had been in his face drained out completely and his head wobbled precariously, making him resemble Nearly Headless Nick. "No," he said, looking away from it, as if he could blot

it out of his memory. "No, it can't be. They never would have sent—"

"They did," Ginny affirmed to him. "The damn Ministry wanted him gone, so they tucked him away here in the middle of your dirty little secret."

Norman's head bent low, almost touching the wood of the desk. "I didn't know. I swear to you I didn't know."

Ginny stared at him, growing extremely tired of this game. "I'm allowing you five hours to get Jasper out of wherever you've stuck him. If I don't see him in person, alive and well, I'll come back for you, Mr. Senator."

"Five hours?" he asked incredulously as his head rose. "I have no idea where—"

"You'll make it work," Ginny said confidently. "And if I see you following after the men from Lucas, I'll come back as well."

"You're not going to get away with this," he warned, although there wasn't much fight in his words.

"You did," she quipped with a dry chuckle. "Besides, who said I did anything to you?" she asked, repairing his shirt and removing the blood stains from it. Just before she Disappeared, she leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "Prove I was even here, Norman."

\* \* \*

Ginny repeated her crazy Apparition jumping before finally returning to the small motel she'd started her day at.

"I can't believe I did it," she told the shower walls as she scrubbed at her skin, trying to get rid of the feeling that she was tainted and horrible for what she'd done. But, she also felt she was more than justified in her actions. Norman was only partly to blame for the Project, but the fact that he truly had very little knowledge of what it was about—according to what he said, anyway—made him entirely disgusting in Ginny's eyes.

The water was almost cold by the time she came out from under the spray.

New Orleans. Joe Lucas.

The names she'd been repeating over and over in her mind since she'd seen them scribbled on the pad of paper.

New Orleans. Joe Lucas.

Harry was in New Orleans, probably hiding from whoever had been chasing him, and trying to find some meaning to his life. The urge to Apparate away immediately and start checking every bar until she could find Harry and drag him someplace they could be truly alone and she could hold him in her arms once more was strong.

There were almost too many steps involved in finding him—and yet, she was closer than she'd ever been—so Ginny had the distinct feeling of tripping all over herself, stumbling from one task to the

next while still trying to get anything worthwhile done.

Through it all, she kept a wary eye on the clock, watching the hand advance around the dial until the five hours she'd threatened Norman with were over. She convinced herself to wait for another hour until she contacted him to inquire about Jasper. Perhaps five hours had been a very optimistic goal on her part.

But she certainly wouldn't wait much longer than that, because then Norman might start to think she wouldn't strike back.

And that would nullify all that she'd accomplished today.

Ginny settled for organizing all of the files one more time and shrinking them into neat bundles that she stored in her rucksack. It was busy work, but her hands needed to be occupied doing something so her heart didn't convince her mind that she needed to leave. Right now.

An hour later, Ginny stuck a few coins in her pocket and walked down the street to a payphone. She dialed the number that she had memorized and waited for Norman to answer.

"Hello, Donald," she greeted him, grinning when he swore.

"How did you get this number?" he demanded. She could practically feel the frustration rolling off of him.

"Is that any way to treat me?" she chuckled. "I just wanted to let you know that I haven't seen my friend yet."

"Dammit," he hissed. "I tried. I really did. I was told he was released hours ago."

Ginny thought about that before clearing her throat. "You're being given a reprieve, Donald. But if I don't see him before morning, I'm going to release everything to the press."

"Don't do that," he said after a minute of being quiet. "That won't benefit either of us and you know it."

"I don't have much to lose, thanks to you," Ginny snapped.

"He's been released," Norman assured her.

"Don't do anything to bollocks this up, Donald. I'm not a patient person." She hung up the phone and shook away the tension in her shoulders while walking back to the motel.

"Do you know how horrible you are to track?"

Ginny squeaked both in surprise and in relief when Doell—looking horribly worse for the wear—stood shakily as she walked into the room.

One of his eyes was swollen shut, purple and black bruises surrounding it, and his left arm was tied to his body with a length of torn cloth. His face showed evidence of a severe beating; small cuts, bruises and abrasions everywhere.

"He promised you wouldn't be hurt," she mumbled, wrapping her arms gently around him and giving him a squeeze.

"Careful with the ribs there," he muttered, chuckling slightly. "I don't think whoever you got to could prevent what I got myself into. But I'll heal."

Ginny pulled back, wiping at the tears that had escaped her eyes and made tracks down her cheeks. "I'm glad you're alright," she said.

"Please tell me you didn't spend all of your time trying to get me out," he said, sinking back down into a chair and wincing when he finally settled in.

"Hardly," Ginny shook her head and stared at him. She felt horrible that he'd gone through so much so that she could get away without a scratch.

"Well," he prompted. "Don't keep me waiting, because... I'm not sure how long I can stay awake, actually."

"New Orleans," she said, a slow smile stretching her face. "And no one is going to be searching for him anymore."

"Do I want to know how you managed that?" he grinned.

"No," she shook her head, her face heating spectacularly. "It's probably best if you don't." It felt good to be able to say that phrase to him this time, instead of listening to it fall from his lips.

He blinked at her, with his good eye, and nodded firmly. "Okay. So... down to a one city search."

"Yeah," Ginny said, sinking into a chair across from him. "It seems..."

"Incredible," he nodded.

"Surreal."

"Well," he sighed. "New Orleans is very large, so we've still got a lot of work to do."

"But not nearly as much."

He nodded and reached forward, taking her hand in his battered one. "You're close, Ginny. You're really close."

Ginny could only nod around the lump in her throat. "I don't really know how to feel."

"I can only imagine," he said in sympathy.

"I don't really know what to say... how to feel if I find him. Do I tell him right away? Do I try and convince him that I'm not insane?" she asked, laughing through the tears that she was finally releasing freely. "Will he even still want me?"

"All tough questions," Doell nodded. "And I wish I could tell you there's an easy answer. I think

you'll just have to wait until you've found him to decide the best way to proceed."

Ginny brought her legs up to curl under herself. "Yeah," she said as she leaned her head against the back of the seat. "I didn't think I would feel this way. So... torn."

"I think you need to prepare yourself for the fact that he might have moved on with his life, Ginny. Can you accept that he might be involved with someone else, or that he might not want to know anything about his life in the past?"

"I don't know," she answered truthfully.

"That's understandable," he yawned.

"I'm being selfish," she dismissed. "Come on; let's see how much of you we can heal. When was the last time that you ate?"

\* \* \*

"I think you should go on alone," Jasper said the next morning while he was packing his things into his rucksack. He looked much better this morning, with the bandages removed and the cuts healed, even though he did move slower than normal.

"You go on to New Orleans, while I go back and try to make sense of all of this."

Ginny thought about that and shrugged. The idea of being alone again, after months of having Jasper to talk to, to bounce ideas off of and to help pick up her spirits with a rousing argument were now coming to an end. "It's probably best if I'm not in the way anyway. But... you call as soon as you've found him, yeah?" He held up a mobile phone and slid it into her rucksack.

Ginny sank onto the edge of the bed and nodded. She couldn't say exactly why she was worried—in fact, she should be thrilled that she was so much closer to finding Harry. But after all this time, the doubts that he may not want her in his life were very clear.

"Don't do this, Ginny," Doell said softly, standing in front of her and lifting her with slight pressure to her shoulders. "Don't start to worry now after all that you've put into this."

"What if—"

"Don't," he commanded softly, with a smile. "You're the one who has never wavered in your belief that Harry is out there, alive. Why are you letting yourself do this now that we *know* it's true?"

"Because I don't think I can handle it if he rejects me after all that I've done to find him," she admitted in a small voice. "Where do I go, what do I do after that?"

Doell sighed and nodded his understanding. "You pick up the pieces, like you've always done, and you move forward, wherever that leads you."

Ginny stared at him, wishing she could take some of his strength and use it as her own.

"Close your eyes." Ginny eyed him skeptically, but did as he said. "Now... do you remember the last

time you saw him?"

"Yes," she answered. She could plainly see Harry standing on Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ , his hand raised in goodbye as she hung out the window of the train, on her way back to Hogwarts.

"Do you remember the last time he touched you?"

Ginny's heart raced, thinking of the kisses they'd traded there on the platform, ignoring Ron's disgusted groaning and George's threats to take the mickey forever. "Yes."

"Do you remember the last words he spoke to you?"

Harry's voice, whispered in her ear today, just the same as it had back then, "I love you. Be careful, Gin. And give 'em hell for me." His crooked smile, the left corner pulling up a little more than the right made Ginny smile then, and she smiled again now.

"I remember them."

Doell leaned forward until she could feel his breath on her forehead before he pressed his lips lightly there in a brotherly kiss. "Go and find him, Ginny. You both deserve to have those happy moments again."

A flood of determination and gratitude welled up inside her and she nodded.

"Thank you, Jasper."

"I owe you one," he said with a wink.

\* \* \*

Norman had mentioned a bar with the name Oyster in it, or perhaps it was just simply an oyster bar. How many of those could there be? And what would be the best way to approach Harry if she did find him?

Honestly, what she wanted to do was run up to him and throw her arms around him, kiss him and take him back to England. The problems with that approach were so many that it almost made Ginny chuckle.

More than likely, she'd be carted off to some lunatic asylum and locked away. At the very least, Harry wouldn't recognize her at all and would reject her attempts to talk to him completely.

No, this had to be done carefully.

The best plan that she could come up with was to make a list of the bars once she got to New Orleans. And then she'd find them and watch, as patiently as she could, until she saw him. From there the plan got hazy, but there would be time to figure it out, she decided.

As it turned out, there were eight bars with the name Oyster in them. And several others that simply boasted of being an 'oyster bar'. The high number was discouraging, but Ginny resigned herself to the fact that she was going to have to do the ground work here.

*Do the hard work, reap the rewards!*

Trammel's voice, now beginning to fade somewhat in her memory barked out at her, as he'd done a hundred, if not a thousand, times during their time working together.

But, as usual, he was right.

A hotel room in New Orleans wasn't hard to find. And although the bed wasn't in the least comfortable, the room made up for it by two thick, worn phone directories on the Formica table.

Ginny went about making a detailed list of each of the bars, their location and surroundings by looking at their ads.

It was tedious work, and really was quite pointless, but it gave her something to do until she was finally tired enough to doze off.

It was early afternoon when Ginny began tracking down the bars on her list. The first was *The Blue Oyster*, a rather stiff looking place that was open and serving lunch. Judging from the men wearing suits milling around, Ginny gave this one a lower mark on the list she was making. She just couldn't picture Harry serving cocktails and mixed drinks to men in suits. She made a note on her list to come back later tonight to see if the night crowd was any different.

Moving on to the next one on the list, Ginny was glad she had actually researched the map in the directory. At least she could attack this situation methodically.

One down, seven more to go.

*The Slimy Oyster* was just as the name proclaimed. A sign in the grungy window said they didn't open until four, so Ginny made that note on her list. The taxi waiting for her at the curb gave a curt tap on his horn and Ginny sighed. What was he being impatient for? He was still getting paid.

"Are you looking for any bar in particular," the man demanded when she climbed back into his car, "or will just any do?"

Ginny glared at the small bit of him she could see in his rear view mirror. "I'm looking for a friend."

"Well," the man drawled, pushing his cap back off of his sweaty brow and scratching at the few long strands of hair that were plastered to his balding head. "If you're looking in bars, we could be at this for a long time."

Ginny sighed and reached into her bag, retrieving her wallet. She pulled out two hundred dollar bills and held them up. "Do you have anything better to do?"

His eyes widened and she could tell from the way his cheeks shifted that he was smiling. "No ma'am," he answered quickly, reaching forward and tapping the meter to the off position. "I'd be happy to look at your list. I've been driving Naw'lins for years and years. You can call me George."

He drawled the pronunciation of the city out, slurring the syllables together. If Ginny hadn't been paying attention, she would have had no idea what he was talking about.

Ginny slid the paper over the seat toward him and watched as his eyes scanned it. "My brother's name is George," she mused, almost to herself. What she wouldn't give to have him with her right now. She had no doubt if she contacted him, he'd be in New Orleans as fast as he could, dragging her to every bar in a methodical trek to getting them both entirely pissed.

For a brief moment, she actually considered it. Tracking with George would be... an experience, that's for sure.

"Something with the name Oyster in it, huh?" George the cab driver asked, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

"That's the only information I have to go on," Ginny said.

He nodded. "I think you've managed to find most of them. If I remember right," he said, handing the list back and pulling away from the curb, "there's an older place that doesn't advertise much. Sam's Oyster has been around forever."

Ginny nodded, pulling out a pen and scratching it to the bottom of the list.

"Pearly Oyster should be next," George grunted out, weaving in and out of late afternoon traffic. "They get a brisk business now that work is ending."

Ginny tuned out George's monologue on the city and its thriving alcohol sales as she watched the metropolis move in front of her. Somewhere out there in the mess of buildings and urban jungle, Harry was living his life, unaware that there were people in the world searching for him.

A small voice at the back of her mind quipped snide remarks that it couldn't be Harry. He was not really out there and she'd spend the rest of her life chasing after ghosts.

George pulled his cab up directly in front of the bar and nodded toward it. "I'll wait a while, just to make sure your friend is here. It's five now, and they close at two." He scratched his head again and turned the car off. "I may just come in for a bit. A pretty lady like you hanging around in a bar like that..."

Ginny snorted at the thought. If things went to hell in the bar, she had no doubt *she'd* be the one pulling George out. But he looked determined, and who was she to deprive him of a little drink.

*The Pearly Oyster* reminded Ginny of the Hogshead, only without the permeating smell of goats. It was filthy and run down.

"Charming," Ginny drawled as George joined her, smiling at the dark interior.

"It grows on you," he shrugged.

"Yeah, let's hope not," she quipped, praying Harry wasn't in this place somewhere.

George quickly found them two places at a table. "What'll it be?"

Ginny scanned the room, looking for anyone who might even slightly resemble Harry. But he wasn't behind the bar, or at any of the tables.

"A pint of bitter, I guess."

"Bitter?" George stared at her.

"A beer," she shrugged, having forgotten for a minute where she was.

"Okay," George said, raising his eyebrow and taking the money that Ginny placed on the table.

Ginny sighed back into the chair, wondering how many bad beers she was going to have to consume to figure out what bar he was in.

"Found yer friend yet?" George asked as he returned with a mug of amber liquid that was more foam than not.

"I don't see him," she shook her head, taking a sip and then setting the glass on the filthy table.

George eyed her. "Why not just ask around?"

It was a logical question, and one that Ginny had asked herself time and time again. Would it hurt to ask around? How was she going to explain who she was if she did find him?

"I should," she shrugged.

"You know his name, just ask," George said, taking a large drink and motioning with his hand toward the bar.

"I know the name he might be using," Ginny admitted.

George narrowed his squinty eyes at her. "This isn't going to get me into some kind of trouble is it?" he asked. "You aren't... going to do something to him, like... like they do on them shows on the television?"

The question made Ginny laugh and she shook her head. "I'm not here to hurt him," she said. "Far from it. He and I used to..." She trailed off, wondering why she was telling a complete stranger about her life.

"Oh, you're after this guy for a paternity suit then," he nodded knowingly.

It took Ginny a minute to figure out what he meant. "No, oh no. He and I... we didn't have a child. We just dated."

George leaned forward, interest blooming all over his face. "The missus watches them kind of shows on television. She's always going on about lost loves and such."

Ginny nodded, relieved to have found something that he could relate to. "That's what this is."

"Hmm," George said, scratching his head. "It seems to me that any feller would be happy to have a pretty girl like you asking around about him."

Ginny felt her face heat as she scanned the bar once more. "It's been a long time," she shrugged. "I

just... I don't know what he's going to say."

George leaned across and patted her hand. His eyes sparkled lightly and Ginny couldn't help but smile. "If he's got a lick of sense in his head, he'll snatch you right up. Now, you just let old George take care of this one. What's the feller's name?"

"His last name is Lucas," Ginny said, feeling both relief and annoyance at herself for not just doing it. "He might be using the name Joe."

"Okay," George said. "You just sit right here and I'll go ask around."

Ginny watched him go and scolded herself for being such a little girl about this. But the idea that he could reject her straight out made her falter. But she was going to have to do this. There wouldn't be someone to hold her hand forever.

"I'm sorry," George said as he came back to the table. "They've never heard of him here."

Ginny blew out a breath, looking up at him. "It's okay," she nodded. "The next one."

George nodded, trying to look positive.

"You want to go on?"

Ginny nodded.

George smiled. "Let's go then. There's one other place that I remembered once we got here," he explained. "It's doubtful that your friend would be there, but... you never know."

Feeling numb from the whole experience, Ginny nodded mutely. This quest was looking like it might not pan out to be anything after all.

Ginny wasn't usually the kind to let disappointment get her down; in fact, in the past disappointment had motivated her to work even harder.

But after months of chasing lead after lead, watching them disappear right before her eyes, or lead into absolutely nothing, she was getting tired of living this way.

*Please just let me find him.*

She didn't remember getting in the cab at all, but pressed her forehead to the window as George drove, his quiet whistling giving her something else to focus on for a minute.

The blinding light from the neon signs flashed all across the window when George stopped the car.

"Aphrodite's Oyster?" Ginny read the sign, glancing at George whose cheeks were quite pink.

"Like I said, I doubt your friend would work here."

Ginny watched as the buxom woman on the animated sign leaned forward and her breasts bulged, threatening to pop out. She'd never seen the effect done with simply neon lights and wondered if

there wasn't some magic involved.

"Guess we should check," Ginny said half-heartedly.

"You want me to go in?" George offered, although his voice betrayed his hesitancy.

"I'll do it," Ginny sighed, reaching for the handle. "Just... just stay here."

"I'll keep the motor running," he nodded, looking entirely relieved that Ginny was going to tackle this particular bar alone.

"I'm going to kill you, Harry, if this is the place you work," she muttered as she forced her feet to walk forward toward the tawdry entrance, all lit up in pink lights.

The music was blaring when she stepped inside and Ginny had the urge to press her hands over her ears.

The interior was large and spacious, looking completely as Ginny expected from what was betrayed by the name and the exterior.

Merlin, even the walls were pink.

No one seemed to have noticed that she had walked in, so Ginny determinedly moved toward the bar. Harry wasn't in sight—thank heavens.

"What can I get you?" a tall woman behind the bar asked. Her skin was black as night, reminding Ginny of Marius, which was only accented when she smiled and her bright white teeth shown.

"Just information, actually," Ginny said after swallowing and glancing down the bar. "I'm looking for a man—"

The woman laughed. "If you're looking for a man, you're definitely in the wrong place."

Ginny gaped at her, the idea of what she'd just walked into finally breaking over her.

"He's a bartender, I think," she continued, her mouth going dry.

The woman shook her head slowly. "Only women working here, lady."

"Thanks anyway," Ginny said, taking a deep breath—both of relief and disbelief—as she turned to go.

A group of women near the door laughed loudly at something and Ginny watched as two of them kissed.

It wasn't something completely new; Ginny had been in London, and several other larger cities, after all. But it was a little jarring, since she wasn't used to it. The idea that both George, her brother, and Charlie would probably have a wonderful time in this place made her smile. She could easily see both of them, notorious flirts, wandering from group to group, drinking and smiling and having a great time.

"Well?" George asked as she climbed back into his cab.

Ginny chuckled. "You set me up for that one," she scolded.

George looked a little abashed and shrugged, a smile splitting his face. "The missus would never forgive me if I walked into a place like that. I'm not sure how she would know, she just would."

"Let's go on," Ginny said, feeling somewhat better, strangely, after that stop. Maybe it was a release of tension after building herself up so much over the past few hours, or maybe it was simply because she was really dwelling on all of this too much, and had just realized it.

"Sam's Oyster is next," George said, looking at her in his mirror. "I promise it's a nicer place."

Ginny chuckled and laid her head back against the seat. "This time I'll do the asking," she said, determined to do it.

\* \* \*

George pulled up in front of the neon sign proclaiming the bar, *Sam's Oyster*, the large engine of the car humming beneath them.

"You think this will be the one?" George asked, oblivious to the fact that he was just raising the tension.

"I don't know," Ginny said, looking up at the brick building and watching as a young couple went in the door. It certainly looked nicer than the last place.

"Do you want to do this alone?" George asked.

Ginny thought about it for a minute before nodding. "Yeah. I can do this."

George smiled and reached back to pat her hand. "I hope that you find everything you want—if not here, then somewhere.

"I appreciate that, George," Ginny said. "Now go home and turn off that television and give your wife her own romance."

George laughed and clutched at his heart. "I'm not sure I could take that."

Suddenly, an overwhelming wave of affection for this man, who had given up part of his afternoon to help her, filled Ginny.

"Take it from someone who didn't treasure every minute, George," she said, giving his hand a squeeze. "Those minutes fade too fast. Take hold of them every chance you get."

"I'll do that, ma'am," he nodded with a smile. He almost refused to take the money she slid over the seat, but Ginny's stern look convinced him otherwise.

"Good luck." He said and Ginny got out of the taxi and stood on the sidewalk, the humid, hot evening around her being lit up by the flash of blue neon lettering.

"You can do this," Ginny told herself, taking the façade of the building in one more time. In one of the windows was a handmade sign announcing that the pub was hiring, it was just under a painted picture of a large grey oyster, barely open to show a large, shiny pearl in the center of it.

Soft music played in the background of the main area and Ginny blinked to try and adjust her eyes to the light. It wasn't as dark as *The Pearly Oyster* and the place looked almost clean in comparison.

There were several patrons, including the couple that she had seen walk in earlier, but it was still fairly early. Two men in suits sat at the bar, their ties hanging loose as they chatted loudly over drinks and munched on something out of small woven baskets.

Behind the bar was a broad, round man who looked a bit like Father Christmas with his snowy white beard, red cheeks and nose, and glasses that slipped down his face to perch on the end of his nose.

He winked at her and continued to wipe one section of the bar.

"Can I help you?"

Ginny swallowed thickly and walked toward the bar, sliding onto one of the tall stools and hooking the heels of her boots over the rungs.

"Maybe," she said, gathering the courage to simply open her mouth and ask. "I'm looking for—"

"Sam!" Someone called from the back room and the bearded man—presumably Sam—turned his head. Another man backed through a doorway, carrying a large box of bottles that clinked together softly. "We'll definitely need a case of Scotch and probably two of Vodka."

Ginny's heart jumped into her throat and she stared at the back of his head, his voice making her skin tingle. After all these years, the rich timbre of his voice was the same, even if the accent was different now.

When he turned, his bright eyes taking in the conversation he had just interrupted as they shone from behind a thin pair of glasses, Ginny was glad she had settled herself so fully on the stool.

"Oh, sorry," he apologized. His eyes met Ginny's and a jolt of electricity ran under Ginny's skin as she stared at him. Harry. It was him.

Sam chuckled and shook his head. "I'll look into that, Joe, thanks."

"Can I help you?" Joe asked, stepping forward, his eyes never leaving Ginny's. The fact that he didn't automatically recognize her hurt, but it was understandable. At least he was showing some interest.

"She was asking for my help in finding something," Sam informed Joe.

Ginny was finally able to tear her eyes away from Joe's, but now stared at Sam, trying to remember where she was and what she was actually doing here. Her heart pounded in her throat and her mind cast about, trying to find anything to say that wouldn't make her look like the complete prat she

was being right now.

"I'm looking for... Who would I talk to about the sign you have in the window?" she settled on, the image popping into her mind. Once it did, however, it seemed like a brilliant solution.

"You want a job," Sam repeated, glancing at Joe as he smiled and backed away, busying himself with putting the bottles from the box he was carrying on a shelf. Ginny could tell by the way he kept tilting his head to one side that he was still listening.

"Yeah," she nodded, the picture of her working side by side with Harry—er, Joe—making her smile. It was a perfect idea. She could get close enough to get to know him before she told him who he really was. She and Harry had been friends before they were something else, she could do that again with Joe. "I'm new to the area and I need a job."

Sam narrowed his eyes and pushed his glasses up on his nose. "You got any experience? I assume you have all your documents that say you can work in this country?"

A flash of panic shot through her and Ginny nodded, trying to remember a conversation, months ago, with Jasper about documents and what was needed.

"Yeah," she nodded, pulling her rucksack, which was transfigured into a large purse currently, up into her lap and reaching in. While her hand was inside, she let her wand slide out of the arm holster a little and gripped it, quickly conjuring up what she hoped she would need.

Sam only glanced at the documents she laid on the bar before returning his gaze to her.

"As for experience," Ginny continued, "I haven't ever worked in a pub—er, bar, but... I think I can manage." Feeling silly for doing it, Ginny crossed her fingers in her lap, just as she'd done when she was a little girl and begging her parents to let her do something.

"Stand up and let me get a good look at you," Sam commanded, although his gruff voice didn't frighten her.

Ginny unwound her legs and hopped up, standing away from the bar a bit and spinning in place, gathering the courage to wink at Joe when he smirked.

Sam tilted his head to the side and crossed his arms over his large belly. "I don't know. Joe, what do you think?"

Ginny's heart raced. 'Yes, Joe,' she put into the conversation silently, 'what do *you* think.'

Joe sighed and tossed the empty box he was working with to the side before turning his attention fully back to them. "I don't know," he said. If Ginny hadn't known Harry so well, if she hadn't heard the teasing tone of his voice so many times, she would have mistaken Joe's disinterested words for something else.

Just to reassure herself, as a horrid thought popped into her head, Ginny glanced at the hands he rested on the bar, his arms partially bared by the sleeves he had rolled up over his forearms. No ring on the left hand; not even a pale bit of flesh there.

"Come on, Joe," she coaxed, feeling some courage return now. Sam chuckled and he and Joe shared some kind of look.

"It gets a bit rough in here," Joe said, shaking his head. "You look a little, er... delicate."

Ginny couldn't help but snort. "Delicate?" she asked. "I'm far from delicate."

"Yeah?" Joe said, leaning forward more. Ginny's jaw almost dropped when his eyes slowly traced her from head to toe, staring just a bit longer than necessary at her chest. The feeling it invoked was so much different than when any other man stared at her. This time, heat shot all through her rather than annoyance.

"Grew up the youngest of seven," Ginny said, stepping forward and taking her place at the bar again. "All boys, except me."

Sam whistled long and low before nudging Joe's arm with his elbow.

Joe continued to stare at her. "I can see how that would be an advantage," he nodded slowly.

"And I've got more fire in me than any of them," Ginny continued, leaning further onto the bar, her eyes boring into Joe's.

A slow, and completely lopsided, smile spread across his face and he slapped Sam on the shoulder. "I'd hire her, Sam."

Sam barked out a laugh that reminded Ginny of Sirius for a minute before he nodded. "You've got the job, little lady."

A thrill coursed all through Ginny and she grinned back. "I got the job?"

Joe smiled again and a part of Ginny that had been dead for more than two years awoke, filling her like sunshine on a summer morning.

"You start tomorrow," Sam said, slapping his hand down onto the bar and looking between Joe and Ginny. "Five o'clock. But it won't be easy. I'll have you train with my daughter."

"I'll be here," Ginny assured him, watching out of the corner of her eye as Joe moved down the bar and chatted with the two men in suits. "I'll be here."

# Chapter 17: Let Me Be Myself

Joe watched as Ginny went into the small hotel, disappearing behind the glass door, smiling cheerfully to the young lady behind the desk and disappearing down a hallway where he couldn't see.

He leaned against the warm brick of the building and knocked his head lightly several times against it. Perhaps he could beat some sense into himself.

What was it about this young woman that made his skin feel like it had been electrified? And they hadn't even really met; just those few minutes at the bar where she had flirted with him and he'd felt the unusual urge to flirt back.

Joe rarely flirted. He just wasn't comfortable doing it. Truth was, he sucked at it. He didn't really figure that the women that came into Sam's and leaned their chests on the bar, winking and passing him their phone numbers really counted as flirting—they were mostly drunk anyway. And none of them had the witty comebacks and quips that this new girl did.

She was definitely beautiful, Joe told himself. Petite and spunky looking, with dazzling red hair and freckles sprinkled across her face.

And now that she was going to be working with him, Joe was a little concerned about how he'd been affected by her. Was it simply loneliness and attraction that drew him to her?

It'd been months since he broke things off with Meghan; maybe he was lonely. But a relationship... that just complicated matters beyond what he thought he could handle right now. It definitely hadn't worked well with Meghan.

Relationships were for people who had any idea where they had come from, any idea where they were going in life, and weren't constantly running from shadows.

A brief flash of worry shot through him—what if this new girl was somehow connected to the people watching him? Maybe she was sent to try and trap him.

"Stop doing this," Joe scolded himself and pushed away from the building. He slowly began to wander toward the bus stop, his mind racing with the possibility. It was very unlikely, considering he hadn't seen anyone watching him in a long time. Either they were getting good, or they had stopped following him.

As the bus arrived and Joe climbed on, he vowed to stop being so paranoid and try to get on with the business of living. That's what he and John had promised each other they would do.

\* \* \*

Ginny decided that a hotel closer to the Quarter, where Sam's was located, was a much better idea, so she packed up her things and found one close enough that she could take a bus into the Quarter for work. A flat—an apartment, she kept having to remind herself—was something she'd need to look into soon, if she ended up staying long.

Visions of telling Harry—Joe!—everything tomorrow danced through her head, but she knew that wasn't the best idea. She needed to gain his trust before she thrust everything on him. And working together should help with that.

As she lay in the new hotel, on the softer bed this time, Ginny closed her eyes and replayed the scene at Sam's time and time again, analyzing every movement Joe made, and every facial expression and gesture.

He held himself similarly to how Harry had. Harry was always wary that someone might attack him, so his eyes were always assessing situations before he went into them. Joe seemed similar but... there was still a different air about him.

His shoulders seemed much less tense and his smile came a bit easier. His hair was cropped much shorter to his head than Harry had ever worn, but the heat down here could easily explain that away. His cheekbones and jaw were just a little wider and more defined, even though he was still as slim as ever.

Some of the differences unsettled Ginny, as she pondered what they might mean, staring up at the cracked ceiling of the hotel room. It was sweltering and the hotel's air conditioning tried to keep up. The air billowed the curtains out in time with the slowly rotating ceiling fan, but did little to make her comfortable. Ginny's mind just wouldn't let her sleep.

The way Joe's eyes had studied her was something new, something Harry never would have allowed to be seen in public. Harry had been somewhat affectionate in public before—holding her hand, stealing a kiss now and again—but the open, physical appreciation had happened in private.

She wasn't sure what that change meant, even if her body had appreciated his interested gaze.

Ginny rolled over and let her legs dangle off of the bed, trying to decide if she had enough energy to go out exploring, or if that was better saved for tomorrow. The hours before she had to report to Sam's were bound to be excruciating.

On a whim, she delved into her rucksack and pulled out the small mobile phone that Jasper had given her. The urge to contact someone—anyone—and tell them that she'd actually done it—she'd found Harry—was great. She quickly dialed the number Jasper had given her and explained where she was and that she'd found him.

Jasper asked about the encounter and told her that he was searching San Francisco for Lucas Johns, and that he would be in touch if he found anything.

Ginny pushed the button to end the call and stared at the phone, pondering this newest change in her life. She spent the next hour leaning on the window sill and staring out at the city lights, watching the barges and a large paddlewheel boat go by on the distant bit of river she could make out.

Finally, at nearly two in the morning, she cast a sleeping charm on herself, knowing that she had to be sharp tomorrow to keep up with whatever Sam's daughter sent her way.

Ginny's expectations of Sam's daughter couldn't have been more right, and absolutely wrong at the same time.

While Ginny showed up wearing jeans and a decent button-up shirt, having remembered what Joe was wearing the day before, Pearl's idea of work attire seemed to be to show off as many of her tattoos and piercings as possible.

"Hi, I'm Pearl," she said, holding her hand in front of Ginny, covered in gaudy rings and black nail polish. "But don't let the name fool you; I'm neither sweet, nor soft."

Ginny chuckled and shook the woman's hand firmly, appraising her as she moved.

Pearl looked entirely too young to be behind the bar. Her hair was bleached blond, all but the under layer, which was dyed pitch black. The tight tank-top she wore hugged all of her voluptuous curves and ended just above her belly button, where a sparkly diamond dangled.

"Pearl is Sam's idea of a funny name for his daughter," she explained, moving swiftly in the enclosed space that ran the whole length of the room.

"It's not exactly what I would have pictured, having heard the name," Ginny admitted, chuckling. She couldn't keep her eyes from searching the room for Joe, but he didn't seem to be around.

Pearl smiled and shook her head. "I'm nothing you can predict. It's still early; let's give you a crash course in bartending before the rush comes."

Ginny took a deep breath and nodded, praying she wouldn't get fired on her first day.

"Should I take notes?" she asked, smirking when Pearl threw back her head and laughed. The sound actually startled the two couples that were in the bar, near the far wall, making them stare with wide eyes.

Pearl ignored them, or simply didn't care what their reactions to her laughter were.

"Sam wanted to see you in the office before you start," she explained as they made their way into a small, cramped kitchen and then to what looked to be a cupboard.

Pearl pounded with her fist loudly and then backed away as Sam cursed from inside.

"One day you're going to give me a heart attack, girl!" he shouted.

Ginny's eyes widened but then she chuckled at Pearl's eye roll.

"Been saying that for years, old man," she called back, opening the narrow door wide. "You and I both know you'll never kick the bucket, you're too ornery."

Ginny's eyes nearly bulged at the cramped quarters and Sam's bulk filling most of it, wedged into a desk that was covered in random bits of paper and piles. A blue haze of cigar smoke floated near the ceiling, swirling around a fluorescent light that hung precariously from the ceiling and hummed in the background.

"Come on in," he said, gesturing to a chair that looked as if it had seen better days. There were old liquor boxes—looking like they were close to caving in from having too much paperwork stuffed into them—stacked against one wall, their contents leaking out in some cases.

"Just need to get some paperwork done here before you start," Sam continued, taking a stubby cigar from the corner of his mouth and tamping it violently into an overflowing ash tray on the corner of his desk.

"Don't let him be mean to you," Pearl advised, winking at her father as she sauntered out of the office and into the kitchen, leaving the door ajar in the process.

"I think I can handle him," Ginny called back. Sam chuckled and shook his head before handing over a few papers. Ginny glanced at him and, for a moment, worried about actually filling them out. "What is all this?"

"Just crap that the lawyers make me keep on file," Sam waved, glaring at the documents as if they'd personally done him wrong.

His words made Ginny feel better about filing them out, as she didn't think he would really read them anyway. So she grabbed a pen off of his desk and began filling things in, skipping over most of everything except a few things she felt were vital.

"From England, huh?" Sam said, rocking his chair back until it creaked ominously.

Ginny blinked up from her writing and shrugged. "That's where I was born and raised, yes. But lately I've been living abroad."

Sam seemed impressed at that and tilted his head. "Yeah? Where have you been?"

Ginny signed her name with a flourish at the bottom of the document and shook her head slowly. "France. Germany... Spain... Italy, Portugal, South Africa..."

Sam whistled low and shook his head. "And you ended up here?"

Ginny chuckled at his disbelief. "Here is as good as anywhere," she lied. "I guess you could say I'm looking for something."

Sam's dark eyes sparkled behind his glasses and he nodded. "You let me know if you find it."

Ginny grinned and stood, understanding the dismissal for what it was. "I'll do that."

Sam struggled to get himself out of the chair and from behind the desk while Ginny watched.

"Pearl can teach you all about this place," he said, waving his hand widely as they moved out into the kitchen. "She's all but run it since she was sixteen. Mother died when she was just a baby."

They both turned as the door in the back of the kitchen opened and two men—Joe one of them—came in, laughing and talking casually.

Joe waved his hand in greeting, but kept moving toward the front of the building. Ginny's eyes

watched him closely, noting the casual way he carried himself.

Sam cleared his throat and Ginny felt her face heat. "I'd better get back to Pearl," she mumbled, wondering when she would manage to get some time with Joe alone.

"Just one more thing, Ginny," Sam said, taking his glasses off of his face and rubbing harshly with his large hand. "Joe and Pearl... well, they're kind of an item. I see how you watch him and..."

Ginny's heart jumped into her throat and she had to look away, anger and hurt crashed over her. Joe and... Pearl? The match simply didn't make sense in her head.

"And I just don't want you to get your hopes up," Sam finished, patting her heavily on the shoulder. "Now, Max, on the other hand, could use a good woman." He barked out a laugh that Ginny didn't find remotely funny as she walked away.

She contemplated simply walking out the front door, but the idea of walking away from Harry just wasn't one she could let dwell in her head a moment longer. She'd worked too hard for too long to find him, and Ginny wasn't one to let some... tattooed, pierced... slapper steal him away from her.

Immediate dislike for Pearl—what a stupid name for someone like her—swelled up inside Ginny as she heard Joe laughing and then Pearl's loud guffawed response.

"There you are," Pearl said as Ginny came out from the kitchen. Joe caught her eye but Ginny had to look away. She knew she was being childish, treating them both this way. After all, it wasn't their fault that she was in love with Harry—Joe!—and Pearl happened to be standing in her way.

"I'll let you go through your little tour," Joe said, edging around Pearl, his hand running along her back as he moved, making Ginny shudder in anger and annoyance. "I know you've been waiting to practice your torture methods on someone for awhile."

Pearl growled at him and they both chuckled. Ginny sucked in a deep breath, wondering how she was going to be able to survive this.

"I'm going to see if I can fix that pool table," Joe said as he passed Ginny, narrowing his eyes at the way she moved away from him. She simply couldn't handle having him touch her right now, even if it was only to brush by her, especially after having seen the way his hand lingered on the small of Pearl's back.

"Are you feelin' alright?" Pearl said, leaning over to peer at Ginny.

Ginny stared at her, wondering what on earth Harry—Joe!—could see in someone so... so... like *her*.

"I'm fine," Ginny said brusquely and reached for a plain white apron to drape over herself. "We should probably get started," she said, glancing at Pearl, who looked utterly confused, but shrugged and started to point out the various bottles of liquor and explain the variety of drinks one could make with them.

Ginny honestly hoped there was somewhere where this was all written down, because there was just too much information to cram into her head.

"If they want food, all we serve is oysters and po'boys," Pearl went on, pointing to the kitchen. "If they want something else, tell them to find it somewhere else. As for the oysters, they can get them on the shell, by the dozen, or by half."

Ginny nodded along as if she knew exactly what to do. What the hell was a po'boy?

Sam wandered through, mumbling something about the bank, although he didn't have anything in his hands.

"He'll be gone for hours," Pearl shook her head fondly as she showed Ginny how to work the till.

As much as she tried to focus on what Pearl was saying, Ginny's eyes kept straying to the back of the bar, where a room filled with pool tables was. Someone was underneath one of them, turning a screwdriver while Joe had his hand stuck in one of the corner pockets.

Joe and—well, that was probably Max he was with—were repairing something.

He looked so... happy... that it made Ginny cringe. Jasper's words to her just the other day came back harshly now, even though he hadn't meant them to be that way.

*... you need to prepare yourself for the fact that he might have moved on with his life, Ginny...*

What *would* she do if he didn't want her? Could she really demand that Joe love her, simply because Harry had once loved her?

"Ginny... what the hell is wrong with you?" Pearl demanded, slamming a bottle of beer down on the bar.

Ginny started and stared at the bottle as foam spilled over the top and pooled onto the bar.

"Nothing, sorry," she said. "I just... didn't sleep well last night."

Pearl glared at her and then shook her head, reaching for a rag to clean up her mess.

"Don't worry about it," she dismissed. "It's best to learn on the fly anyway." Ginny's anger swirled and flowed beneath her skin as Pearl fidgeted with a few things, her eyes darting toward the room with the pool tables now and again.

Ginny reluctantly helped her first customer, glad that all he had wanted was a beer. She mentally ran through all of the drink recipes again, trailing her fingers along the bottles and scolding herself for being a jealous bint.

Harry—Joe!—had every right to date whomever he wanted; that didn't mean it didn't hurt to picture him with someone else.

Her anger and frustration quelled some when she pictured what might happen if the situation were reversed. What if it had been *Harry* looking for her, and he had seen the way she had carried on with someone else?

"Listen, you think you have this up here?" Pearl asked.

Ginny nodded her head, refusing to look at the woman right now. Even if it was a lie, Ginny wouldn't give in to this battle of wills right now.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," she said, her voice trailing off as she hurried toward the kitchen and closed the door. Ginny stared at the small window in the door for a minute before shaking her head.

Another two customers came in and Ginny took care of them, fumbling through their order and apologizing the whole time. They chuckled slightly along with her and handed over their money before disappearing into the back room.

Ginny looked up and could see Max's foot sticking out from under the table he and Joe had been working on. She perked up when she didn't see Joe, until something banged from the kitchen and there was a clatter of metal on metal.

It happened again and Ginny stared at the window, edging toward it, dread filling her with each footstep.

'Don't look in there,' she warned herself, already knowing that she was going to, even if it would tear her heart into a million pieces.

Glancing around the room and then into the back room where Max had moved to the other corner, just his bent, jean-clad knee showing from this angle, Ginny took a deep breath and went up on her toes to peek into the room.

She nearly bit her tongue when a small bit of Pearl was revealed, along with the edge of the metal table rocking back and forth.

The urge to vomit nearly overtook her and Ginny moved away from the door quickly, her fingernails digging into the bar in front of her as she tried to banish the image of Harry and Pearl in the kitchen... having sex.

"You get used to it."

The voice behind her startled her and Ginny gasped, clutching her chest as she spun.

But it was Joe standing there, his bright green eyes staring at her from behind his glasses, and wiping his black, greasy hands on a rag.

"Pearl and Max..." he said, looking over his shoulder to the door and shaking his head. "You get used to them slipping off after awhile."

Ginny's jaw dropped and she stared at him, trying to put the pieces of this puzzle together in her head. Pearl and... Max?

"Doesn't it make you angry?" she asked before her tongue could stop. A fierce protectiveness erupted inside of her and she had to physically hold herself back from storming in there and demanding to know why Pearl was hurting Joe this way. He didn't deserve to be treated like this...

But Joe chuckled and shrugged. "Not really. I mean, I'd prefer if I didn't have to walk in on them every few days. And I don't really like lying to Sam about it, but... they seem to be happy."

Ginny felt like she was walking through a foggy place, not fully seeing everything for what it was, only getting vague ideas of shapes looming in front of her.

"I think it's atrocious," she breathed out, shaking her head. "She shouldn't treat you like this, Joe. If you and she—"

"Hang on," Joe said, holding his hands up, the greasy rag still clutched in one of them. "Hold up... Pearl and *me*?" He trailed off and a slow smile stretched over his face as he shook his head and leaned one hip against the bar. "Sam told you that Pearl and I were... together? Right?"

Ginny nodded dumbly, her heart pounding away in her chest, almost matching the scraping rhythm that leaked from the kitchen door.

Joe sighed and shook his head again. "There's nothing between Pearl and me. We're... we're just friends. Sam has this crazy idea... I'm not really sure what he thinks," Joe said as he reached up and ruffled his hair, smearing bits of grease into it.

Relief and embarrassment flooded through Ginny, but she couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm sorry... I just assumed..." she stammered, gesturing to the door. "And then when she was with Max..."

Joe chuckled again and looked at her, the smile fading. "Thank you, though, for... defending my honor, or something."

Ginny felt her face heat and she turned back around to face the bar, trying to find a place to put her hands. "I feel like such a complete prat," she shook her head.

Joe was silent for a minute and Ginny's heart pounded, wondering what he was thinking, what expression he wore on his face.

"Well, then, complete prat," he drawled, moving up next to her and reaching down under the counter, pulling out two green bottles, removing the tops and handing one to her. "Have a drink on me, a fellow prat." He grinned at her and then urged her to take a drink. "Is that what I would be called?" he asked, a sincere expression on his face before he lifted the bottle to his lips and drained a good portion of it.

Ginny did the same, sighing at the bitter taste, perfectly room temperature, that spread along her tongue.

"Sam keeps these around just for me," Joe said, holding up his bottle. "Rarely does anyone else drink it, and... I've never known anyone else to like it this warm."

"It's best at room temperature," Ginny informed him, glad to have a real bitter again, even if it was out of a bottle.

Joe smiled slowly and Ginny felt a thrill shoot through her, making the hair on her arms stand up.

"Better get back to it," he said, nodding his head toward the pool tables and taking his bitter with him. He glanced back over his shoulder at her once and Ginny felt her face heat as she took a sip from her bottle.

\* \* \*

"I'm sorry about Sam," Pearl said later that evening when the customers had slowed to a small trickle. Ginny's feet ached and she went up on her toes, trying to stretch out the muscles that she had *thought* were in shape.

Ginny looked up, feeling incredibly more genial toward Pearl now that she knew she wasn't sleeping with Joe, but Max.

"He doesn't much care for Max," Pearl said, lowering her voice as Joe came out of the kitchen with armfuls of plates and distributed them all along the bar.

Ginny watched as he joked with the customers and tried to ignore the young women who flirted shamelessly with him.

"He thinks of Joe as a son," she went on, reaching around Ginny to stuff some bills into the till. "And I'm sure he would love for Joe and I... but it's just not there, you know?"

Ginny looked up from where she was washing a few glasses in the small sink and nodded, hoping she could one day forget that she had made a complete fool out of herself. Joe hadn't said another word about it and by the time Pearl and Max had returned, straightening their clothing and wearing huge grins, the customers had started to stream in the door.

"Don't worry about it," Ginny dismissed, wondering what Joe had told Pearl. The three hadn't said much more than mumbled apologies as they bumped into each other in the tight space and slid glasses and bottles down the length of the bar toward each other.

Pearl watched her closely and Ginny looked away, feeling her face heat when the woman caught her watching Joe as he chatted with several young men.

"So that's what's going on with you," she sang in a knowing voice, smirking and then barking out a laugh that sounded disturbingly similar to her father's. "You have a thing for Joe."

Ginny should probably deny it, but she just couldn't, so she shrugged instead.

"I don't really know him," she argued, both to Pearl and to herself.

Pearl giggled—a sound Ginny was convinced didn't suit her at all—and nudged Ginny with her shoulder. "You *do* have a thing for him. Is this... serious or just lusting after him?"

Ginny shot another glance down the bar and felt her body tingle when Joe smiled at her. The other men around him laughed and slapped him on the back, making his face turn a little red.

"I see," Pearl said, nodding knowingly. Her teasing died out, however and she studiously focused on

helping the next few customers.

“What does ‘I see’ mean?” Ginny demanded the next time they were alone, huddled down at the far end of the bar.

Pearl looked at her and sighed. “Listen, Ginny, I think you’re really great—what I know of you so far—but Joe... he doesn’t get involved with anyone really. He barely has friends, let alone a girlfriend. In fact, if you’d asked me before, I would have told you I thought he was gay. He was so... celibate.”

Ginny snorted but then sobered, wondering where the change had come. “And?”

“And then,” Pearl drawled out, straightening the glasses next to her and then reaching for some limes, which she started slicing up, her eyes never on the knife, “he started seeing this one woman. She worked down at one of the coffee shops. See, Joe doesn’t sleep much—don’t tell him I told you that, he’d die!—so he spends a lot of his nights wandering around the city. That’s where he met her.”

Ginny’s throat went dry and she tried not to let her mind race ahead of the story; that’s what had gotten her into trouble earlier tonight.

“And?” she prompted again after taking care of another customer while Pearl flashed her smile at the men and even hopped up on the bar twice to give hugs and kisses to several groups of people.

“And... I thought it was pretty serious, you know,” she shrugged. “They were together for a few months, and then... nothing. He just stopped seeing her. I know she had a kid already and I asked him, later, if that was an issue. But he said the kid was great. He never really answered me about why they broke up, just that it hadn’t worked out.”

Ginny glanced at Joe again and watched his methodical movements as he cleaned the bar, chatted with customers and filled orders. It was very easy to lose sight of Harry in Joe right now. He seemed like such a different man all of a sudden.

That thought jarred Ginny and she stared off, wondering if this was a complete waste of her time, and if she was setting herself up for heartbreak even thinking of convincing Joe that he was Harry.

Because he really wasn’t Harry anymore.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt when he doesn’t return your affection,” Pearl sighed. The two women looked at each other for a long minute before Ginny smiled, determined that she hadn’t come all this way just to walk out of his life.

“Maybe I don’t give up that easily.”

Pearl laughed at her words, drawing the attention of most of the bar. “Good for you!” she cheered. A wicked smile bloomed over her face and Pearl hopped up on the bar, thoroughly surprising Ginny, who backed away, trying to figure out what she was doing.

“HEY!” Pearl yelled, putting both hands up to the sides of her mouth. “Everybody SHUT UP!”

The crowd laughed, but did as she asked, the volume in the room down now to a very dull roar.

“Some of y’all may have noticed that we have a new face in here!” Pearl yelled.

“No,” Ginny said, backing toward the door to the kitchen slowly. But Max came up and blocked her exit and Joe stood imposingly at one end of the bar, forcing Ginny to stay.

“Get up here, Ginger!” Pearl yelled, beckoning Ginny up onto the bar next to her. “All the way from merry old England! We have Ginger Spice!”

Ginny screamed when Joe and Max each wrapped an arm under Ginny’s and lifted her to perch on the bar. The crowd went wild, cheering and whistling, and Ginny’s face flushed as she silently vowed to get Pearl back for this, somehow.

“Let’s give her a Naw’lins welcome, shall we?”

Ginny screamed again when several of the men at the front grabbed her and pulled her down into the crowd, hugging and kissing her directly on the lips.

The Weasleys had always been a rather affectionate family—especially for being English—but Ginny couldn’t remember *ever* being greeted this way.

Even the women were hugging her tightly and jostling her along in the crowd.

“Who wants to buy this little lady her first round?” Pearl screamed.

Ginny glared up at the woman and swore loudly, only to have it cut off by a quite passionate kiss from a young man who wore a shirt boasting Loyola College all over it.

“Give me a call sometime,” he said as he slid his hand in her back pocket, causing Ginny to squeak and force her way back toward the bar.

“I’ll buy first round!”

\* \* \*

Joe wasn’t sure what had come over him—maybe it was the fun atmosphere the bar had tonight, or the way that he and Ginny had talked earlier—but here he was, holding up his money and calling first round.

He never did that!

Ginny was still lost in the sea of people, but he could see her head searching around for a way out of the crowd.

“What are you doing?” Max asked, a grin on his face. But Joe didn’t answer; he just kept watching as Ginny was lifted onto the bar and Pearl’s loud laughter rolled over the crowd.

Ginny’s bright brown eyes met his as he tucked the bill in her hand and helped her climb down from the bar. His mind raced and he couldn’t seem to stop staring at her lips, wondering how they would

feel pressed to his.

"You know," he said, not letting go of her waist, "traditionally, the person buying the first round gets a kiss from the girl."

Ginny's jaw dropped and she blinked at him. "You don't think I've gotten enough kisses tonight?"

Joe chuckled. The crowd in front of the bar was chanting now, the noise level almost deafening.

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!"

Surprising him, Ginny grinned. "Who am I to buck tradition?" She leaned in and wrapped her arms around his head.

Her lips were soft and Joe groaned into the kiss, tilting his head and trying to remind himself they were in the middle of a packed bar. The sound level reached deafening as they continued to kiss. Ginny rubbed his neck softly with her fingers and Joe's grip on her waist tightened, his fingers burying in the soft fabric of her shirt. He could feel the heat from her skin through it and shivered.

When they finally did pull apart, Joe stared at her dazed eyes and then laughed mightily. The crowd around them cheered and he held up his hand in triumph.

He wasn't quite sure why he'd done it, but he didn't regret it. And the way Ginny's cheeks bloomed brilliantly pink and her eyes kept coming back to him... maybe that meant she felt the same way.

It hadn't been the best kiss ever—it was sloppy and rushed, and a bit uninvolved—but Joe thought it was still just about the best kiss he'd ever had.

Max slapped him on the shoulder, laughing and cheering along with everyone else and Pearl gave him an inquisitive look that nearly made him cringe. Great. She'd be all over him now, wanting to know exactly what he was doing.

He wished he had an answer to give her—or even himself.

Ginny leaned heavily on the bar, looking like she might just tip over. Joe slid another green bottle from under the counter into her hand and wandered off, being swallowed up in the crowd as he moved from behind the bar. Just before he disappeared completely, his eyes met hers and a jolt of electricity passed between them, making Joe nearly drop his drink. He continued to stare at her as Pearl draped an arm over Ginny's shoulder and stared back at him.

"Maybe I was wrong about him," Pearl said, "he's never bought a round before."

Joe's face heated and he tried to ignore the way the words made him feel by taking a long drink from his bottle.

"I owe you one, Pearly." Ginny's vow floated over the bar toward him, and Pearl laughed loudly. "When you least expect it..."

By the time they closed the doors at two in the morning, and Max and Joe had managed to physically push the last of the customers out, Ginny was ready to fall asleep on the bar.

"You look like you could sleep for a week," Max teased, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

The overly affectionate nature of everyone stunned Ginny, but she had to admit it was kind of fun. She still felt like she could feel Joe's kiss from earlier; her lips still tingled and her knees got weak at the thought of it.

"Max," she said, slowly drawing out her words. "I do believe I could sleep for a month." He laughed, his head thrown back as Pearl came and wrapped her arms around him, nuzzling her nose against his scruffy face.

Ginny looked at them and had to admit they made a handsome couple. At least their tattoos and piercings matched. She snorted at the thought and rolled her eyes at herself.

"What's left to do?" she asked, glancing around at the discarded bottles, napkins, oyster shells and various other piles of debris.

"Not much," Max said with a glance around. "Pick up a few things and such. Sam will be in tomorrow and if we clean up too much, he thinks we didn't have a successful night."

Ginny snorted and watched as Joe righted a few chairs and picked up a few bottles here and there. It had been too busy the rest of the night to talk about their kiss—even jokingly—but even then, Joe had been... distant. He hadn't purposely touched her at all the rest of the night, making Ginny wonder if it had all been for show earlier—the teasing, the beer, the kiss... all of it.

She grabbed a wet rag, her fingers almost sore from being wet all night anyway, and cleaned off one section of the bar, pushing the rubbish toward the end where she could scoop it all into the bin.

"Is it always like that?" she asked as Pearl and Max began to count out the money from the till, wrapping it into large clumps with rubber bands and then putting those into a canvas bag.

"Not always," Pearl said. "Some nights it's quiet... the weekends are always insane."

Max continued, "Sam's is more for the locals than the tourists, even though we do get them coming around too. That's why we actually close, rather than staying open all night."

"Tonight was fun," Joe said quietly from beside her, and Ginny startled, not having realized he had come that close.

"It was," Ginny mused, trying to remember when she'd laughed so hard. It hadn't been for quite some time, she decided.

They all moved around, cleaning up small bits here and there, but not trying overly hard.

Hanging from one chandelier was a pair of knickers and Ginny couldn't quite stop staring at them.

"Are those..." she began, but then brushed it away with a shake of her head. "I probably don't want

to know.”

Joe smirked and shook his head too.

“My brothers had this party once,” she mused, still staring at the knickers. “After everyone was gone from their flat, there was this... mysterious stain on their ceiling.” Everyone was now listening to her and Ginny felt a bit self-conscious. She hadn’t even meant to tell the story out loud—it just sort of... slipped.

“And I always swore that if you turned your head just right, it was in the perfect shape of a pair of knickers.”

Both Max and Joe laughed and Pearl just shook her head. “Do you know how much I love that word?” she asked.

Ginny gaped at her. “What? Knickers?”

Pearl barked out a laugh and closed the till with a sharp thrust of her hip at it. “That has to be one of the most wonderful words in the history of language. *Knickers.*”

“I, personally, prefer the *lack* of knickers,” Max drawled, leaning down to kiss Pearl.

“Time to close up,” Joe called, shaking his head as he passed the couple and rolled his eyes in Ginny’s direction.

“Joe,” Pearl called out as Ginny followed him toward the kitchen. “Ginny’s new in town, make sure she gets home alright.”

Joe looked back over his shoulder at Ginny who was shaking her head. “That’s not necessary,” she told him.

“Of course it is,” Max said, sharing the same smirk that his girlfriend wore. “It can be dangerous out here this time of night.”

“I don’t mind,” Joe said, glancing at her. Ginny stared at him, wishing that the lights were still on so that she could fully see his expression.

Even though she had been contemplating crawling into her bed and not getting up until at least three this afternoon, the idea of Joe escorting her the eight blocks to the hotel was thrilling.

Pearl walked by and nudged her, making Ginny realize she’d been standing, staring at Joe the whole time and hadn’t answered him.

“She’d love to,” Pearl answered for her, shoving her forward. “In fact, since she hasn’t seen any of Naw’lins nightlife, feel free to take her on one of your middle of the night walks.”

Ginny’s face heated and now she was thankful that it *was* dark in the room. Taking a deep breath, she moved forward and wrapped her arm into Joe’s grinning up at his shocked expression.

“I would love to see some of this place.”

In the dim light of the kitchen, Ginny watched as Joe's face ran a gamut of expressions. He definitely looked interested, at the same time incredibly annoyed that Pearl was pushing him into something.

"Go on," she nudged them both. "Time's wasting. You haven't lived, Ginger, until you've seen the sun rise over the city."

\* \* \*

Once they were outside, Ginny dropped Joe's arm and let him walk at his own pace.

"Pearl is definitely..."

"Interesting?" Joe said, grinning as he stuffed his hands into his jeans pocket.

Ginny had no idea where they were walking—it definitely wasn't in the way of her hotel—but she was happy just to be able to be alone with Joe. In the darkness, lit by lamps they passed, Joe looked so much like Harry that it made Ginny's chest ache. She longed to reach over and tug his hand out of his pocket and wind their fingers together like Harry had always done when they walked.

"That's one word for it," Ginny nodded, trying to find a place for her hands so they would stop itching to touch him.

"Don't let her push you around," Joe finally said after they'd walked almost a whole block in silence.

Ginny didn't like the awkwardness between them, so she tried to focus on the world they were exploring together. It was unlike anything Ginny had ever seen and she let her head fall back, watching the balconies as they passed.

The heat and the scent of the street combined to make Ginny a little lightheaded. The alcohol and smell of the street itself, the bodies pressed into everything, and... something that smelled very much like animals, filled her senses. Joe's hand slid along her shoulder as he guided her through a crowd of people who looked as if they had spilled out of the bar along with the noise of a band playing.

"Those guys are good," Joe mumbled, his chest coming into contact with her back. "But it's always too crowded in there for me."

"You don't like crowds." It was more of a statement than a question and Ginny wondered if she'd overstepped her bounds when Joe chuckled.

"No, I don't, really." His hand moved off her shoulder when they broke free of the crowd, but he stayed close, his arm rubbing her shoulder as they moved forward. "I prefer to be alone."

"I grew up in a large family," Ginny said. A sense of incredulity that she had to explain something so fundamental about herself to someone who shouldn't be a stranger at all, washed over her. "There was always a crowd around and time alone was something we all coveted."

"Crowds don't bother you?" he asked, nodding to a police officer who rode past on a horse.

That explains the smell, Ginny nodded to herself.

"Sometimes," Ginny shrugged, throwing her hands wide and spinning in place, taking in all four sides of the intersection they had come to. "Sometimes I only ever really feel safe in a crowd," she admitted.

Joe's face flashed understanding for a minute as he nodded. "I think that's partly why I'm here," he said, motioning for them to turn left at the corner. "I can really disappear here."

Ginny looked at him, hating the haunted look that took over his face for a minute, but understanding it completely. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and assure him that he didn't need to hide anymore, that they could face the world together now.

But it was too soon. Maybe for both of them.

They walked in silence for a while before Joe motioned ahead. "This is the French Market," he explained. "During the weekend this place will be crawling with people, buying all kinds of things."

"And now?" Ginny asked, watching as a fair number of people milled around the street in groups.

"Some of the bars and restaurants are open twenty-four hours," Joe said. "Some close down at night."

"You come here often." Again, it was more of a statement, but Joe didn't seem to mind, really.

"I like to watch people," he shrugged.

Ginny smiled up at him and nudged him with her shoulder. "I like to watch people too."

Joe smiled and his hand fumbled for hers, guiding her slowly down the street. They stopped several times to look in windows and Ginny simply enjoyed being there; alive and with Joe, whose similarities to Harry, now that they were alone and in the quiet, un-pressured atmosphere, were striking.

Her heart fluttered and she gave his hand a quick squeeze.

"Come on, there's this great place I know." Joe tugged on her hand and led her to a terrace covered with green awnings and proclaiming the place, Café Du Monde. Even at almost four o'clock in the morning, there were fans leisurely spinning above the tables and people drinking coffee and eating some kind of large, square pastry.

"I don't come here a lot," Joe explained as he ordered them two cups of coffee and their own plates of pastries, called beignets, although he pronounced them ben-yays. "But sometimes it's good to treat yourself."

Ginny smiled up at him, feeling more content and whole than she had in months—years, even.

They sat at a table near the street and sipped the rich coffee slowly, making small comments and

observations about the people passing by, or the other customers. It became something of a game to try and guess what their stories were; what brought them out this early in the morning and why.

"These are... divine," Ginny said, sighing as she bit into the beignet. It was thick and doughy and hardly sweet at all, except for the powdered sugar along the top.

"They are," Joe nodded, pulling bits of his own off and rubbing them in the powdered sugar on his plate before stuffing them in his mouth.

"Thank you," Ginny finally said, "for tonight. I... I can't remember when I've had more fun."

Joe laughed softly and cleaned up their table. "It's almost sunrise," he observed as they stepped out onto the street again.

Ginny stared up at the sky, hardly able to see the stars that she had studied in school. "It doesn't seem like it's been that long," she said quietly. This time, she fit her hand into his and they walked along the river, slowly watching the lights flash on the barges and cast reflections in the water.

"So, what's *your* story?" Joe finally asked after he gestured to a bench that looked out over the river. "Who is Ginny Weasley?"

Ginny chuckled and sat next to him, letting her thigh rest against his. "I... I'm not sure I can answer that," she said truthfully. "I'm not sure I even know anymore."

The idea rattled her deeply and she stared out over the water, her heart pounding away in her ears.

For so long she'd been so focused on one thing—finding Harry—that she wasn't quite sure when 'the quest' had taken over and defined her fully.

"I... I was always so sure, when I was little, that I knew exactly who I was," she continued, "who I wanted to be."

"What happened?" Joe asked, his thumb tracing her fingers.

She turned and looked at him, shaken by the intensity in his eyes. "I don't know," she admitted. "I think... I think I let life take over, and then it started to pass me by."

He nodded slowly, glancing away from her. "Life can get like that sometimes."

"Some days I wake up and I have to remind myself why I'm here, why I'm doing what I'm doing, and if it's really worth it."

The words traveled out over the water, and Ginny watched as the sky got darker and darker over the river.

"Is it?" Joe finally asked, his voice hoarse and low. "Worth it?"

Ginny looked at him then, resolve and fire filling her. *This* was worth it—worth years alone and struggling to stay afloat in an ocean of grief and frustration. *This* moment almost made up for all of that.

"I think it is," she said quietly, looking directly into his eyes.

Joe's face split into a slow smile and he looked at the water again. "That's good to know."

"It is," Ginny sighed, sitting back in the bench and sighing. The first bits of color finally touched the water, reflected from the sky and Ginny smiled, praying that the warmth of the sun would change everything.

# Chapter 18: Right Where I Belong

Ginny found a flat only a few blocks from the bar—easily within walking distance, even though she often preferred to hop on one of the streetcars. The hot breeze made by the moving car reminded her of flying in a bright blue sky with the wind rustling her hair.

Since Joe had asked her who she really was, Ginny had done a lot of thinking. Part of her thought that she hadn't changed all that much, yet her life was virtually unrecognizable when she compared it to her former dreams.

Ginny decided to forgo the streetcar. She was determined to get her head straight and figure out who she was, and what she wanted in life. Joe was definitely part of that plan, if she could figure him out. The afternoon sun was warm on her shoulders and she found herself smiling at the people she passed as she walked slowly along, mulling things over.

Joe hadn't been distant, really—that wasn't the word she was looking for, but it was just on the edge of describing his mood. He'd been pleasant to her in the past week since their evening on the riverfront, but he hadn't taken any initiative to move their relationship forward, despite the time they had spent together. There hadn't been any more kisses, or hand holding.

She felt a bit like a yo-yo—always pushed right to the brink of what she could handle before being pulled back in.

He *had* commented on the new haircut she'd splurged on the other day and yesterday when she wore a cute skirt and blouse he had acted strange.

The skirt had been a whim—something that Ginny hadn't done in years. And it felt good to remember that she *could* look feminine and desirable again.

Pearl's theory—as if Ginny *needed* Pearl's particular brand of wisdom about Joe—was that Ginny would have him eating out of her palm in a matter of weeks. So, she had proceeded to tell the entire, very full bar that Ginny was single and new in town.

Ginny always thought of herself as rather thick skinned, and not embarrassed easily—unless you counted around Harry. But the five marriage proposals, several gropings, countless phone numbers and kisses she'd received just that one night had nearly put her over the edge. She laughed and went along with it all, unsure what to think until Joe tossed his rag on the bar and disappeared for twenty minutes.

Rather than staying to help them clean up that night, Joe had melted into the darkness of the alley next to the bar as Ginny watched him go.

Over Pearl's protests (You never know, Ginger.) Ginny lit a match and started the whole pile of business cards and little notes scrawled with telephone numbers on fire. It was wholly unsatisfying; her magic itched to be set loose and do the destruction. The only place she was really free to use spells was her new flat.

Joe stared out at the city spread beneath his window, not seeing any of it. Instead, his mind was a jumbled mess, all due to a spunky little red head that wasn't ever far from his thoughts.

Ginny was... an enigma, to say the least. She was very open and forward in her regard for him, and Joe wasn't sure how to take that. No one had ever—well, that he could remember, of course—reacted to him in this way.

Meghan had always been giggly and happy in his presence, but she never reached for his hand, never initiated anything. Joe had always been the one to take any steps in their relationship, short lived as it was.

And it had been comfortable for awhile, Joe admitted. But he really craved someone who challenged him, someone he could hold a conversation with about important things, or nothing at all, someone who he didn't have to try and read her mind all the time to figure out what she wanted.

Ginny seemed to fit the bill, and that scared Joe.

What if he did start a relationship with her?

Max and Pearl had both been very vocal about the idea of him dating Ginny. But they didn't know Joe's past. They didn't know the reality behind his nightmares and the terrifying feeling of having someone out there watching your every move, just waiting for you to trip up so they could drag you back to some underground building and strap you to a table again...

"No," he whispered, rubbing his forehead harshly and pulling away from the window. "Don't go back there, Joe," he commanded himself. "It's over and done. In the past."

He wished the words would help calm his racing heart, however.

Instead of dwelling on it, he rummaged in his drawers to find something to wear. The idea of spending the evening with Ginny was more than appealing, he had to admit.

"Just go and... and see where things lead," he nodded to himself as he pulled on a shirt and khaki pants. "Nothing has to come of it, even if..." He clapped his mouth shut, refusing to state aloud what his body and brain had been thinking for the past week.

Ginny was very attractive, and Joe had definitely taken notice. The other day when she wore a skirt had nearly done him in.

But he also felt... different... around Ginny. This wasn't just an attraction thing—Joe had dealt with that before—but something that seemed to tug them together. Whenever he was close to her, he wanted nothing more than to touch her; run his hand along her back, wrap their fingers together... kiss her again.

What if he did allow something to develop between them?

That was the question that had been plaguing him ever since they'd walked in the Quarter and watched the sun rise together. He couldn't deny that his heart seemed to be leading him in that

direction. But he really knew nothing about her, and she knew *nothing* about him.

"Stop over-analyzing everything, Joe, and just... just see where it goes," he scolded himself as he locked his door and clambered down the steps to the street below.

\* \* \*

Sam was behind the bar when Ginny walked in. Where he found an apron to fit his girth, she didn't know.

"Afternoon, Sam," she greeted, surprised at seeing him there. He rarely tended bar that she'd seen, mostly just puttering around the edges of the action, and greeted people near the door.

"Afternoon, Ginger," he smiled, making his dark eyes crinkle up at the corners.

Ginny cringed at the nickname, but there had been worse in the past, she decided. "Where is everyone?"

Sam's motion in wiping the bar stopped and he stared at her. "They didn't tell you?"

Ginny racked her brain, trying to remember anything that Pearl or Joe might have said in closing up yesterday that would have been different. "Er..."

"Tonight is date night," Sam proclaimed, spreading his arms wide and grinning as if his words explained everything.

"Er..." Ginny must have been gaping at him because Pearl laughed when she walked in from the kitchen.

"Come on, Ginger, we've only got twenty minutes before we meet the guys."

Ginny's jaw dropped as she looked at Pearl, wearing a dress that, even though it revealed a record number of tattoos, was very flattering. Gold bangle bracelets littered her wrists, clinking loudly when she threw her arms toward Ginny.

"Is that what you're wearing?"

Ginny looked down at her jeans and sneakers and immediately shook her head. "Er..."

Pearl rolled her eyes. "Come on upstairs, I have something you can borrow."

"Hang on," she protested as Pearl tugged her on her hand, dragging her toward the kitchen. "Where are we going?"

"Upstairs, to my apartment," Pearl said with a roll of her eyes.

Ginny shook her head, never having known that Pearl lived above the bar. "I meant..."

"Once a month," Pearl explained as she opened a thin door next to Sam's office and motioned for Ginny to go up the narrow, dark stairs, "Sam takes over the bar for the night and kicks us out."

We're supposed to go out and have fun somewhere, get drunk, get laid... whatever."

Ginny slowly walked up the stairs, pushing back against Pearl's hand which propelled her forward. The idea of going out sounded like fun, but it was all such a new, rushed idea that Ginny was having a hard time engaging her brain.

"And Sam can control it down there?"

Pearl laughed and threw open another door at the top of the stairs, leading to a chaotic, loft-style apartment. It looked like an old storage facility converted, but yet... homey all the same. A huge bank of windows across one wall was draped with exotic and bright fabrics. This side of the building must face away from the street, since Ginny surely would have noticed the colors before now.

"Sam *thinks* he can control it. And if it gets us all a chance to escape, who are we to protest."

Pearl stood in the middle of the floor, looking as if she perfectly fit in with the bright colors and patterns all around her.

"Now, come over here, I think we can lose the jeans and t-shirt for tonight. Joe loved the skirt you wore the other day," she added with a sly smile. "I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head."

Ginny felt her cheeks heat as she resigned herself to Pearl's plans for the night. Spending the evening with Joe, even if all they did was get something to eat, made her heart race in excitement. Perhaps tonight she could get closer to him and could really begin to discover who he was under all those layers.

Taking a deep breath, Ginny stepped forward and held her hands wide. "Do with me what you will, as long as it doesn't involve needles."

Pearl grinned and cheered. "I'll have you talked into a tattoo in no time at all."

"Not bloody likely," Ginny grumbled as she watched Pearl pick through the clothing scattered around.

Twenty minutes later, Ginny felt a little silly, but the look on Joe's face when she walked down the stairs was enough to make her completely forget that Pearl had covered her face in thick makeup and 'dolloed her up'.

Over Pearl's protests that Ginny would look great in a leather miniskirt, Ginny had unearthed a plain white sundress that went down to her knees. In the closet, Pearl had found a pair of strappy sandals that Ginny had discreetly re-sized while Pearl stepped into the bathroom.

"Wow, you look... wow," Joe mumbled as she came up to them, doing a little spin to show off her new look.

"Thanks," Ginny said, grinning at him. The pale blue shirt he wore was un-tucked from his tan trousers, and casually rolled up on his arms, but looked absolutely delicious on him. "You look pretty good yourself."

"The boy cleans up well," Pearl said, reaching up to ruffle his hair teasingly, earning her a rude gesture from Joe.

"Have fun, kids!" Sam called out from behind the bar.

"Where are we going?" Ginny asked as they left the bar and walked down the sidewalk that was starting to come to life with people. Her arm brushed Joe's several times, but she didn't want to be the one to take his hand in hers. She knew what she wanted from him, but he needed to want it too.

Ahead of them, Pearl and Max were wrapped together, laughing at things and talking quietly.

"Not really sure," Joe shrugged glancing at her. "I usually just do my own thing. Being with them..." he trailed off and Ginny had to smile. Pearl and Max really were in their own world.

"How long have they been together?" Ginny asked.

Joe scrunched up his face and seemed to be counting. "Forever?" he asked. "I don't know, a long time." He shook his head and they both laughed.

"And Sam still doesn't have a clue about them?" Ginny asked, shaking her head sadly. "They seem so... in love."

Joe sighed and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his trousers. "Sam sees what he wants to see. Don't get me wrong, I love the man, I really do. He took me in and gave me a job when..." He trailed off and Ginny wondered if he thought he was revealing too much. She wanted to tell him to keep going, but bit her lip instead, hoping he would loosen up as the night went on.

"But Pearl set him straight the other day," he shrugged. "She told me the old man's eyes nearly popped out of his head."

Ginny couldn't help but laugh at that picture. "And he believed her? Sam seems like the kind that might be too stubborn to accept much of anything new."

Joe nodded and looked away, his face scrunched a bit. "She uh... she kind of told him that you and I..."

"Oh." Ginny nodded, wondering what he thought of that. The idea of she and Joe as a couple, thrilled her. But it *had* been only a few days. And, really, looking at it from Joe's point of view, things between them had moved fairly fast; he'd kissed her on the day after they'd met, and held her hand while they walked that night.

Tonight Ginny vowed to simply do all she could to get to know him, and to let them both have fun while they were at it.

"Does that bother you that Pearl told him that?"

Joe glanced at her before staring straight ahead. "I'm not really sure how to feel about it."

"That's okay," Ginny said, forcing herself to laugh. "So... Mr. Lucas, tell me where you think we're

going," she gestured to the street around them and Joe seemed to perk up.

"Probably up to Bourbon," he shrugged, pointing up the street a ways. "There are some great restaurants up there. Pearl probably got reservations at the Red Fish Grill. It's her favorite."

Ginny nodded, not caring where they went, really. She and Joe had fallen behind Pearl and Max, who were now standing ahead in a group of people surrounding someone playing a saxophone. The low mournful song that drifted out over the street made Ginny close her eyes once they had stopped as well, swaying just a bit in place.

The scent of fish, something frying, alcohol, and the steamy smell of the street enveloped her. Joe's clean, masculine scent drifted into her awareness and she smiled when his hand fumbled for hers, lightly wrapping their hands together.

*Finally.*

The music died away and people clapped, waking Ginny from her trance. Joe nudged her forward, tossing a few coins into a box at the feet of the musician, as they followed Pearl and Max on.

"This place feels like magic," Ginny observed, as she took a deep breath and realized the truth in her statement. She didn't know if it was the whole area, or just the French Quarter that made her skin tingle. "Like almost anything could happen, you know?"

Joe smiled down at her, giving her hand a squeeze. "I know what you mean," he nodded. "I think that's how I ended up here. There's just this... energy that pulls you in and completely wraps you up."

"Exactly," she nodded, returning his smile. They walked for a while, Ginny looking up at the buildings with the intricate wrought iron balconies, decorated with festive garlands and flags. They passed several food vendors and the smell of boiled shrimp and various other items made Ginny's stomach growl. Joe chuckled and squeezed her hand before pointing into a window that offered a variety of sexually suggestive t-shirts.

"I should buy some of those for my brothers," she chuckled, shaking her head. "They'd love them."

"Your family is all back in England?" Joe asked.

Ginny nodded. "Yeah. As far as I know, anyway." Guilt settled in her stomach and she vowed to try and remember to write her parents soon. They needed to know she was alive still, if not where she was and who she was with.

A strange expression came over Joe's face but he glanced away. "How many brothers?" he asked, his tone tight.

Ginny tried to figure out what was wrong. Had she said something to upset him? Finally, she decided that her comment had been particularly stupid. Of course Joe would be sensitive to her being apart from her family, as far as she could tell he thought he didn't have any family left. She wasn't sure what they had told him back at the military base.

"I'm the youngest of seven," she said. "There is Bill, who is eleven years older than I am. He and his wife, Fleur, have a daughter, and a son on the way. Then, Charlie, who works in Romania, and Percy, who lives in London." She went on, giving him a breakdown of her family and what they did.

Joe seemed genuinely interested and asked questions about what they did for a living and where Ginny had gone to school. Some of his questions were hard to answer, as Ginny had to censor the magic usage.

She bit her lip when she ran out of material, knowing that she needed to ask him about his family, and not sure how he would receive it.

"What about your family?"

Just as she expected, Joe flinched. "I was... in an accident a few years ago," he said softly, the muscles in his jaw tightening. The movement of his jaw alone told Ginny that he was lying. "I don't remember anything before that." He was definitely holding something back, and it was more than just his lie about the accident. That rolled off of his tongue well practiced. But the comment about what he remembered wasn't so smooth.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. Her tone made him turn to her.

"Don't worry about it," he said, forcing a smile. "It's in the past."

Ginny really wanted to press him further on it, but Pearl and Max had stopped in front of a green building, a sign with a red fish on it above their heads.

"We're here," Joe said, tugging her forward.

\* \* \*

Joe couldn't keep his eyes off Ginny all through dinner. He hadn't even tasted what he'd ordered—some sort of fish... something or other.

Her whole face lit when she smiled and it made his chest feel funny and tight.

Toward the end of dinner, however, Pearl and Max seemed to be in their own world, speaking softly between them and sitting more on one chair than two. Joe stared at them, wondering if he would ever feel that way about someone. Part of him hoped he would with Ginny... but there was still that part of him that held back and whispered that he was no good for someone as wonderful and beautiful as Ginny was.

Across the table, he caught her eye and nodded toward the kissing couple. "That's our cue to leave them alone," Joe whispered, throwing a few bills on the table. "We'll catch you two later," he said, standing up and holding his hand out for Ginny to take.

"'kay," Pearl muttered before pressing her face to Max's.

Ginny chuckled as Joe led her back outside, into the humid evening air. "What should we do now?" Ginny asked. Joe smiled down at her. She wrapped her arm through his and pulled closer to him. His

heart thumped loudly and he looked around, trying to decide what would be best for them.

"Whatever you want," he shrugged. "The French Market is closed," he mused. "But we could go down to the riverfront again. There are usually musicians and that out."

"We could go dancing," Ginny suggested, waggling her eyebrows and spinning so that she was walking backwards, her arms wrapping around Joe's back.

He chuckled and shook his head. "I suck at it." His hands wrapped behind her of their own accord and he very nearly sighed in relief. Something about having her here, this close to him... it just made the rest of the world go away.

Ginny laughed, "Maybe you just need the right partner."

Joe's eyes widened and he impulsively leaned forward and kissed her forehead. Her quick wit and funny comments—as if she'd known all along that they'd be the perfect dancing partners—made him want to laugh. "I might know a place," he shrugged. "Come on. But I make no promises about my dancing abilities."

Joe remembered coming to this pub once, but he'd been just wandering by and seen the craziness that ensued. He had ducked in to see what it was all about and had to laugh at just what went on.

"It's pretty quiet in here," Ginny remarked, looking around the dimly lit room.

"Just watch," he mused, sipping from his beer and motioning toward the door. "At eleven, you'll see what I mean."

Sure enough, almost at eleven on the hour, people began to pour in. The pool tables were quickly converted to dance platforms and a band set up in the corner. In minutes, the music blared and everyone was dancing.

"I told you," Joe teased, finishing off his drink and grabbing hers as a couple, dancing quite expressively, bumped into their table.

Ginny grinned at the chaos and they watched as people from all walks of life moved to the loud music, some of them climbing up on the bar itself to celebrate... whatever it was they were celebrating.

Joe watched her face, beaming at the hilarity of it all, her eyes sparkling in the darkness. The urge to lean forward and kiss her—not the hasty, too-public kiss of last week, but a long, involved kiss that would steal both of their breath away—was great.

"Come on," Joe said, tugging on her hands. "I'll give you two songs."

They managed to find a small pocket where people weren't quite so thick and moved closer together, letting the music dictate how their bodies moved.

The heat in the room was suddenly overpowering, Joe noticed, but it also might have been because his hands found her hips and his body brushed against hers, electrifying every point where they

touched. Even though the music was loud and fast, they danced slowly in the center of it all, Ginny's arms wrapped around Joe's neck as he held her to him.

"I think it was the partner," Joe confirmed into her ear. He was shouting, but over the loud music, it probably sounded like a whisper to her. The words themselves didn't mean a whole lot, but the look in her eye when he pulled back said more than words ever could.

\* \* \*

The music changed several times, but they continued to rock back and forth in each other's arms, ignoring the jostling of the crowd around them.

Ginny pressed her face into his chest, breathing in the bit of him she could smell over the stench of stale cigarettes that caused the whole place to be fuzzy. She closed her eyes and tried to remember Harry—the way he had held her, the things he used to say to her.

But it was all mixed up in what she felt for Joe right now. It seemed strange, since they were really one person. But they weren't, at the same time.

Her stomach still swooped pleasantly when she saw him, and her chest tightened when he held her hand, or pulled her close, like they were right now. The sexual attraction between them was much more evident now than it had been years ago. Ginny supposed that was a consequence of them being older and more world-hardened.

"Ginny," Joe groaned softly, his lips pressing against her temple and his breath moving the hairs there as he rubbed his cheek on her head.

Joe's appreciation of her body was evident, and it made Ginny feel extremely attractive and womanly. Somehow she knew, without having to hear him say it, that it wasn't just physical for him. This attraction to her, and now she knew it was completely mutual, wasn't just about him being lonely and randy—he held her hand, he wanted to spend time with her, he treated her with respect.

She looked up just as Joe leaned down, his lips finding hers. The urgency in his kiss was almost overwhelming, and Ginny let herself be drawn in by it, surprised that she had lived this long without it. His hands held her back so gently, yet firmly, telling her that he would hold her up, but that he wasn't going to let her go either.

Their dancing soon turned into strictly kissing as Ginny wrapped her arms around his back, and gave herself over to the moment, savoring the way his lips caressed hers, the way his tongue tentatively tasted her and then moved back in for more.

Slowly, they pulled apart and began swaying again as the crowd screamed for the band to play one more.

"Come on," Joe said, sliding his hands down to hers and leading her through the crowd.

Ginny let him guide her, her head still lost in the kiss and the intensity of the moment.

"Is it okay if we walk for a while?" he asked once they had reached the sidewalk outside.

"Yeah," Ginny nodded, content in whatever they did. They were quiet for almost an entire block before Joe cleared his throat.

\* \* \*

"I told you I wasn't very good at it."

Ginny snorted. "That was one of the best kisses I've ever had," she shook her head.

Joe laughed and then it died out as he flushed. "I meant the dancing."

"Oh," Ginny said, feeling a little silly. "Well, that was good too."

Joe's hand clasped hers tightly and they walked on, another block before he spoke. "But I'm glad about the kiss."

Ginny leaned her face against his shoulder, nuzzling there. "I meant it."

"Good," he said, nodding over toward a large grassy area behind a large wrought iron fence. The thought that he was a good kisser—something he'd never really thought about before—was almost overwhelming. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to prove that claim, and so much more.

"This is Jackson Square, and over there is St. Louis Cathedral."

Ginny nodded, her eyes taking in the lush trees and the artists who were just starting to clean up their paintings that leaned all along the fence.

"Buy the pretty lady a flower," one man suggested to Joe, shoving a red rosebud into his face from the cart on large wheels he was pushing around.

"No thanks," Joe said, holding up his hand and walking on. But the man persisted, pulling out several other kinds of flowers.

"One of these, maybe?"

Joe shook his head, until his eye caught something and he pointed at one particular flower. It was beautiful and from the moment his eye saw it, it reminded him of Ginny. "That one."

"I don't need one, Joe," Ginny protested, although her hand tightened down on his when he handed over the money and the peddler handed him a brilliant tiger lily. He handed it to Ginny and smiled widely, watching as her face lit.

"Thank you, Joe," she said, holding the flower and staring at it. She seemed to be thinking too hard about that flower, but Joe shrugged it off.

"Do you want to walk through the square," he asked, motioning toward the entrance with four large lamps giving it a golden glow.

"Yeah," Ginny agreed, wrapping her arm through his again. "I'd like that."

After they had walked a while, circling most of the square, Joe motioned to a nice patch of grass and they sat down together. Joe rested his elbows on his knees and looked at her flower.

"I like the color on that. It reminds me of you," he said, surprised he was being so open with her. He was never like this with anyone. "The color of your hair and... and the way you make me smile."

Ginny grinned and nudged him with her shoulder. "That was incredibly sappy."

He chuckled and rubbed his forehead. "It was. But it's also true."

They were quiet for a minute before Ginny turned toward him. "I make you smile?"

"Yeah," he admitted, staring off into the night, his fingers playing in the grass and pulling a piece occasionally. "You do."

"That's good," Ginny said, nudging him again. "You have a beautiful smile."

"Yours is beautiful," he protested softly. "And I like how that one patch of freckles near your mouth disappears when you smile."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "It does?" Her fingers reaching up and tracing her lip.

"Yeah," Joe said, smiling again, his stomach doing a funny little rolling motion. "I noticed the first time we met." He reached out and pressed his fingertip to a spot right next to her lip.

She blinked, and was quiet for a minute. "I've always loved your eyes."

Joe chuckled at the strange phrase. "Always?"

Ginny chuckled. "I meant... since we met, obviously. Sometimes I think I can see things in them, they're so green."

Joe looked away then, wondering what she meant. What could she see in his eyes? His heart pounded, but for a far different reason than it had the rest of the night. The past seemed too close all of a sudden. "What can you see?" he finally asked, his voice soft.

\* \* \*

Ginny thought about how to answer him. How did she tell him that she saw another man when she looked at him, yet... they were one and the same? How did she tell him that she saw herself in them, and what they used to have? What they could have now.

"I see forever in them," she finally settled on.

"And what does forever look like?" he pressed, turning to face her again.

Ginny thought about that as she reached up to take his glasses off. He blinked and looked back at her, his eyes still bright in the darkness.

"It looks like power... and strength," she said softly. "I see someone who is a natural leader, but who has such a great capacity to love that it takes my breath away."

Joe blinked and looked away, fumbling to put his glasses on. "You can really see all of that?" He forced out a chuckle that died between them.

"Yeah," she nodded. "That and so much more."

"I'm not strong or powerful," he protested, his jaw setting stubbornly. "I hate that part about me."

Ginny shook her head. "I can see it there, Joe, even if you can't. You have something about you that draws people toward you. They can feel the strength and power inside you and it makes them want to be near you." It was nothing but the truth, and Ginny was glad she could tell him that. Harry had always radiated power, but with Joe, it was... different. She could still feel it there, like a magnetic pull that at times was so strong it overwhelmed her, intoxicating her with its seductive touch.

Joe looked over at her, blinking. "I don't have that many friends."

"Maybe not," Ginny said. "But that's probably because you don't allow people to get too close to you. I'm a lot the same way."

Joe snorted. "I'll bet you have a lot of friends. You're just... amazing, Ginny."

"I used to be popular," she admitted, scrunching her nose at how long ago it seemed. "But... that was when I was back in school."

"Not after then?"

Ginny smiled. "I, er... I was kind of a trouble maker." It was a complete understatement, but he was smiling again now. Maybe if she helped him to see that she was just like him, with a haunted past and an uncertain future...

Joe smirked at her. "*That* I believe."

"Oi," she nudged him, but had to laugh. "I'm serious. I'm not allowed in England right now, actually," she said, scrunching up her nose again. It kind of hurt to say that, but Joe's laughter, even at her expense, helped.

"You're serious?"

"Er... yeah," she shrugged. "It's kind of a long story, but... I sort of had to leave."

"Nice," he nodded, breaking into laughter again and actually tipping over just a bit. "What did you do? Assassinate someone?"

Ginny shook her head, smiling wryly. *If only he knew.* "Nothing that intense. I just... didn't agree with something the government was doing, and... I got a little... vocal about it."

Joe tipped over completely, holding his stomach as he laughed.

"It's a very serious situation," Ginny protested, breaking into giggles herself. The humor wore off quickly, however and she shook her head. "I couldn't even sneak back in for my brother's wedding a few months ago."

Joe stopped laughing as well and reached for her hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't imagine being apart from someone you love like that, let alone your whole family."

Ginny looked at him, not seeing pity, but sympathy etched all over his face.

"I wish..." He looked away, staring out over the square before shaking his head. "Do you think you'll ever go back, permanently, I mean?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. Somehow, she didn't think telling him that she wanted to take him back with her was the best idea; not yet, anyway. "I think I'm right where I belong right now," she finished softly, looking over at him.

Joe squeezed her hand again and nodded. "I think I'm where I need to be too." The vulnerability in that statement shocked her. This man was such a mix of emotions, and he was horrible at hiding them, just like Harry always had been. Although Joe had his moments when Ginny couldn't read anything from him—when the strength and power simply radiated off of him. His struggle with the demons—whether real or imagined—was great and Ginny longed to be there to help him, if only he would allow her.

So far, she seemed to be working her way into his life during these fun, relaxed moments, but those were only a small fraction of what he was all about.

"Do you remember anything from... before?" Ginny asked letting her fingers trace the back of his hand.

\* \* \*

Joe's jaw tightened and he shook his head. The overwhelming urge to tell her everything rose up in him and he licked his lips, trying to decide what to say. "It wasn't an accident," he admitted softly, giving her a sheepish look. "They wouldn't tell me much... just that I was part of something important. Something... secret. I know it sounds stupid, but... that's what I remember."

"Military?" Ginny asked.

"Maybe," he shrugged, slightly alarmed that she had gotten that close to the truth. "I don't really like to talk about it." He felt bad for shutting her out like that, but tonight had been wonderful, and he didn't want the past to intrude more than it was already doing.

"Let's walk again," she said, picking up her flower and standing. Joe stared up at her from the grass and then chuckled as she impatiently reached for his hand.

"Come on," she urged. "I'm tired of sitting. My arse is asleep."

"Your arse?" he asked as he allowed her to pull him from the ground. He pulled back a bit, amused to watch her struggling to pry him up.

"Yes, my *arse*," she said. "Now, stop being a pain in my *arse* and let's walk."

Joe laughed as he rose fully and wrapped his arms around her waist, curling himself into her back and resting his chin over her shoulder. "You make me laugh," he mumbled, kissing her neck just below her ear.

"I like it when you laugh," she said. "It makes me smile inside."

Slowly, he let his arms fall away and took her hand, smiling down at her as they began to walk down the paved path towards Decatur Street.

"You think Sam survived the night?" she asked, resting her head on his arm.

Joe chuckled and shook his head. "I think he probably had a few of his buddies come in and help. He doesn't think we know he does that—some of the old fellows from around here. Sam's been here forever, and he knows just about everyone."

"It seems that way," Ginny said as they took slow steps.

Most of the vendors were gone for the night, their artwork covered in clothes or gone completely. A lone trumpet player stood far down on the corner, mournful notes wafting out over the street, ending the day.

"He loves that bar," she shook her head, chuckling.

"He'll be there until they have to carry him out," Joe said with a fond smile. "He gave me a job when I first got to New Orleans. Let me stay in that apartment upstairs while I repaired things."

"The one Pearl lives in now?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah," he nodded. "That place was a mess. It was just an old storage room, stuffed full of rotting boxes and junk."

"I hate to tell you now," Ginny chuckled, "but it's still a mess."

Joe rolled his eyes. "With Pearl living there, I'm not surprised." They walked to the end of the block, but instead of crossing, naturally turned and continued with the square on their left. "That place was falling apart. Sam can't fix anything," Joe chuckled fondly. "And... I'm kind of good with my hands. One night he was short handed behind the bar—this is before Pearl came back from college—"

"Pearl went to *college*?" Ginny said.

Joe laughed at the shock in her voice. "She has a business degree. In fact, she finished in just three years, I think. She always grumbles about how much she hated school, but I think she really liked it."

Ginny blinked several times and then shook her head. "I guess I never pictured—"

"Yeah, Pearl in a classroom," he said, a laugh rumbling from somewhere low inside his chest.

"Anyway, Sam needed help, and I was around. I got drafted into bartending. Since then, I've kind of just... done it all."

"You're good at all of it," Ginny complimented.

He shrugged. "I just do what I need to do." His face flushed at her kind words. The bar was... well, it was some place that Joe felt like he fit in. And that was saying something, as he'd never found anyplace like that before. He was an outcast at best, someone who lived on the fringes of polite society but didn't quite know how to function in the middle of it. While he didn't think he was *happy*, he was content for right now. Actually, before Ginny had come, he'd been thinking about making a change in his life, but now...

\* \* \*

Ginny sighed happily as they continued on. A woman stepped out of the shadows, her chocolate brown skin shining in the low light of the streetlamps.

"Tarot readings, horoscopes... I tell you da futah. Sell you good luck charm," she chanted in a low, gravelly voice. The bright fabrics she was wrapped in tinkled softly like bells and Ginny saw small bits of glass or metal on the edges, forming some sort of pattern that was hard to make out in the dark.

"No thank you," Joe said, holding up his hand.

"You lady maybe," she pointed toward Ginny, her heavy eyelids widening. "I do you bot, ten dollars."

Joe shook his head, but looked down at Ginny, who was watching the woman. "I don't know."

"Best be warned, Mista, of anyting in the futah," the woman continued, pointing back to the rickety square table she had set against the fence that bordered the park.

Ginny was surprised when Joe gave in, nodding his head and taking a bill from his pocket. But then she noticed that he watched the woman carefully, taking in her threadbare clothes and the fact that her feet, which poked out from the edges of her long skirt, were bare. When she smiled, her teeth were broken and dark. Ginny got the distinct impression that this woman was homeless.

"I do tree cards for you bot," she nodded, smiling again as she urged them to stand by her table. She sat, slowly, on a chair and pulled a deck of large tarot cards from somewhere under the stained tablecloth that was crookedly displayed on her table. "Tell you past, present, and futah."

Joe winked at Ginny who watched the woman's hands, surprisingly agile as she shuffled the cards back and forth before handing them to Ginny. "You first."

"Have you ever done this before?" Joe asked Ginny, watching as she shuffled the cards.

Ginny chuckled, remembering helping Ron and Harry, and even Neville, with their Divination revising. She had never taken the class herself. "Some people in school were into this stuff," she shrugged. "I saw it a few times."

She handed the deck back to the woman, who pulled one card from the top, one from the middle, and one from the bottom, laying them out, face down, on the table.

"Turn over dis one," she urged Ginny, pointing at the first one on the left. "Dis be da past."

Ginny did so, wondering what foolishness she would come up with. She didn't seem magical in any way, selling her wares out here on the side of the street.

The card pictured a man hanging upside down and the woman hummed and nodded, her dark eyes, surrounded by puffy lids, stared at Ginny, making her shiver.

"Da hanged man," she nodded wisely. "You past full of devotion and sacrifice. You good woman."

Ginny felt her skin heat, but smiled tightly at Joe, who seemed to be enjoying this little show.

"Now da next," the woman urged. Her dark eyes clouded a bit when the card revealed a woman seated in between two columns, one black and one white.

"The High Priestess," Ginny said, wracking her memory for what that might mean.

Joe chuckled. "You *have* done this before."

"You have a secret," the woman nodded, narrowing her eyes until they were only slits, and tilting her head to the side. "All is not as it seems."

Ginny bristled, feeling as if the woman were seeing everything about her. Perhaps she was magical after all.

Joe scowled. "Could that be about not being able to go home?" he asked softly.

Ginny forced herself to shrug and smile dismissively at him. "I'm not sure I believe in all of this." It was partial truth; Ginny had seen real divination work, but on the side of a street in New Orleans wasn't somewhere she expected *real* magic to happen.

The woman's eyes opened widely now as she nudged the last card with her crooked finger. "Dat be da futah."

Ginny forced herself to turn the card and brush off the prickling in her skin. A woman and a lion were revealed and the old lady nodded wisely.

"You believe in da power of love. You have strength and courage."

Joe's arm wrapped around her waist and he narrowed his eyes at her, perhaps seeing how shaken she'd become in just a few minutes. "You okay?"

She nodded tightly and watched as the woman gathered up the cards and handed the deck to Joe.

"Now you turn." Her eyes were intense and appraising as she watched Joe hesitantly fumble with the cards.

Ginny studied the woman, seeing something deep in her eyes. There *was* magic there—but it was... darker, more mysterious than Ginny had ever imagined seeing. She almost reached out a hand and stopped Joe, unsure of what might come of these cards.

The motions were repeated, three cards lay down. And Joe turned over the first one, revealing a man dressed in white.

“Da Hermit,” the woman said, nodding wisely and narrowing her eyes at Joe. “You hide from da world. You need help, but you refuse it when it comes.”

Joe bristled next to her and shook his head. His eyes were clouded, but Ginny couldn’t tell whether he was bothered by what the woman was saying, or if he just didn’t believe she could read his past and future.

“Da present,” she urged, nudging the card. Joe sighed as he turned it over.

The woman gasped and pulled her hand back, her eyes searching Joe’s face closely.

“The Emperor,” Ginny sighed, rubbing her forehead and trying to gage what the woman was seeing in Joe.

The woman nodded slowly, as if she was finally understanding something. “Power and strength. You are... chosen.”

The word shook Ginny and she had to look away, visions of newspaper headlines proclaiming Harry as The Chosen One, flashing before her eyes.

“I don’t feel very powerful,” Joe chuckled, although his tone was tight. “Or chosen.”

Ginny turned back to him and took his hand in hers, the truth sitting on the tip of her tongue.

“You fear powerlessness,” the woman continued, staring at Joe with wide eyes. “You don’t like dos in authority.”

“It’s getting late,” Joe mumbled, looking out at the few cars on the street. She could feel him tense beside her and wondered if he was planning on walking away. It wasn’t a bad idea, actually, considering how intense the past few minutes had become.

Her skin prickled where it touched him and she shivered just a bit.

They remained standing and Joe took a deep breath before turning over the last card.

For Ginny, time froze as he stared at it and tossed onto the others, revealing a black knight on a white horse.

“Deat,” the woman breathed.

Joe tugged his hand away from Ginny’s and stalked off into the night.

“Joe!” Ginny called as she ran after him. She finally caught him on the corner and flinched at the

look of fury and helplessness on his face. "It doesn't mean death," she shook her head, moving to stand in front of him so that he couldn't get away from her.

"Yeah, what does it mean then?" he bit out, his eyes darting all over the road in front of them, without seeing a thing.

"It usually means a change in life," Ginny explained frantically. "The beginning of a new life."

Joe looked down at her, his chest still heaving. "What does that mean?"

His words were harsh, but Ginny could hear the panic behind them. His hand reached up and ruffled his hair in annoyance as he scowled at the situation. "What if I don't want my life to change?"

"It doesn't always mean for the worse," Ginny pleaded.

Joe's hand dropped and he sighed deeply, his eyes still dark and troubled behind his glasses.

"I want to go home," he muttered. "It's been a long night."

Ginny sighed, her shoulders sagging, a bit in relief, but mostly in resignation. It was very obvious that Joe was finished talking about this right now. He was beginning to shut down completely.

"Let's take a streetcar," she mumbled. "I'm too tired to walk."

Joe was silent the entire ride, although he did ride with her to her stop, bypassing his own by several blocks.

They got off together and Ginny wrapped her arms around herself, shivering, even in the muggy midnight air.

"I had a good time tonight," she said softly. Joe smiled tightly and blinked at her, his hands shoved in his pockets. His shoulders were hunched and tight, as if he were tensed for a fight.

Ginny's fantasies of asking him up to her apartment and maybe getting him to open up a bit more faded into nothingness as they stood, feet apart, both awkwardly searching for something to say.

Finally, she sighed and moved closer to him, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Don't let those silly cards dictate who you are, Joe."

"I don't like change," he grunted out, staring over her shoulder. "I hate it."

Ginny stared at him for a minute. "Your life changed when I walked into that bar," she said bluntly, a bit hesitant of what his reaction was going to be. "Was that such a bad change?"

Joe looked at her, his eyes dark and clouded and his jaw clenched. "I'm not sure how I feel about that change," he said quietly before pressing his dry lips to her cheek and hurrying off.

Ginny watched him until he turned the corner and then threw her head back, staring up at the black sky. There were only a few stars visible.

Everything had been going so well tonight, until those stupid cards. And now... now it felt as if Ginny were all alone again, thrown back into the helplessness and hurt of her past, rather than looking forward to the future.

She didn't blame Joe, really. There was so much he was hiding from—his past, the hurt, the memory of what had happened to him at Lucas, what had happened to him since then. It all bubbled and simmered inside him, leaking out from time to time and nearly knocking Ginny aside with its intensity.

No, this wasn't Joe's fault. And Ginny was determined that he needed to know that. Soon.

# Chapter 19: My World

Everything was completely out of control tonight, Joe decided as he stormed away from Ginny's apartment, not even caring where he went, really.

How could things swing from near perfection to absolute chaos in the space of a few minutes—in the turn of those stupid cards? Fucking stupid cards!

Joe swore violently, ignoring the couple that scooted away from him on the sidewalk and hurried turned the corner. But he was beyond caring, really.

Everything that had been bubbling up, churning and threatening to burst out of him for days, was right at the surface. And he needed to be away when it finally erupted, because someone was liable to get hurt.

So he ran, twisting and turning through the dark streets, forgetting about the pain in his side, the burning in his lungs and the tears streaming down his face.

He ran until he came to an open field—a playground of some sort, he suspected—and then screamed in release. A sensation of fire rolled off his skin. The night lit brightly and a car parked not too far away began to flash its lights and blare its horn.

Joe sank to his knees, his chest heaving with each labored breath. The ground hurt his legs but he couldn't manage to care much as flashes of the past came back, battering him from all sides and making him cry out against them.

*Joe arched against the restraints that held him to the narrow bed, crying out every time he heard the Frenchman scream from the other room. He could hear Johnny reacting similarly and Momma Jessen's cries as the Healers worked on him.*

*What they were doing to him Joe could only guess. But the three men had made a vow, passed silently with looks traded in the hallway, and through whispered words to Momma Jessen, and the small hole dug in the wall, that they weren't going to allow themselves to be treated this way any longer.*

*The time was coming soon, they all knew.*

*The last few memory treatments had been hell, Joe remembered with a painful wince. It was as if they weren't trying to heal what illness he had, but truly trying to drag every bit of knowledge right out of his head, leaving him empty and weightless.*

*It wasn't working. The "treatment" the Healers insisted would set them free from terrible visions and nightmares weren't working. In fact, Joe had worse dreams now than ever—they were just different.*

*Instead of vague, floating shapes in forests and green flashes of light that made his chest and head explode, now his head was filled with the screams of other patients like himself and vague, shadowy visions of men standing over him with sticks and drawing silver fluid away from his head.*

*The screaming stopped abruptly and shouting and shuffling was heard... before it faded out to silence.*

*"What's happening?" he begged when Momma Jessen slipped into the room.*

*Her face was wet with tears and she shook her head, moving her frail old body toward him and holding out a syringe, tapping the side of it with her fingernail.*

*"I'm sorry, my Ordinary Joe," she whispered. "It's better if you go to sleep now." She cried even louder when his eyes met hers, pleading for her not to do this to him.*

*"Please... you have to help us," he whispered back, straining against the restraints.*

*Her dark, watery eyes met his and he went slack in relief when she nodded. Shaking fingers undid the buckles on the leather straps and she slipped the syringe into his hand, leaning forward and giving him a kiss on the cheek.*

*"There's a fence just outside the door a few yards... don't stop when you get there... just keep running."*

*Joe nodded, closing his eyes against the well of affection for this woman who had done everything she possibly could to help the three men.*

*"Johnny Appleseed is one door dow..." she told him as if he didn't know; as if she hadn't caught him whispering to Johnny through the hole in the wall a dozen times.*

*"Frenchie?" Joe whispered.*

*Her face grew tight and she shook her head, fresh tears rolling down her face.*

*A wave of nausea rolled over Joe and he clenched his teeth against it, praying he wouldn't lose the meager contents of his stomach.*

*"Leave the door unlocked," he said. "I'll wait until you're gone."*

*She nodded, looking over her shoulder one last time with a look that Joe took as an apology for everything she'd been forced to do to him over the time he was here. Joe didn't even know how long he had been a prisoner in this place they called a hospital. Too long, that was for damned sure.*

*Momma Jessen was gone and Joe counted to one hundred before putting his eye to the thin crack in the door. The guard at the end of the hall seemed to be asleep now that it was quiet. Joe counted again to one hundred, and then once more as Momma Jessen appeared again, coming out of Johnny's room. She didn't turn to him... didn't even acknowledge he was there standing at his door, but walked on down the hall, her footsteps sounding like klaxons in the eerie silence of the hall.*

*Before Joe could move from his statue post, Johnny slipped from his room and struck the guard twice with quick jabs to the nose. Blood spurted everywhere and Joe opened his door fully,*

*preparing for more guards to come running at the sound.*

*But no one came and the guard lay slumped on the ground, blood leaking out of his mouth and nose.*

*Johnny spun, his bare feet sliding in the blood pool, and turned to go past Joe to Frenchie's room. But Joe clasped his thin pajamas as they nearly collided.*

*"He's dead."*

*"NO!" Johnny hissed loudly, reaching out to steady himself on the wall. Joe clasped his shoulder strongly, remembering that hours before Frenchie had begun to scream, it had been Johnny's turn in the room down the hall.*

*"He's gone," Joe assured him, trying to pull the man toward the front of the building. "Now is our chance."*

*"Hey!"*

*They two men froze as a guard came into the hallway, pulling his weapon and advancing on them in the narrow space.*

*Joe and Johnny exchanged a look and both barreled toward the man.*

*Joe threw out his right hand, sending a force through his arm that knocked the guard spinning back into the wall with a grunt and a thud.*

*Two Healers came out to see what the commotion was and Joe jabbed the syringe at the first one, sticking him directly in the neck and plunging down, sending the whole amount of liquid into the man. Johnny struck the second man with a forceful blow to the chest, his head cracking the edge of the door in the process.*

*"I'm going to find Frenchie," Johnny said as they stared at the two Healers, lying still in the doorway.*

*Joe's stomach heaved and he threw up all over the healer's leg, splattering the sick all over the floor and wall. His whole body shook as he stared at the men, one of whom he'd probably just killed.*

*A whimper farther in the room made Joe look up to see a pair of terrified, dark eyes meeting his.*

*Momma Jessen was crouched around her knees in the cold, metal room, shaking horribly as she cried.*

*"I won't hurt you," Joe panted out. Somehow he managed to climb over the bodies and crawl toward her, taking her trembling hand in his. "I won't hurt you."*

*"I know," she whispered. "I know; you're one of my boys."*

*"Your boys," he panted, staring around the room. Both of them jumped when Johnny roared down*

*the hall and glass shattered.*

*"You need to run, Joe," Momma Jessen urged, her face stern and her eyes wide. "Run and never look back."*

*He nodded jerkily and stood to go. But the cabinet across the room caught his eye and he moved toward it in an almost hypnotic state.*

*They were supposed to be completely asleep when they were in this room, he knew. But there were times, while they were removing memories, or making his head hurt, that he'd been lucid enough to watch as the silvery fluid that looked almost like liquid air went into the glass containers and onto shelves in this cupboard.*

*"Joe..." Momma Jessen pleaded, her eyes darting from him to the door again.*

*Someone was coming; Joe could feel it in the vibrations of the floor beneath his bare feet, and feel it in the way the air moved around him. But his eyes still stared at the cupboard.*

*Slowly, he reached out and tried to open it. But the handle didn't move. He growled in frustration and clamped both hands onto the doors, trying to pry them open. It never should have worked, but Joe's arms shook as he pried the cabinet open, dozens of glass vials clinking and wobbling precariously on the shelves.*

*"Get away from there!"*

*Joe ducked as a burly guard shot a beam of light at him, hitting the cabinet and shattering glass. Silver liquid poured out over Joe's hand and he stared at it, mesmerized by the way it flowed over his hand and splashed onto the floor, pooling around his bloodstained foot.*

*Momma Jessen screamed and dove at the man with the stick, but Joe still stared at the liquid.*

*"If I can't have them," he said softly, "then no one can."*

*With a primal scream, he tipped the cabinet over, sending a shower of glass and silver cascading everywhere.*

*Time seemed to slow and Joe watched as the pieces rained down on him, the liquid splashing all over his body.*

*Another flash of light shown and Joe grunted in pain as his shoulder stung horribly.*

*Johnny barreled into the guard from behind and the man slid to a stop in the middle of the silver pool, blood streaming from his nose.*

*"Run," Momma Jessen urged them both once more and Joe reached out to pull her up with him as Johnny dragged him toward the door.*

*"Leave me," she urged them. "Get over that fence and don't look back."*

*Joe's eyes filled with tears that he ignored as Johnny led the way down the corridor that looked*

*like a war zone. Bodies lay everywhere, although some of them were moving slowly.*

*Joe tried to ignore that as they moved toward the front of the building. "Get us the hell out of here, Joe," Johnny urged as they stared at a locked door. The sounds of men running down the hallway echoed and Joe stared at the lock before reaching forward and closing his hand around it.*

*Johnny shook his shoulders, clutching at his pajamas and urging him to hurry as Joe visualized the lock crumbling away in his fingers.*

*It seemed to take forever and his hand ached... but the lock fell away, powder in his hands as Johnny propelled him forward, stumbling in the dirt and blinking at the bright lights that illuminated the area they were in.*

*Joe could just see the outline of a tall fence and stumbled toward it, hanging onto Johnny as tightly as Johnny was hanging on to him. No one was chasing them yet, but Joe knew it was only a matter of minutes until someone pulled a gun and shot them. But... if they were over this damned fence, at least they'd be free when they died. He tried to not let a picture of Frenchie's dead body take over his mind as he and Johnny dug their bare toes into the fence, climbing as fast as they could.*

*The razor wire, coiling like a deadly serpent all along the top of the fence sliced them open and the two men screamed, dropping to the ground, where Johnny's ankle cracked loudly.*

*"We made it!" Joe crowed, wrapping an arm under Johnny's shoulder to lift the screaming man—who was also, strangely, laughing.*

*"Free!" Johnny crowed.*

*A bright light surrounded them, along with a thumping sound that made Joe's chest rattle strangely. Joe tried to look up, shielding his eyes, but the dirt around them was swirling. He glanced pitifully down at Johnny, who was trying to hobble on his broken ankle.*

*His heart pounded away and Joe swore loudly. They'd fought so hard to escape, only to die a few steps from the fence.*

*"NO!" he screamed up at the light. "We won't go back!"*

*Johnny leaned heavily on him and Joe wrapped his arms around his friend and closed his eyes, wishing they could be anywhere but where they were.*

The memory was always a draining one, and Joe sighed deeply, disturbing the grass that was in front of his face.

"I think he's dead."

"Poke him again."

There was a nudge at his hip and Joe groaned, trying to roll away from whoever was poking him.

Two high pitched screams echoed around the abandoned playground and Joe winced, covering his

ears. Slowly, he opened his eyes to see two teenage boys staring down at him.

"Are you alright, mister?" one of them finally asked, eyes wide.

"Fine," Joe groaned out, taking his smudged glasses off of his face and rubbing harshly at his eyes.

"Told you he was high," one of them shrugged, shaking his head sadly.

"I'm not on drugs," Joe protested. "Or drunk. I just..."

"Laid down in the middle of the park to sleep," the taller, skinnier boy nodded with a wide grin.

"Something like that," Joe nodded, feeling incredibly foolish. He glanced around after replacing his glasses. "What time is it?"

The boys shuffled about and shrugged, one pulling a cell phone and flipping it open. "Three."

"Great," Joe grumbled, ruffling his hair and standing slowly. The boys watched him as he started to walk out of the park, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. Vaguely, he felt he should say something to the boys, but he couldn't think of anything to say. 'Thanks for not shooting me and stealing my wallet,' probably wasn't the best thing to say. Just to check, he patted his pocket and found the folded leather bulge still there.

\* \* \*

The sky was just beginning to lighten when he made it to his apartment. But he flopped onto the sofa rather than making it to the bed in the middle of the room.

Reliving the memory of the most horrific things that had happened to him wasn't how Joe had planned to spend the evening. And he had a vague notion that he'd completely ruined everything with Ginny by flying off the handle and overreacting to a crazy old woman who made his skin feel funny. Or maybe it was Ginny who made him feel like that.

Joe rubbed harshly at his face. It was all a jumbled mix-up in his fried brain.

How he and Johnny had escaped was nothing short of a miracle—and yet, Joe still had no idea what had actually happened. One minute they were surrounded by men with guns trained at them, being hunted by a helicopter, and the next, they were somewhere different entirely, with no helicopter, no guns.

It hadn't happened since, thankfully, even though Joe did have strange things happen to him all the time. Johnny's theory was that someone had actually saved them, but they'd been knocked out in the process. They both had to admit that their memories weren't very good.

Over the next few weeks, while they healed and hid, they came up with all sorts of stories to explain it, growing wilder each time they imagined them. It became a sort of joke between them until they parted, deciding that splitting up was probably for the best.

Joe hadn't seen Johnny since the day he left, determined to make it to California. Joe had no desire to travel that far, and wandered around for weeks before ending up near the Gulf Coast.

When the sun finally peeked into his windows, lighting up bright rectangles everywhere, Joe stripped and climbed into bed, dozing off and on while his mind still raced.

\* \* \*

Being around Ginny was driving Joe crazy, and he had absolutely no idea how to fix this thing between them, or if it even could be fixed.

And he knew he was being a bastard, but it's not like he could come right up to her and say 'hi, I know I'm jerking you around, but could you just hang on for awhile until I get things straight in my head and decide if I *can* even be with you?'

Yeah, that would go over well. Ginny would probably break his nose. Not that he would blame her.

The tension between them was nearly unbearable and Joe had to keep coming up with ways to drain off the excess frustration after his shifts. He'd started running; jogging through the streets until the sun rose and he dragged himself into his flat, sweaty and exhausted.

But sometimes when it was too much, he needed to do something crazy and out of control.

Tonight was looking like one of those nights as Ginny had worn the skirt again, and Joe could see the creamy, perfectly shaped legs that he'd dreamt about time and time again. He knew she hadn't done it on purpose—Ginny wasn't a tease that he'd seen—but he stared at her all the same, watching as she went up on tiptoe when she delivered the drinks in her hand. It was something he'd noticed her do often, even though she wasn't *that* short—just right, in fact. But it accented her slim build and feminine curves all the more. Joe groaned at that thought and dove under the counter, pulling out a bottle of bitter and draining most of it.

But it wasn't just the sexual attraction between them that had his skin aching. Ginny had a habit of staring at him when she thought he wasn't looking. He could feel the weight of her eyes on him, not glaring at him—surprisingly, Joe didn't think she was actually angry with him—but just... watching... waiting for him to decide what he wanted.

"What's with you and Ginny?" Max said when Joe came back to place an order of food.

Joe blinked at him and shrugged. "Nothing."

"Bullshit," Max hissed as his hands worked efficiently, assembling the food. "Look, I'm your friend, and as your friend, I'm going to be blunt."

Joe nodded and smirked. Max was always blunt, regardless if he thought highly of the person or not.

"Ginny... she's special. And I don't really care who you screw around with on the side or whatever... but don't fuck with *her*, okay?"

Joe blinked and stared at him. "You think I... Ginny and I haven't..."

"Whatever!" Max said, holding up his hands in protest. "I don't need details. But I don't think you should treat her the way you have been. If you don't want her, be honest with her at least."

He looked away and Joe growled in frustration, backing up so that he was resting against a wall, and banging his head several times, making it ache. "That's not the problem, I promise."

"Then what is?" Max demanded. "Because that woman is crazy for you. She hasn't even looked at another guy, man. She's wanted you from the moment she walked in that door, and you've got this... I don't know, this *wall* around you that you never let anyone in."

Joe shifted uncomfortably. "Are you finished yet?"

Max stared at him and shook his head. "Don't take off tonight. You and I are going somewhere to get drunk. You need to unwind."

Joe had to admit that it did sound good. Maybe he would be able to let his mind finally relax, instead of constantly running at full speed.

"Deal?"

"Deal," Joe said, smiling slightly. "As long as it's just us."

Max chuckled. "I don't like getting drunk with Pearl around. She makes me agree to stupid stuff and I can't seem to turn her down."

Joe snorted and shook his head as he gathered the plates Max had finished preparing and took them back out to the bar.

\* \* \*

"I told you," Max said, grinning over the glass of amber liquid he was drinking as the two relaxed at Joe's flat late that night—or perhaps it was really morning. Joe didn't know. "You just need to relax about things."

Joe had never been a big drinker, really. Over the past two years, he could easily only remember twice, or maybe three times when he'd been drunk enough to completely forget what he'd been through.

"You were right," Joe shrugged, even though it was on the verge of a lie. His head was still spinning with a thousand different things, even with the two glasses of whiskey he'd already had.

"So... you and Ginny." Max grinned and waggled his eyebrows, making the small ring piercing one of them dance. Joe stared at it, thinking how absurd it really looked; but then he'd never seen the attraction in piercings and tattoos, really. He had more than enough marks all over his body.

"I don't know," he said, staring at the bricks on the wall, his eyes tracing the white mortar.

"What's bothering you about it?" Max asked, swirling the glass in his hand. The ice inside it clinked pleasantly on the side and Joe shrugged.

"I just don't know. There are... complications."

"Is she married?" Max peered at him.

Joe shook his head. "No."

"Are you?" Max asked after a minute of staring at him.

Joe chuckled. "Not that I know of." It was something he'd thought about over the years, but he'd finally come to the conclusion that he couldn't have been married. There was no callous on his hand from a ring and, most importantly, no one had ever come looking for him. No, Joe Lucas was alone in the world.

"Then what's the problem?" Max prompted. "Because I don't think I've ever seen you happier than when the two of you are together. Not even when you were with that other woman."

"Meghan?" Joe asked. "No. She and I..."

"You didn't love her," Max shrugged.

Joe sighed and rubbed his face. "No, I didn't."

"But you love Ginny."

Max's words caused an uncomfortable ache in Joe's chest and he shrugged. "She deserves someone better than me."

"Says you," Max said. "But don't all women? Hell, I know I'm not what Pearl deserves. She's... she's amazing, Joe. But I also know she's not perfect. She has this... *thing* about how she grew up, and she lets it hold her back."

Joe scowled, trying to remember if she'd ever said anything to him about it. As far as he knew, Pearl had had a great childhood, other than her mother dying when she was young.

"And I sure as hell ain't innocent," Max laughed loudly. "I think that's why old Sam doesn't really care for me being around Pearl."

"But you're good together," Joe protested softly. "He has to see that you make each other happy."

"Oh, Sam knows all about me," Max shook his head, smirking as he finished his drink. "Knows about the year I spent in jail and why I got sent there."

Joe blinked at him. While he and Max had enjoyed a lot of days laughing and talking, Joe realized he really knew nothing of the only man he could call his friend. "You were in jail?"

Max snorted. "You sound surprised. Yeah, I did some time."

"What for, if you don't mind me asking?" Joe stared at him, trying to picture Max caught up in anything crazy enough to require jail time.

"Drugs," he shrugged. "I'm from a small town, it's not like there was much to do there. And I got into them when I was young and stupid."

Joe blinked. "You don't anymore?"

“Nah,” Max shook his head. “Just a drink now and again. I got clean while I was inside. I looked around at all those boys in there—lifelong users, killers, addicts, rapists—and I knew I didn’t want my life to be like that. I couldn’t be like they were, content with living in a nine-by-nine the rest of their lives.”

Joe shuddered, clenching his jaw and closing his eyes against the wave of memories. The room he’d been kept in was about nine-by-nine.

“Surely you can’t be as bad as that,” Max challenged, with a laugh. It died out, however, when he saw the stoic look on Joe’s face.

Joe stood and walked a few steps away, staring out at the city bathed in night, the bright neon signs and lights flashing rhythmically.

“I should be in jail,” Joe admitted, pressing his forehead against the glass that was still hot from the day’s sun.

“Whatever,” Max scoffed. “You do drugs?”

“No,” Joe said, wondering why he was feeling the need to talk about his life so much lately. First Ginny and now Max.

Max was scowling when Joe looked back over his shoulder. “Gangs?”

“No,” Joe chuckled. “I stole cars,” he admitted softly. He glanced over at his friend to see a puzzled expression on Max’s face.

“You stole cars.”

“Yeah,” Joe shrugged. “Sold them for money so that I could eat.” He couldn’t quite admit that he still did it from time to time, only not to buy food, but just for the thrill of doing it.

“That’s not so bad,” Max shrugged, “I guess. You didn’t kill anyone, at least.”

Joe winced and pressed his forehead to the glass. He watched himself, inside his mind, plunge that syringe into a man’s neck, felt the plunger go down and saw the color drain out of the man before he slumped to the ground. He wasn’t really sure if the man had died or not, but in his mind, Joe was fairly sure he had killed the man. And that was one of the largest reasons he couldn’t let Ginny get too close to him.

One day, someone was going to make him pay for what he had done and it wasn’t fair to drag anyone else into that.

“I was in a... a hospital a few years back.” The words were forced out as Joe stared at his own reflection in the window. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Max for his reaction.

“A hospital? Like... like a real hospital or a mental hospital.”

Joe was quiet, wondering how to explain it. “The second, I guess. They said I had some kind of... something wrong with my brain.”

Max was silent and Joe swore softly, thinking he might have just scared his friend right out of *being* his friend.

"Everyone has a past, Joe," Max said. His words seemed to be carefully measured. "I'll bet even Ginny has some things in her past that she isn't proud of. None of us is perfect."

Joe snorted, thinking of just the other night when Ginny had told him about her past. "She's not," he confirmed. "Did she tell you she can't go back to England?"

Max laughed loudly. "No shit?"

"Yeah," Joe laughed. "I have no idea what she did... some kind of political upheaval or something."

"That's totally awesome," Max said, holding his stomach as he tipped over laughing. "I think I like her even more now."

Joe's laughter died and his chest tightened as he silently agreed with Max. Ginny was... she was amazing. That was the only word he could think of that described her right now.

"I don't have a past at all," he shrugged.

"Get over yourself," Max said, his laughter dying out.

"I'm serious," Joe shook his head and flopped back to the sofa. "I don't remember anything before the hospital."

Max stared at him, all traces of humor gone now. "I just thought you had a shitty childhood or something because you never talked about it."

An ironic smile spread over Joe's face. "I don't even know how old I am."

The two men stared at each other for a minute before Max surged forward and poured them both another drink, slopping liquor all over the wobbly table next to the sofa.

"That's fucked up," he said, holding up his drink.

"So is the rest of my life," Joe said, clinking his glass against Max's before they both tossed back the whiskey.

They sat in relative silence as the alcohol seeped into them.

Joe stared at the bricks again and then closed his eyes when the color reminded him of Ginny's hair. No matter how he tried, he couldn't seem to get away from her.

"Have you told Ginny any of this?" Max asked finally. His head was resting back against the sofa, his eyes closed.

Joe sighed and shook his head. "Not really. A bit." Silence crept back in and Joe squirmed in his seat.

“You’re in love with her.”

Max’s words were so sure, said with so much confidence that it made Joe uncomfortable. The truth of it thundered in his chest, even if his head hadn’t caught up with what the rest of him thought.

“I don’t know.”

How could he explain it to his friend? How could he explain that he was fairly sure it was love, even if he wasn’t sure what love was? And that when he was with Ginny, it was like this huge force drew him toward her and made his skin tingle. It woke things inside him that Joe had only ever felt before when he was locked up in a mental hospital, being tortured.

And that it terrified him more than just a little. It was completely ironic and unfair that the thing he craved the most—the woman that made him feel as if he were the most wonderful thing in the world and that he could do anything he wanted—also made him remember the worst times in his life.

“You do,” Max nodded firmly. “You just need to get it straight in that fucked up head of yours.”

“If only I could,” Joe groaned, leaning forward and pressing his fingers into his eyes, underneath his glasses.

“I think you owe it to her, and to yourself, to figure it out,” Max said.

\* \* \*

Joe’s distance grew over the next week and Ginny stood helplessly by, afraid to push in case he decided that whatever he felt for her wasn’t enough to overcome his fears and concerns.

It wasn’t easy for her to sit by, because she’d always been the type to act first and worry about the consequences later. But the searching, confused look that she sometimes saw on Joe’s face told her that acting rashly now would only cause problems.

Each night after work, Ginny watched him do what he could to clean up, and then silently leave the bar and disappear into the darkness. Both Pearl and Max simply shrugged, but had little helpful advice to give her. She knew Max had done something with him one night, but hadn’t heard what.

Ginny felt near her breaking point when she made it to the bar just before her shift started. Sam greeted her with a smile and removed his apron.

She was alone for nearly twenty minutes before Pearl came down from her apartment. The two women laughed and joked, which greatly improved Ginny’s mood. When Max and Joe arrived a while after that, Ginny watched Joe closely, wondering if she should try and talk to him.

Perhaps tonight when Joe tried to disappear, Ginny would follow him. It had been a long time since she had properly tracked anyone and it would feel good to put her training to use again.

Joe seemed in a better mood today, even nudging her several times as they passed behind the bar.

It was a relatively quiet night and Ginny was glad for the few minutes she got to grab something to

eat, having missed lunch by sleeping through it. Working at a bar was murder on her sleep habits—not that she'd ever really slept well, not without potion, anyway.

"Hi, Max," Ginny said as she came into the kitchen, smirking when Max tried to hide his cigarette behind his back.

"Er... hi, Ginger," he said, grinning guiltily and taking one long last drag from it before stubbing it out.

"You're a walking health code violation, did you know that?" Ginny chuckled and motioned for him to back away from the table he had been preparing food on all night.

Max laughed, his low voice rumbling through the room. "You should see when Sam's back here."

Ginny grimaced and decided that not knowing was probably better. "Is there anything in here not contaminated with your filth?" she asked, scrunching up her nose at everything lying out. The idea that she had been delivering baskets of po'boys dusted with cigarette ash made her shudder.

"The oysters. Give her those."

She turned when Joe spoke from the doorway, leaning casually up against it and looking... entirely too attractive with his worn t-shirt, frayed jeans and a two-day beard.

His eyes were dark behind his glasses and his expression was too muddled for Ginny to decipher right now. But there might be a challenge in there, because the corner of his mouth lifted just a bit.

"No thanks," Ginny said, tiredness with his brooding seeping into her. If she had needed any more proof that Joe was actually Harry, his rollercoaster moods were enough. She definitely remembered how moody and brooding he could be at times.

"No," Max said, reaching over and shoving a tray of oysters her direction. "I think you should. Have you ever tried them?"

Ginny scrunched her nose up, her stomach tightening at the thought of putting something so slimy and... disgusting looking in her mouth. "No."

"Give her a half order," Joe insisted, his dark eyes not leaving hers.

"They're an aphrodisiac, you know," Max chuckled, his voice fading out as he cleared his throat and handed the plate to Ginny.

Recognizing the challenge, Ginny glared at both men and grabbed the plate, making the oysters, which were sitting on a bed of ice, move around the plate.

"Fine," she said.

"Out here," Joe said, nodding his head over his shoulder. He turned and Ginny stared after him as he made his way toward an empty table, right in the center of the room.

“Damn him,” Ginny said viciously, nearly dumping the plate in her haste to prove that she wasn’t going to back down from any challenge he offered. “I’ll eat them if you will,” she said as she slid into the seat across from him.

All around them, the customers—many of them regulars in the bar—were starting to take notice.

Joe grinned as Sam shuffled forward. “Not much challenge in that,” Sam said. “Joe here could live off the things.”

If Ginny hadn’t been staring right at Joe, she would have missed the small twitch in his eye that told her that it was a lie. Harry had never been that good at schooling his features, at least not from her. But Joe was much harder to read.

“I’ll eat one, just to show you how it’s done, and you eat the other five,” Joe said, leaning his elbows onto the table and glancing down at the oysters.

“Two hundred says she does it,” Pearl said from behind Ginny, slapping two crumpled bills down on the table. Ginny tried to protest, but Pearl simply winked and nodded her head, as if she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Done,” Sam barked. “I’ll match the two hundred that says she doesn’t make it through.”

Joe smirked as Ginny swallowed thickly and stared down at the slimy little things. He reached out and took one in his hand, using the funny little fork to pry it loose from the shell. Cradling it in his hand, he reached out and sprinkled Tabasco sauce on it, his eyes never leaving Ginny’s as he tipped it into his mouth, his stubbled jaw working up and down as his eyes glittered at her.

Ginny dug deep and glared back before looking down to work on her first oyster. ‘Just do it,’ she repeated to herself. ‘It’s like any other challenge; you stand up to it and just get through it.’

The first one was hard, but Ginny chewed and finally swallowed, shivering as the liquid followed it down. The crowd around her cheered and she vowed the next four oysters would have something on them. She didn’t care for the flavor of Tabasco, so she chose the cocktail sauce instead, spreading it liberally all over the meat of the next one, and then staring straight into Joe’s eyes as she slurped it in.

“Two down!” Pearl declared.

Ginny didn’t have the heart to tell her that the next three just might not make it down.

A slow chant began in the back and worked its way forward, making Joe smirk.

The last one was the real challenge as Ginny’s stomach was churning, both from the unfamiliar food and the weight of Joe’s stare. Somehow this felt like some sort of test between them that Ginny needed to pass to get one step closer to understanding this complex man.

Once she was done, however, and the crowd was deafening in its jovial celebration, Ginny smiled weakly and Joe pulled her from her chair and into a rough sort of hug.

"Can you make it to the bathroom?"

Her stomach churned and she nodded against him before pulling away and slowly making her way toward the back, accepting hugs and kisses all the way.

\* \* \*

Joe was back behind the bar when she returned and although he didn't say anything about her losing the contents of her stomach, he did give her a slight wink.

Pearl passed over the four hundred dollars and Ginny tried to protest that she really hadn't earned it.

"Don't let Sam hear you say that," she cautioned. "It's not often he actually takes a bet."

Ginny glanced over to watch the man sitting with a group of men near his age and had to laugh at how happy he looked. She tucked the bills into her pocket and started serving customers again.

"*That* was impressive."

Ginny glanced up to see a handsome man in front of her. He was clean-shaven with longish brown hair that curled over his ears. He smiled widely and Ginny returned it.

"What can I get for you?" she asked.

"How about I take you to dinner?"

She smiled but shook her head. "What do you want from the bar?"

It wasn't the first, or even the fiftieth, proposition she'd had, but this man seemed more persistent than the others had. Usually they accepted Ginny's rejection with a smile and a shrug, and then moved off to chase after the college co-eds wearing skimpy clothing.

"Just you," he said, leaning over and propping his elbows on the dark wood.

Ginny rolled her eyes and moved to the man next to him, serving several beers and a mixed drink, all the while feeling the forward man's eyes on her.

"I'm Phillip," he said, sticking his hand in front of Ginny as she took the payment.

"And I'm not interested," she said, starting to lose patience.

He grinned and moved down the bar, following her as she served several other people. Annoyance built up in her, but she tried to ignore it, until she looked up and saw Joe staring at her, his jaw locked and his posture rigid. Ginny shivered under his stare and wondered what he was thinking.

He'd certainly made no claim on her, what did he care if someone else was interested? Ginny would never fall for Phillip and his perfect smile and hundred dollar shirt, but the fact that it riled Joe, even a little, almost made her want to flirt with the man. But it wouldn't get her anywhere, she knew—she had never been that type of girl.

"Come on," Phillip tried again. "At least let me buy you a drink."

Ginny sighed as she closed the till and stared at him. "Listen," she said, trying to keep her voice down, so as not to embarrass the man any further than necessary. "I told you—"

"One drink!" he grinned.

"The lady said she wasn't interested." Joe vaulted over the bar and in one swift movement had Phillip pinned to the wall, Joe's arm across his neck. "I suggest you back off before I get more than just annoyed."

Ginny gasped and ducked under the opening in the bottom of the bar, hurrying to stop Joe. His shoulder was rigid and shaking when she put her hand there, trying to get him to listen to her.

"Joe, it's okay. He was just leaving."

Joe growled low in his throat and glared at the man. Phillip coughed and struggled, his eyes going wide.

Ginny glanced around at the almost silent crowd. "Joe!" she warned, flinching when he turned toward her, pure hatred etched across his face. "It's really alright."

He looked at her a moment longer and she could hear his teeth grinding and his jaw popping. Her skin tingled and rose in goosebumps along the arm where she touched him—it wasn't the first indication of the intense magic inside him that she had felt, but it was the strongest yet, and a thrill shot through her, along with panic that he might accidentally hurt this man.

"Get out," he growled. Ginny blinked until she realized that he was now glowering at Phillip. "Get out and don't come back." In a blink, Joe had released Phillip and stalked off toward the back of the bar, disappearing through the wide berth the crowd had given him.

\* \* \*

Joe did come back in, but he refused to look at Ginny directly and simply finished out the last hour before they closed silently, filling orders and doing his best to stay away from everyone.

When they closed up, he was out the back door faster than Ginny could say anything to him. She gave a heavy sigh and started after him, only to have Max catch her arm.

"It's probably best to let him go." His eyes were bright in the dim light of the bar as he stared at the doorway. "He does better if you don't confront him."

Something in his tone made her shiver and she pulled her arm from his. "I'm going home," she mumbled, knowing that she would follow him. She'd planned on it all along, but she *needed* to now.

"Joe is... different, Ginny," Pearl said, joining her boyfriend in staring at the door. "He... he's not like you or me. I think he might actually prefer to be alone."

Ginny's chest tightened and she forced herself not to scream that she knew him better than anyone—because she wasn't sure if it was true. Joe's outburst had been very like something that

Harry might have done, but the darkness and anger had been so nearly uncontrolled, that it made Ginny's body ache.

She needed to talk to him, to get some of this out of her head, before she exploded as well.

"I'm going home," she said again, this time more firmly. She had no problem lying to them right now.

"We'll close up," Pearl said. Somehow, Ginny thought the woman might know what she was thinking, because she physically pulled Max toward the front of the bar and left Ginny alone.

Ginny stepped out into the dark alley and glanced around before pulling her wand. Joe had a good head start on her and if she didn't hurry, she'd lose his trail completely. She contemplated putting Harry's Invisibility Cloak over her—it was tucked away inside her handbag—but decided to wait until she got closer. The Cloak was cumbersome when there were crowds of people around; someone was bound to bump into something that wasn't there.

Two blocks down, Ginny huffed in annoyance, staring at the intersection and wondering which way to go. Her tracking charm faded here and there were simply too many people around to cast it again.

"Dammit," she hissed, rubbing her face harshly.

"You shouldn't be here."

Joe's voice, right in her ear, dark and low, made her jump. He was always doing this, showing up when Ginny was convinced he'd already vanished.

She gasped and turned toward him. The light of the streetlamp cast long shadows on his face and she could see the fury and confusion plainly on it.

"*You* shouldn't be here," he repeated again, the words torn out of his throat as he took her by the arm and led her toward the dark corner of the building, the shadows painting them both black.

Ginny swallowed thickly, everything she wanted to say—needed to say—rattling around in her head and trying to come out. "I want to be here," she finally settled on, whispering the words as Joe's body pressed her against the brick of the building. It was still warm from the sun on it earlier in the day, but it was the heat of Joe's body that made her gasp.

His hands surrounded her face and his lips pressed against hers lightly, barely ghosting along the skin and raising goosebumps all along her body.

Ginny stared into his eyes, almost black behind his smudged and crooked glasses. She'd only ever seen Harry this intense once, and it had nothing to do with his feelings for her, but his hatred and anger at a monster. The small space between them seemed alive right now and Ginny had a hard time breathing. Her body tingled, from the closeness and Joe's gentle touch, and from the raw energy that was pouring off him. His magic, confined and hidden for so long, seemed to be reaching out to her.

"If you were smart," he muttered, resting his lips against her cheek, "you'd leave."

"I'm not leaving," Ginny insisted, her eyes slipping closed as her body responded to his touch. Her hands clutched at his shoulders and she sucked in a deep breath through her nose when he kissed her again, possessively and passionately, grinding into her.

The kiss lasted forever, and not nearly long enough, before he broke away with a cry.

"I can't do this."

"Why not?" Ginny demanded reaching forward to stop him before he moved away from her. His body trembled under her touch and she wondered if it was rage, or magic, or fear.

He stared at her and slowly shook his head. "Because..."

It was only one word, but Ginny thought she understood all that it implied. So she pulled him close instead, pressing her face into the space between his rough chin and chest and breathing in the masculine scent of him. The feeling between them made her shudder in awe and arousal.

"Why did you not stay with that woman?" she asked, not sure why she was bringing it up now. The question had been haunting her ever since Pearl had mentioned that Joe had dated another woman. It was completely sadistic torturing herself this way—but she still wanted to know.

Joe's arms held her to him like a vice, strong and unyielding, even as she could feel the pain and self-loathing shuddering in his chest.

"She wasn't what I needed," he mumbled finally, after a long silence. "I... I was just... alone."

Ginny pulled back and his grip loosened. "Why are you running from me?"

Joe's arms slipped away completely and he stared at her, the feeling between them intensifying until Ginny had to lean back against the wall to stay up.

"Because I'm afraid you *are* what I need," he whispered, barely making a sound before he turned away and stalked off into the shadows.

It took a minute for Ginny to catch her breath, and then she looked around before pulling the Invisibility Cloak from her bag and draping it over her.

Joe certainly wasn't trying to hide as he ran through the streets. Ginny had a hard time keeping up, but he also wasn't being careful about staying quiet.

When he reached a large public car park, he slowed, bending over at the waist, his chest heaving from the exertion.

Ginny stayed back in the shadows, watching as he moved along the rows of cars, searching for something. When he finally found what he was looking for, Joe stopped and studied the entire park, his eyes seeing everything. They lingered in her direction, but Ginny shrugged off the feeling he could see her—the Invisibility Cloak had never failed before.

She took a few steps closer when she realized what he was doing, standing right next to the driver's door and fiddling with something. The alarm that went off was deafening, and Ginny gasped in realization as Joe ducked into the car and silenced the noise. Half a second later, the large engine in the car roared to life and Joe shut the door behind him.

He was actually stealing a car!

Ginny stared at him, taking a step forward and holding out her hand, almost as if she could stop him.

But the screeching tires tore through the night, and Joe was gone.

# Chapter 20: Here By Me

Joe tucked his hands into his jacket pockets and stared out from the shadow of the trees, his eyes tracing the outline of the fence. Even though it had been dark, he could still remember the exact place he and Johnny had climbed over, finally gaining their freedom.

He couldn't quite say what had brought him here... He'd always sworn that nothing could ever drag him back to this place.

But it was a demon he seemed doomed to face. If he wanted to ever be able to have anything remotely normal in his life, Joe knew he needed to work through these feelings—work to accept that what had happened didn't define who he would always be.

It wasn't cold, but he shivered nonetheless, staring at the low buildings in the distance. In a way, he wished he could go back in there and fully confront what had happened. But the fear that he never would be able to make it through rattled around his head.

He sank to the forest floor and stared at the fence, the patterns of the chain he could barely make out sliding together in his vision as he thought about all that had happened since he'd first woken in this place.

Strangely, this time the memories weren't overwhelming; they were painful, but Joe didn't feel the need to explode in anger or hatred.

He tried to analyze what that might mean: was he healing, or simply learning how to deal with all of this better than he had?

His eyes drifted closed and he let a memory—one of the only ones that wasn't horribly painful—come to him.

*Momma Jessen busied herself around him fussing with the bed he was in and tucking the thin blanket around him tightly.*

*"Why am I here?" he asked her softly as he rested his head back against the thin mattress, staring up at the dull grey ceiling.*

*"You're here to make sure you get better," she said with a firm voice.*

*Joe thought about that for a minute. He tried pushing his mind back past when he'd woken for the first time here, but it was all extremely vague and he couldn't grasp anything more than impressions that he'd been injured somehow. He was always so tired, sleeping for long periods of time that made it impossible to count the days or even figure out when it was day or night. There were no windows in the rooms he was in.*

*"But what's wrong with me?" Joe asked. He screwed up his eyes and rolled over slightly, watching Momma Jessen's hands still in what she was doing until she pulled one of the chairs in his room toward the edge of the bed and sat down.*

*"I don't know much, Joe," she said. "But there's something wrong with your mind and the Healers here are trying to help you."*

*Joe blinked at her a couple of times before he sucked in a breath through his teeth. "Because I can't remember?"*

*Her face worked curiously for a minute and then she smiled tightly and winked, standing. "No need to worry about it, Joe, I'm sure they'll have you fixed up in no time."*

*"Why do you call me Joe?" he asked, the question bursting out of him. "Is that my name?"*

*Momma Jessen smiled widely. "That's the name I gave you," she said. "I always name my boys, but... when they brought you in, something about you told me you were special."*

*Joe scowled and his eyes traced the thin window next to the door that locked when anyone left. "I'm not special."*

*"Oh, you are," Momma Jessen assured him, patting his cheek softly. "I can feel it," she whispered. "You have great things within you, Joe."*

*"I don't want to be special," he pouted, feeling silly to do so. He definitely wasn't a child, no matter how they treated him in here. In fact, this didn't feel like a hospital at all, but more of a prison.*

*"You can't help that you are," Momma Jessen informed him. "Some people are born that way. I always wanted to name my son Joe."*

*"Why didn't you?" Joe said, studying her aged face carefully.*

*"Had three daughters instead," she shrugged and chuckled. "Joe was always my favorite name, so when you came in here I said to myself, 'that's the name for him'."*

*"I'm not special," Joe shook his head again, watching with growing dread as Momma Jessen pulled a vial of clear liquid from her pocket and a syringe. He hated when she gave him the shots because they always made him go to sleep and he woke feeling like he'd lost more of himself. "I don't want to be special."*

*"Ordinary is nothing to brag about," Momma Jessen chided softly as she filled the syringe.*

*Joe held out his arm, knowing it was useless to resist. He'd given Momma Jessen enough trouble lately, and if he did try to fight her, the guards would come in and hold him down while she stuck him anyway.*

*"I want to be ordinary," Joe protested, wincing at the prick of the needle. He watched the plunger on the needle go down and the cold fluid enter his vein. It was only a moment until he started to feel woozy and light headed.*

*"Okay, my Ordinary Joe," Momma Jessen said, pulling out the needle and setting it to the side before she tucked him in and placed a kiss on his forehead. "You can be ordinary."*

It was strange that he could find a memory so simple, and really not relevant with all that had happened to him, so comforting. From that moment on, he'd been Ordinary Joe to Momma Jessen.

There were other memories too that weren't painful. Joe remembered how he and Johnny talked through their thin wall that separated their rooms. And Johnny had even somehow broken some of the wall between them away so that they could see vague shadows of each other in the dark rooms when they should have been sleeping. Toward the end, however, they had both begun making so much trouble for the guards and the Healers that more times than not they were either given the shots that made them sleep, or strapped to their beds where they would yell themselves hoarse.

Joe blew out a breath and shook away the thoughts. His hands found a small stick that he stared at while he broke it into tiny pieces.

Maybe he should try and find Johnny; try and make sure that he was well and alive. They'd promised to move on with their lives when they parted, to try and forget all that had gone on here and really live. Joe felt his face heat when he thought of that promise. He'd broken it. He really wasn't living at all. Instead he was just... surviving.

But what did it mean to live? What would be different about simply stumbling through life, making it from one day to another, and *ireally/i* living? What would he change about his life right now if he could?

The answer came with simple clarity, and a force that made his chest ache. Momma Jessen had called him special, yet he didn't feel that way. Not until Ginny had come into his life, waltzing into the bar and staring at him with those eyes that he felt could see right through him, did he feel as if he could have anything different. Ginny seemed to understand him in a way he'd never felt before. At the same time, the way he felt when they were together made him *feel* special, but in an entirely different way.

He closed his eyes and thought about the night they had sat together in Jackson Square and the way she had laughed, and made him laugh. When her skin brushed against his, he felt chills shoot all through his body, and a slow fire burning deep inside him. Was that love?

Joe just didn't know. He tossed the last of his stick toward the ground and fumbled around for another.

What if it was love? Could Ginny handle who he really was beneath the mask of Joe Lucas he wore now? Would she want to be with someone who had the baggage he did?

The answers weren't easy, but he thought that out of everyone he'd ever met, she might just understand more than anyone.

He knew she was there, watching from the shadows when he'd stolen that car. That was one of the reasons he'd done it. What would she do? What did she think about him doing it? As he'd driven through the streets, winding this way and that, Joe had been the smallest bit relieved she'd seen him. Maybe now she would stop staring at him in that way she had, making him feel like she knew more about him than he did. And maybe she would slowly drift out of his life, leaving him to his miserable existence.

Hours after returning the car to its spot, and while he stood in line for a bus to Georgia, Joe realized he didn't want her to leave. As much as he hated it, he wanted her to be waiting for him when he got back from this insane, unplanned trip. The ache inside him that thinking about her brought felt... good, in a way.

Joe took a deep breath and shook his head. It was time to go back and face the demons that waited for him back at Sam's. He chuckled softly thinking that facing one particular, red headed demon might be more daunting than coming here and dealing with his memories.

He was just about to walk back through the woods when the sound of someone approaching startled him. He instinctively held up his hands when he saw the stout man in front of him, holding a shotgun.

"This here is my property," he said, staring at Joe.

"I'm sorry," Joe apologized, holding his hands up still. "I didn't mean any harm. I just..." He gestured back over his shoulder at the base. "I was just watching."

The man relaxed some and took a few steps forward, his eyes scanning the edge of the base and then looking back at Joe.

"You stationed there?"

"I was," Joe lied. "Few years ago."

The man grunted and the shotgun dropped to point casually down at the ground. Joe sighed in relief and dropped his hands. "I didn't mean to trespass."

"Sorry about the, um..." The man said, gesturing toward the gun. "Can't be too careful these days."

Joe smiled tightly and shrugged. "No problem."

"That place is usually quiet, you know," the man said, coming closer and looking at the base. "But sometimes all hell breaks loose over there. Something happened a few months ago... some sort of break in, I heard."

"Really?" Joe said, staring back through the fence.

The man shrugged. "My brother in law works over there. He said it was all hushed up, but they definitely caught someone who wasn't supposed to be there. Happened a few years ago too," the man grunted out. "But mostly it's quiet."

The two men stared at the base before Joe turned and held out his hand. "I'll get off your property now."

"No harm done," the man dismissed with a smile.

Joe trudged back through the woods toward the road, trying to make sense of what he'd come here to figure out, the break in at the base, and if they were connected at all or just more random thoughts now crammed into his head.

"What's with you and Joe?" Pearl demanded three days later, cornering Ginny at the bar.

Ginny flinched both at the name and the question. The truth was, she didn't know. She hadn't talked to him—or even seen him—since the night he'd stolen the car.

The idea that Joe would steal a car was... well, it bothered her, but... at the same time she felt there was more behind it. Thinking back to that night, he seemed to almost *need* to do something desperate and out of control the moment when they kissed. As if stealing the car was something he allowed himself to do, rather than be involved with her, as he apparently wanted.

She longed to corner him and ask him not only why he had done it, but if it was something he did regularly, or what he did with the car afterwards.

"I don't know," Ginny answered honestly.

"You went after him, didn't you?" It was half-way between a question and a comment and Ginny looked at Pearl, wondering how someone who seemed so... strange could be so perceptive. Although, Luna had always been both.

"You know I did," Ginny said, glancing around at the mostly empty bar and wondering if Joe would show up today. He'd completely disappeared—something that Pearl admitted happened from time to time.

"And?"

Ginny sighed and rubbed her forehead, feeling a headache coming on. "And... he kissed me." Pearl nodded her onward, not showing any real surprise at the news. "And then... I don't know." Even in her ears, it sounded stupid, but it was the truth. She really didn't know what was going on. There was something between them that was sure, but just what it was, and how she should react to it, was a mystery.

Joe was Harry, and yet he wasn't, all at the same time. The past empty days had given Ginny some clarity about that.

What Joe had been through had changed Harry so much that he wasn't the same person anymore—bits of Harry shone through at times, but it was all overshadowed by this hurt, suspicious façade of Joe Lucas that he hid behind now.

And yet, something about Joe drew her in, perhaps even more than her attraction to Harry, or her connection to him. Something inside this man spoke to her like never before and Ginny's whole insides twisted and writhed to be with him.

Thankfully, Pearl left her alone with her thoughts, rather than push her for an answer.

Hours later, in the middle of a rush of customers, Joe was suddenly there, tying an apron around his waist and serving people, without saying a word.

Ginny sighed in relief and resignation. It seemed that Joe was happy, for the moment, not saying anything about what had happened.

"Hi," he finally said when Ginny had stared at him long enough. His clean-shaven face reddened slightly, and he wouldn't let their eyes connect for long.

"Hi," she answered back. The game was growing frustrating. "Got it out of your system yet?" she asked casually, not quite sure whether she meant his feelings for her, the stealing, or his disappearing act.

The corner of Joe's mouth quirked upward and he shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe."

Ginny rolled her eyes and went about doing her work, pasting a smile on her face as she greeted people like old friends and joked back and forth with them.

The bar was incredibly crowded later and Ginny hadn't had the chance to say anything more to Joe. Nervous energy built up inside her until she wasn't sure she could handle it anymore.

"Ginny."

The noise and bustle of the place seemed to freeze, or at least slow to a crawl, as Jasper stepped up to the bar, looking incredible and... out of place here.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, smiling.

His face stretched into a lazy smile and he laughed. "I wanted to check on you."

"I'm fine," she sighed, rolling her eyes at his mothering. He looked amazing; tan and healthy. "You look... wow, Jasper. California did wonders for you."

He grinned wider and bounced on the balls of his feet. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"I'm working," she protested, gesturing to the packed bar. His face fell, but he persisted.

"It's important."

Ginny sighed and her eyes darted toward Joe, who seemed completely caught up in something at his end of the bar. Thankfully. She didn't want to see a scene where Joe defended her like he had against Phillip, the poor, randy customer, because Jasper would definitely defend himself.

"Give me a minute," Ginny nodded. She could feel Pearl's eyes on her and rolled her shoulders in annoyance with everyone. Why couldn't this be easier?

"I'll wait for you if I have to." Jasper leaned casually on the bar and Ginny winced, knowing that Joe would be drawn to the scene in moments. He seemed to have a sense about troublemakers... or maybe it was that he had a sense about her...

"You look... I don't know," he said, shrugging. "You're definitely not as happy as I thought I'd find you."

"I'm trying," Ginny protested. "Things are... more complicated than I'd imagined they could get," Ginny said, looking down the bar again. Joe was staring at the two of them now, his hands mindlessly going about serving customers.

Jasper followed her gaze, sucking in a breath when he finally saw Joe. "Wow... he looks... It's really him."

Ginny felt her face heat and she tore her eyes away from Joe's heated look.

"Does he know?" Jasper asked, giving her a knowing look.

"Not yet," Ginny shook her head guiltily. It was clear that Jasper wasn't going anywhere soon, so she sighed and untied her apron, tossing it on the counter.

"Cover for me a minute, will you?" she mumbled as she passed Pearl, who only nodded, her eyes following Jasper as he matched Ginny's progress down the bar. "Outside," Ginny motioned, winding through the crowd toward the door. The crush at the door was almost impenetrable, until Jasper came up behind her, forcing his way through the crowd and nudging her forward with his body.

"What do you need, Jasper?" Ginny said, turning as soon as they got away from the mass of people trying to get into the bar. She had the fleeting thought that it was overly crowded and that there was a kind of energy to the air that made her shiver, despite the sweltering heat.

Doell looked around, dismayed that they hadn't moved further from the crowd. "I'm going back to England, Ginny," he replied.

"I'm not ready to leave yet, Jasper," Ginny shook her head. "I don't know how this is going to go."

"I know. I want things to work out for you, Ginny," he said, moving closer and running his finger tenderly down the side of her face. "You two deserve your happy ending."

"I think a happy ending might be asking too much," Ginny sighed. "I'd be happy with an ending where he and I were able to be together." She glanced around, praying the crowd had kept Joe inside.

"Does he love you?" Jasper asked, shaking his head and running his hands up and down her arms, making her feel warm and calm, despite the craziness around them.

Ginny smiled up at him. "I love him."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I'm not going to," Ginny said, shaking her head. It hurt that she couldn't give him an answer. "Because I don't know yet."

"Ginny," he said, pulling her to him, cradling her against his chest. "Fight for him. Don't let him push you away."

He leaned down and pressed his lips to her forehead. "I wish I could do more to help."

"You've already done enough, Jasper," Ginny said, pushing away and shaking her head. The look in his face told her that he understood what she was saying. "Go home. And... if you can, tell my family that I love them."

"I will. Take care of yourself... take care of *both* of you," he said softly before walking away, melting into the crowd.

Ginny's heart twisted inside her and she turned around, her skin prickling. Her eyes searched the crowd in front of the bar, knowing that Joe was there somewhere, watching. But she couldn't see him.

Back inside, the roar of the customers was greater than ever and Ginny winced at the volume, and the press of bodies.

"I'll be waiting for that story," Pearl said when Ginny ducked back under the bar and immediately started serving people.

"It wouldn't be worth the breath to tell," Ginny said, shaking her head at the sadness of it all. She glanced over to see that Joe was behind the bar again serving customers—even though she somehow *iknew*/i he'd just been outside. His jaw was set sharply and Ginny shivered.

"I don't like this," Pearl said, looking out over the crowd that was getting rowdier by the minute.

Ginny had to agree. Something in the energy of the bar was off tonight, promising problems.

Maybe it was just the sheer number of people—more than Ginny had seen ever packed into the room—or the amount of hard liquor they were pouring.

"If it continues, I'm going to shut it down," Pearl said.

"They'll riot," Max said, coming up behind her and diving in to make drinks. He usually stayed back in the kitchen, making food, but tonight they really needed him up front.

"You and Joe can handle it," she said firmly.

Max nodded, but Ginny saw he was watching Joe warily. "I don't like the look on his face."

Ginny sighed, thinking that she agreed with Max. The look on Joe's face was one that she'd seen several times on Harry—desperation and frustration. It never led anywhere good. A memory flashed before her, of Harry at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, looking as frazzled and intense as a fifteen year old can look. Sirius had died that night.

She shivered and tore her thoughts away from it, pushing the memory back where it belonged: in the past.

They continued to work as the noise slowly dissipated. Large groups who had come earlier in the evening, most of them regulars, left the bar to escape the craziness.

One rather large group in the corner drew Ginny's attention as the center of the group—a man who rivaled the size of Shepherd from her Auror Training—laughed loudly. Unfortunately, Joe's gaze kept

darting over there as well. Ginny kept her eye on the situation, although there wasn't much, short of pulling her wand—which, she knew, would cause mass hysteria and probably land her in deep trouble—that she could do.

Pearl swore creatively when Mammoth Man nudged his way toward the bar; ignoring the protests of people he shoved out of the way. Ginny reached down under the bar to where she kept her bag and opened it up, feeling for the wand inside before standing back up. Of course, the prat had to come straight up to her.

"I need three more Jimmy's and two vodkas," he demanded in a nasal voice, barely glancing at Ginny before he slapped a fifty-dollar bill down on the bar.

"Bar's closed for you tonight," Joe said from beside her. His hand brushed her back lightly and Ginny tightened at the feel of it. The tension skyrocketed and out of the corner of her eye, Ginny saw Max pull a stout baseball bat out from somewhere and hide it behind his leg.

"What did you say to me?" the man demanded, his thick neck turning red as he glared at Joe.

But Joe seemed ready for a fight and he stepped forward, his shoulder blocking Ginny. "No more for you," he drawled out slowly, his tone suggesting that the man was obviously too stupid to understand what he was saying. "You're over the limit."

"Fuck you, buddy," the man snapped, pushing his money toward Ginny and glaring at her. "My money is as green as anyone else's."

Ginny felt Joe tense and the slow gather of his magic, wild and intense, built around them. Her own magic reacted and she felt the familiar tingle in her arm, connecting with her wand and making it heat in her hand.

"Back off," Joe said, stepping fully in front of her, "before I have to remove you."

The man laughed then, his head thrown back and his thick chest bouncing with the movement.

Ginny reached out and placed her hand on Joe's back, feeling their magic collide and swirl together, feeding off each other.

"Try it, you little bastard," the man challenged.

Before Ginny could even think twice, Joe had scrambled over the bar and thrown himself on the man. People screamed and Ginny dove for her wand, narrowly missing getting kicked in the head as Max scrambled over the bar. He stood in front of the huge man's smaller friends as Joe and the man scuffled, wielding his bat in a way that convinced Ginny he would, and could, easily do severe damage.

"Everyone out!" Pearl yelled from where she stood on the bar. "Bar's closed!"

People began herding out, even Mammoth's friends, who Max had sufficiently cowed with the threat of his bat. Somehow, Joe had gotten the upper hand in the fight with the man and was forcibly dragging him toward the door, given a wide berth by everyone.

Ginny felt incredibly stupid, standing behind the bar, completely unscathed while she had been perfectly capable of defending herself. She glanced down at her wand and loosened her grasp, allowing the blood to flow back into her fingers, changing them from white to pink. Glancing at Pearl, who was just now climbing down off the bar, she stuffed the wand in her back pocket, pulling her t-shirt down over it.

Incredibly, Joe staggered back in after ejecting the man, nursing a bloody nose and a cut above his eye, along with a purple-red bruise that would be a black eye soon. His knuckles were bleeding and he swiped at his face with the sleeve of his shirt, smearing blood around.

"What the bloody hell were you thinking?" Ginny demanded, ducking under the bar and coming up to him. She raised her hands, not quite sure where to place them to help.

Joe backed away, wincing, but Ginny was having none of it.

"Take him home," Pearl demanded, "before that mountain comes back in here and demands a rematch." She shook her head, looking at Joe, her expression one of respect mingled with incredulity.

"Come on," Ginny said, tugging at his hand. "You need some ice on that."

"My place is closest," he mumbled, allowing her to lead him out the back.

\* \* \*

Ginny glared down at the back of Joe's head, feeling little sympathy. She couldn't *believe* he had thrown himself into the middle of that fight. Honestly, what was he thinking? Now that the shock had worn off, and Ginny played it over in her head, she was amazed he was still alive.

The fact that the man had been enormous—at least twice as big as Joe—should have been the first thing that stopped him.

But, no; Joe had to climb up onto the bar and throw himself onto the man's back, wrapping his arms around a neck thick enough to support a tree.

It was a bloody miracle that all he had was a few cuts and scrapes. She had a feeling that his back would be badly bruised tomorrow from where he had slammed into the bar repeatedly.

"You're a prat," she hissed as she pressed a wad of cotton to the cut above his eye, smirking a little when Joe winced.

"If you're going to swear at me," Joe said in a low voice that seemed more tired than annoyed, "could you at least do it in English."

Ginny glared down at him again, catching his eye and feeling victorious when he blinked and looked away. "I *am* speaking English."

"Then... in *American* then," he barked back. His hand tried to bat hers away, but Ginny just sighed mightily and rolled her eyes at him.

“Did you see the size of that... monster?” she asked, feeling the need to rub his stupidity in.

“Of course, I saw him, Ginny,” Joe snapped, finally succeeding in pushing her hand away. He mopped at the sticky blood dripping down the side of his face with his sleeve and tenderly probed the cut with his fingertip.

His independence made Ginny feel bad. She *wanted* him to need her, like she needed him.

But Joe was difficult to figure out. He was even more closed off than Harry had been; which was saying something. For weeks they'd been dancing around this *thing* between them; the attraction that pulled at them like magnets. But Joe rarely let himself be affected by it; or at least that's what Ginny saw. At times, like the night at the park, or even in the alley, she seemed sure he wanted to be with her. And then he would push away again, making her heart ache.

“It's not like I wanted him to pummel me, Ginny,” Joe sighed, sitting back in the chair and staring at her through his one puffy eye. “I just...”

“Boys,” Ginny said, shaking her head as she rummaged through the meager first aid kit that he'd directed her to when they walked into his apartment. What she really wanted to do was to reach up and use her wand to heal the cut. But Joe wasn't ready for that yet.

Perhaps she was wrong not to have told him who he was—who *she* was—yet, but...

There really wasn't a good enough excuse, other than the fact that Ginny simply felt it wasn't time yet. She'd tell him soon.

“Your shirt is ruined,” she observed as she removed a funny little bandage that looked like it might just hold the two bits of skin together long enough for it to heal. She moved closer, hoping he would hold still for her to clean him up.

Joe's eyes caught hers for a minute, making Ginny flush. She looked down, her fingers fumbling with the paper wrapping, all the while trying to make sense of what she was feeling. Her eyes were drawn back to him when he tugged the blood stained t-shirt over his head and threw it to the side. She traced it with her eyes until it was a heap in the middle of his floor.

His hands on her hips made her jerk back to realize how small a distance was really between the two of them.

“You left your glasses at the bar,” she observed, remembering seeing them on the floor, bent and probably broken.

Joe stared at her, his eyes dark and unfocused. When his bright eyes weren't hidden behind glasses, Joe's eyes were lethal. Almost literally.

Ginny felt her knees tremble, but she shook it off. She didn't want to read too much into his look right now. Maybe he just wasn't ready for...

“Who was that man you were talking to earlier?” Joe said, his thumbs sliding under the edge of her shirt and swirling small circles on her hipbones.

Ginny took a deep breath, trying to remember what he'd asked, and not focus on the way goosebumps had just shot all up and down her spine. She really wanted to answer his question with a question about why it had gotten so hot all of a sudden.

"He's... just a man," she dismissed.

His eyes darkened further and the first aid kit slipped out of her hands, clattering to the floor, scattering bits and pieces all over.

Ginny swallowed as Joe's thumbs rubbed more deliberately, dipping just below the waistband of her jeans, and then continuing in the maddening circles. Her low belly quivered in arousal and she blinked, trying to remember to breathe.

No one else had ever been able to make her feel like this; like all of her insides were jelly that he was just dying to sample. But Harry had always had that ability. And Joe even more so, it seemed.

Perhaps it was his complete ignorance of what he was really all about that made Ginny even more attracted to him. Or maybe it was the fact that he was much more dark and mysterious than Harry had ever been, while having a vulnerability so close to the surface that it took her breath away at times. The primal way his magic reacted to hers drew her in like a moth to a flame.

"He was kissing you," Joe said, his fingers digging lightly into her hips.

Ginny couldn't deny it, because Jasper had/i kissed her forehead, even if it hadn't meant what Joe apparently thought it did. She sighed, determined to apply this bandage before her hands got entirely too shaky.

"He and I... we weren't ever together, Joe. Jasper is like an older brother to me." Imagining what Joe had seen between she and Jasper explained the way his magic clawed at hers, dragging her toward him. She fought the urge to blush, only allowing herself to look directly at the wound she was treating and not where Joe's green eyes sparkled up at her.

The expression in them was familiar, but Ginny wasn't sure if she could allow herself to believe that it was focused on her once more. It was almost too good to be true, and made her light-headed. It seemed to come from out of the blue, taking her by surprise, while making her shout for joy inside.

"There," she whispered hoarsely as she pressed down the edge of the bandage.

Joe's eyes weren't on her face anymore, but staring at his own hand as it slid a fraction of an inch upward, directly onto the skin of her belly.

"Joe," she said, meaning it to come out with much less whimper than it had managed.

"I didn't like it," Joe said, his intense gaze returning to her face once more. His tongue darted out, moistening his lips, and Ginny sucked in a breath. "I wanted to kill him... or at least hit him."

The air between them almost crackled with energy, and Ginny's legs quivered as she leaned involuntarily toward him.

"You... you're not his," Joe said, his voice breaking as he lifted her shirt an inch and pressed a small kiss to the skin. "You're not anyone else's."

Ginny's hands jumped to his bare shoulders as she gasped.

"You're mine," he whispered against her skin, his arms wrapping fully around her and pulling her down to straddle his lap.

If her heart hadn't been thumping away in her throat, Ginny would have shouted for joy.

"Yours," she agreed, meeting his lips with her own and wrapping around him tightly. The intensity of the kiss far overpowered anything they'd yet shared, even the kiss in the alleyway. Perhaps because he was finally accepting what he was feeling between them, rather than holding back.

But tonight was different. She briefly wondered if it was the threat of Jasper that had made the change, but it really didn't matter. Something had happened between them—some switch had been flipped—that had made all of this between them okay.

Deep inside of her, Ginny argued that it was really *not* okay. She shouldn't be with Joe this way before he knew the truth. She should really stop him, make him sit down with her and tell him everything.

But his hands danced up her back, slipping the clasp apart on her bra, and then pulling back from the kiss long enough to help her remove both it and her shirt before attacking her mouth again. The guilty thoughts disappeared completely.

Ginny felt out of control as she kissed him and let her hands roam his chest and back and neck. But Joe's hands were just as intense; tracing every bit of her he could find and clutching at her as she rocked against him.

They broke the kiss and pressed their foreheads together, hot breath mingling with tiny beads of sweat on their faces.

"Ginny... I... I think I'm..."

Ginny's eyes shot open, not sure what he was going to say, knowing what she wanted him to say.

But it seemed the words stuck in his throat, because he swallowed thickly and attached his mouth to her neck, licking and sucking as his hips thrust up into her.

It all felt so amazing... yet; Ginny wanted more. She didn't want to simply rub against him until they both finished, satisfied for the moment. That wasn't enough for her; not with Joe.

"Joe, we can't..."

"I want you, Ginny," he whispered, need caking his voice until it was thick and sugary against her neck. "I want you so much."

Tears sprang to Ginny's eyes as she continued to move against him, her arms wrapped tightly around his head.

"I'm in love with you."

His words were so small that Ginny was sure if he wasn't right next to her ear, she wouldn't have heard them.

Suddenly, he pulled back, shock painting his face. "I..." he chuckled awkwardly and took a deep breath.

"You..." Ginny swallowed the lump in her throat away. "You didn't mean to say that, did you?"

Joe looked at her, guilt shining out of his bright eyes. "No," he shook his head. A vice clamped around Ginny's heart and she pulled back, preparing to get off him and go back to her own apartment. "But that doesn't make it any less true," he finished.

Ginny froze and blinked at him. "You..."

"I am," Joe said with a decisive nod. "I'm in love with you." He gave a very weak, and nervous, smile before it fizzled out. "I just think... I wanted you to know... before."

"Before," Ginny nodded. Her head was spinning, trying to grasp onto anything that made sense in that minute.

The words, said with the same conviction that Harry had said them years ago, made Ginny's heart nearly burst.

"I love you," she answered back, laughing at the stunned look on his face. But the words had leaked automatically out of her, before she could even grasp what she was saying.

"You... you do?"

Ginny nodded, leaning forward and placing kisses all over his face. The truth of her statement sinking in slowly as Joe's arms wrapped around her. It was true.

She'd been in love with Harry for years. And then she'd lost him. All that time she'd convinced herself that only her love for Harry kept her going.

But Joe wasn't Harry. He was... so much more, in so many ways. That thought made her feel guilty at the same time it gave her hope.

They'd somehow managed it again. They'd fallen in love, despite the odds against them.

"I do," she nodded, pulling back to gently kiss him again. '*I do, I do, I do,*' she whispered as the tension grew between them again.

Joe pulled back and his eyes shone at her, much brighter now that they weren't behind his glasses—even past the puffy, purplish skin.

"Can I... can we..."

His eyes wandered over to the bed that lay beneath a whole bank of small windows across the one

large room.

Ginny's heart raced, threatening to jump out of her chest and make it to the bed before she did. One last kiss and Ginny nodded slowly.

\* \* \*

"I love you," she said as he pillowed his head on her chest and wrapped his arms around her back, keeping them as connected as possible.

"Love you," he repeated, nuzzling her breast with his face and placing small kisses on the skin.

"What did I do without you?" he asked.

"I've looked for you for years," Ginny admitted. She knew he didn't understand the meaning behind her words right now, but that was alright. It was still the truth.

"I'm yours," he said, resting his forehead on her cheek.

They rolled to the side and Ginny gave a small sigh as they cuddled, spoon style, on top of the sheets.

Joe fidgeted his feet at the bottom of the bed and Ginny looked down, chuckling as he twisted his foot into the edge of the blanket, trying to lift it up onto them. His hand groped down his leg, trying to catch hold of the edge.

Ginny sucked in a breath when the blanket lifted right into his hand. "There we go," he said finally. She glanced back over her shoulder, wondering if he had any clue he'd just used magic to help himself. The entirely satisfied smile on his face told her that he had no idea.

It was another small sign that Harry was in there somewhere, hidden deep within Joe.

She needed to tell him the truth soon.

"You're so amazing," she whispered, rolling in his embrace so that she could use his chest as a pillow.

Joe chuckled softly, a sound that made Ginny's heart both clench and sing, and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "You are," he insisted.

"This changes everything," she mumbled, wondering if she was ready for it all. She was definitely ready to be with Joe, but that led to so much more than either of them understood.

"Stay with me?" Joe said, yawning widely.

Ginny nodded up at him, smiling, and then shaking her head at the deep purple bruise that was just beginning to show around his eye.

Perhaps once he was fully asleep, she could use bruise paste to lessen it. He hadn't looked in a mirror yet, so he shouldn't notice a difference.

"I'll stay," she said, lying back down and pressing a kiss to his chest. "I'll stay forever."

# Chapter 21: It's Not Me

'She's so lovely,' Joe mused as he nuzzled the small bit of shoulder that peeked out of the collar of her t-shirt. The fact that he knew it was the only thing she was wearing made it even better.

Ginny giggled and Joe pressed his face there again, puffing out his cheeks and blowing a great raspberry against her skin. They both laughed and Joe sighed in happiness as her arms wrapped around his head.

"We should really get up," he said, lazily splaying himself across her belly and sliding his hand under the edge of the t-shirt she was wearing to lightly rub her skin.

"Must we?" Ginny asked, running her fingers through Joe's hair. The motion was almost hypnotic and Joe shivered, wondering if he'd ever been this happy in his life. Could it have only been yesterday when he was so conflicted, torn about this developing relationship between them? It seemed years ago.

Waking with Ginny this morning, after making love over and over again last night, was nothing short of amazing. He'd never awakened beside a woman before. With Meghan it had been... well, it was more of just a string of one night stands that left him feeling dirty and unsatisfied. That was the complete opposite of what he was feeling right now.

Perhaps here in Ginny's arms he could find some of the healing he'd been craving so much lately.

Joe chuckled and shook his head slowly, his eyes slipping closed as he leaned his head into her touch. "Much as I'd like to stay this way forever..."

"Yeah," Ginny said, "I know." She sighed and wiggled beneath him, although it didn't seem that she wanted him off of her, so he stayed.

His hand brushed the crumbs from breakfast still on the sheets—although, could it really be called 'breakfast' when they'd eaten well after noon?

Joe cracked his eyes open and looked down at her. "I never thought I'd find anyone like you," he mumbled. His hand groped for hers and laced their fingers together. "I didn't think anyone like you existed. I'm still not sure it's real."

"I was always looking for you," Ginny said, smiling in a way that made his stomach roll pleasantly.

Joe shifted them and lay next to her, his fingers reaching up to trace her hairline and then slowly trailing down her nose. "When you first walked into the bar... I knew." His chest rumbled in appreciation of how beautiful she was, lying here in his bed with her hair all mussed and smudged outlines of marks he'd left on her neck from yesterday.

Ginny's face stretched into a slow smile. "What did you know?"

He stared at her for a minute, wondering the best way to explain it to her. "That everything I'd ever done before in my life had led me up to that point. Something..." he trailed off, staring off

over her shoulder, knowing he sounded completely insane for saying it this way. "Something about you... it just... spoke to me, like nothing else ever has."

"You're everything I could have hoped to find," Ginny said, leaning across the small space between them to kiss him lightly.

"We sound like a couple of greeting cards," Joe laughed, kissing her again, with more attention.

"That bad?" Ginny asked as a laugh bubbled up inside her. "Urgh. We do. Please slap me if I'm ever this way in public."

"Deal," Joe nodded, laying his head down. His fingers never stopped moving, playing with her shirt, stroking the skin on her collarbone, tracing the roundness of her breast beneath the shirt she had pulled on when Joe climbed back in bed with a plate of almost-burnt toast. It was as if his skin simply itched to touch as much of her as he could.

"Where did you go the past couple of days?" she asked, startling him.

Joe sighed and laid his head on the pillow, staring up at the windows above them. "Here and there. Nowhere, really." He rubbed his eyes and pushed out a harsh breath. He knew he would eventually have to tell her about his past, but it seemed too much for right now. But maybe...

"I don't remember anything of growing up, or... well, anything beyond what happened a few years ago."

Ginny studied him intently, the edge of her lip disappearing behind her teeth until Joe reached up and pressed his finger there, and then she released it and nodded him onward.

"And... being in a relationship... it's always kind of worried me," he admitted. "What if... what if there is something horrible in my past? What if it's something that comes back to me one day and haunts the people I love?"

Ginny sighed and propped herself up on her elbow, her fingers tracing his chest as he rubbed her back. She looked as if she might say something, but then pulled it back at the last minute, watching her hand as it moved along his skin.

"When I met Meghan a year ago... she seemed really nice and..."

"This was the one from the coffee shop?" Ginny asked. She got a strange look on her face and he thought she might be a little jealous.

"Yeah," he nodded. "I... I was just so alone. I thought that if I forced myself to get past my fears, forced myself to fall in love..."

"It doesn't happen that way," Ginny shook her head. "I've tried that."

"I know," he said softly, looking up. "I wasn't ever in love with her." It was the truth, and Joe felt bad about it.

Ginny nodded and bit her lip again. "Did you sleep with her?" Her eyes met his, full of... something.

There was jealousy there, but also anger and frustration that seemed entirely misplaced.

"Yeah," he admitted. "It was probably wrong," he shrugged. "I know it wasn't anything like with you."

"It was just sex," she said softly, her face softening.

Joe nodded. "Yeah." They lay in silence for a minute before Joe cleared his throat. Her reaction to his past relationship puzzled him. Why would she worry about something that had happened when they hadn't even known each other? She needn't worry at all, actually, because what Joe had felt for Meghan was nothing more than mild friendship in comparison to what he felt for Ginny.

"What about you? Have you ever..."

"I have," she nodded, a slow smile stretching over her face.

"The guy at the bar?" he grimaced. Now that she'd admitted she'd been with someone other than him, Joe could understand the jealousy, because his chest felt tight when he thought about her sharing that with someone other than him. He'd never seen himself as a jealous person, really.

Ginny laughed. "No," she shook her head. "Jasper really is just a friend. It was years ago... this wonderful, amazing man."

"Why aren't you with him then?" Joe asked, looking at her and trying to figure out what she might mean by the expression she wore.

"Because I'm here, with you," Ginny said simply, leaning down to press a kiss to his chest. "I'm in love with you."

"Were you in love with him?"

"The man I slept with?" Ginny asked, looking up through her eyelashes at him.

"Yeah."

"Yes," she nodded, pressing another kiss to his chest. "But... to be honest, we were very young. The kind of love I feel right now, for you, is very different than that kind of love."

Joe nodded, the edges of her fuzzing as he stared up at her, arousal stirring low in his belly.

"Why did you steal that car?" she asked. Apparently, there were a lot of questions she needed answers to today.

Joe groaned and pressed his fingers into his eyes, wanting very much to not answer that question. He nudged her with his body, but Ginny wouldn't move away. Instead, she settled fully on top of him, ignoring his frustration and wiggling until he hissed in appreciation of what her body was doing to him.

"Because I could?" he asked, meeting her gaze before sighing. "Because... I used to do that. I used to steal cars for money. And..." he shook his head because he couldn't find the words to describe it. His

face heated in admission, but there it was... out there for her to judge now. "And sometimes... I still do it. It's... ridiculous, I know. But..." His fingers slid under the edge of her t-shirt, settling at her hipbones and caressing the skin there.

"What did you do with it?"

"Returned it," he shrugged. "They might not have even noticed it was gone."

"I think I understand," she said, moving until she was straddling him and pinning him to the mattress. His hands gripped tighter on her hips, his eyes watching as she shrugged her shirt off. "It was one thing you had control over that night."

"It was the only thing," he agreed, his eyes feasting on her bare body. "I wanted you so badly."

Ginny didn't answer, but pressed her hands to his chest, leaning over to kiss his jaw. "I've done things I'm not proud of, too," she admitted softly, her voice barely audible. "And you don't have to hold back anymore."

Joe turned his head and captured her lips. "I won't," he promised, knowing he'd give her just about anything she asked right now.

\* \* \*

"You look so happy," Pearl said as she nudged Ginny in the shoulder.

Ginny felt her face heat as she stopped staring at Joe across the room and forced herself to finish picking up empty bottles and other rubbish.

"I am happy," she admitted with a smile.

"And I've *never* seen Joe smile like this," Pearl added, dumping a handful of bottles into the large tub that Ginny had balanced on her hip. "He's... well, I'm not sure I know the word for what he is."

Ginny laughed. "Smitten?" she asked, knowing she felt that way about him.

She and Joe spent almost all of their time together—either at work, or walking around the Quarter. It almost seemed sad that Ginny hadn't seen more of this fascinating city than the few blocks they lived and worked in, but then again, everything they needed was right here. There would be time for exploring later. Right now they were simply enjoying every minute they could.

"Are you sleeping with him?" Pearl asked bluntly, making Ginny snort out a laugh.

"Well, we're not shagging in the kitchen..." Ginny shook her head, giving her friend a knowing look.

Pearl's face split into a wide smile. "That's a yes, then."

Ginny just shook her head and moved on to the next table. She looked up to see Joe watching her. He smirked at Pearl and flipped two chairs up onto a table.

"And?"

"You thrive on details, don't you?" Ginny demanded, lowering the heavy bin to the table with a loud clank of glass. She turned and put her hand on her hip, staring at Pearl, who held her hands out in innocence. "It's not like you're an old maid, sitting around, living vicariously through me."

"I just wondered," Pearl defended. "They always say the quiet ones take you by surprise." Her eyes traveled up Joe from head to toe and he stared at them suspiciously.

Ginny sighed happily. "I, personally, think the silent ones are the best."

Pearl's eyebrows rose and she laughed loudly, the sound bouncing off of the walls.

"Do I *want* to know what you two are talking about?" Joe asked, coming to lift the bin of rubbish from the table.

"I was just telling her what a great shag you are," Ginny teased, leaning up to claim a quick kiss before walking toward the kitchen.

Joe stood still, in the middle of the floor as Pearl gave his bottom a smack and laughed even louder. He glared at her and turned to Max.

"Can you please do something about her?"

"Er..." Max watched Pearl come his direction and wrap her arms around him, giving his bum a squeeze. "Sorry, buddy, you're on your own."

"She's corrupting my woman," Joe grumbled, shaking his head and walking toward the bar.

Ginny scoffed and Pearl laughed again.

"Your woman needs no help from me," Pearl protested, giving Ginny a wink.

"She's right," Ginny sighed, wrapping her arms around Joe once he had set his load down. "I'm completely and utterly wicked."

"Now *that* I'll agree with," Joe said as he chuckled and bent down to kiss her.

\* \* \*

The faint chirping sound woke her from a wonderful night's sleep—something she hadn't had in a long time. Yawning, she looked up at the clock; red shining numbers proclaiming it three o'clock in the morning.

Whoever was on the other end was going to die, Ginny decided. She glanced around the room for a minute before slowly lifting the covers and sliding down to the floor. The jeans she'd worn earlier were crumpled on the other side of the room. Silently, Ginny moved over to them, still following the annoying little sound. She fumbled through the pockets until her hand closed over the small rectangle of plastic that was glowing and vibrating.

"Seriously," she whispered into it as she flipped it open, "someone had better be dead. Because if they're not—"

"Ginny?"

Ginny froze, hearing a voice she'd never considered would come out of her mobile phone. "Good morning, Hermione," she answered, sinking to sit fully on the rug. It was cold on the floor, causing her to shiver. "Or, it will be when it actually *is* morning."

"I'm sorry about that," Hermione continued on, although she didn't sound sorry. Not at all. In fact, she sounded rather...

"Do you know how angry I am right now?"

Brassed off.

Ginny fought the urge to roll her eyes, pulling her bare legs up into the large t-shirt she wore.

"Good to hear from you too," she quipped back, keeping her voice so low she wondered how Hermione was hearing it anyway. "How's the job, Ginny? How are things?"

"You can just stop that right now, Ginny," Hermione scolded. "You're the one that has completely disappeared. No one's talked to you, or seen you, for months."

A headache was beginning to form in her temples and Ginny pressed her thumb and forefinger there, rubbing in circles. Hermione continued her rant and Ginny tuned her out, for the most part.

"Do you know what I went through to get this number?"

Ginny's eyes narrowed and she glanced back over to the bed. "How *did* you get this number?" she growled, already fearing the answer. There was only one person who who actually *had* Ginny's number.

"Well..."

"Jasper," Ginny hissed, silently vowing several means of torture and death, then ruling them out as not cruel enough for a wake-up call at three o'clock in the morning.

"You can't blame him, Ginny. He's worried about you."

"I'm fine," Ginny said, more forcefully than she had planned.

Hermione took what sounded like a very controlled breath. "You need to come home, Ginny." Her argument ended there and Ginny was surprised. Usually Hermione was good for at least another ten minutes. Obviously, she was going to have to have a discussion with Doell. It might just involve knives.

"I... I can't do that, Hermione," she answered honestly, instead of lying. Her eyes traveled up the bed to the man laying there, sleeping peacefully. "Not right now, anyway."

Joe needed her. They needed each other, really.

"Why, Ginny?" Hermione pleaded. "Your family misses you. I know we haven't always supported you

in what you've done... but we still love you."

"I love everyone too," Ginny said, finally standing. Her eyes didn't leave Joe. He looked so young, so at peace when he slept. "Please tell them that," Ginny said softly. "I just... I can't come home right now."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Ginny," Hermione warned, defeat leaking through the little speaker on the phone.

"I do," Ginny said, a fond smile turning one edge of her mouth up. "I do," she confirmed again. Joe's hand reached out for her in bed, sweeping across the spot that she had made into her own. "I need to go," she said quickly.

The little button she pressed to end the call made a sound in protest, and Ginny turned off the phone, slipping it between the mattress and the box springs before sliding back under the covers and into Joe's warm, sleepy embrace.

*I know exactly what I'm doing.*

\* \* \*

Joe balanced the two cups of coffee he'd gotten for them in his hands, feeling the spray from the river hit him in the face as he exited the cabin of the boat and came up behind Ginny.

He hadn't slept well last night because Ginny hadn't been in bed with him; she'd stayed at her own apartment last night. Not for the first time, Joe pondered asking her to move in with him. They rarely spent a night apart lately, but the ones they did, Joe usually ended up dozing off and on, his hand groping the empty sheets for Ginny's warmth.

It was very evident to Joe that Ginny had been preoccupied lately. She drifted off during conversations, staring at nothing. And it wasn't the happy, smitten kind of distracted that Joe saw in her face the first few weeks they were together. He half worried that he'd done something horribly wrong to upset her and make her doubt him.

But even Pearl had noticed and cornered Joe, demanding to know why her friend was jumpy and staring off into space. Joe admitted that he had no idea and promised to try and figure it out.

His suggestion that they take the some time and do something neither of them had done before—ride upriver on one of the famous paddle boats and perhaps find a hotel to stay at for a couple of days—seemed like just the thing they needed and she agreed right away.

"I missed you last night," Joe said as he wrapped his arms around her, the coffee he'd gotten for them in his hands. His lips pressed against her neck and Ginny shivered, scrunching her shoulders against the tickling sensation of the kiss.

"Mmm," Ginny said. "I didn't sleep well," she admitted. "I don't without you there."

Joe kissed her cheek and then handed her one of the cups before leaning on the railing next to her. "Maybe... maybe we should think about moving in together." It was a big step, he knew. But if they

were both feeling this way...

He stared out over the river, his eyes tracing the shore rather than look at her.

"Are you... are you serious?" she asked softly.

He'd admitted his fear of letting anyone in, but he was willing to risk letting himself be hurt in order to be closer to her. And in the weeks they'd been together, Joe had been happier than he'd ever been before.

"I am," he nodded, smiling at her and reaching for her hand. "I think we should do it."

She didn't answer, but laid her head against his shoulder and sipped from her coffee.

"Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?" he asked finally.

Ginny blinked at him and her face heated, her cheeks blooming pink. "I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. "I have been thinking about something a lot."

"Us?" he asked, hating the vulnerability he heard in his own voice.

"Yes," she nodded with a smile, "but it's more than just that. That's the best part of what distracts me."

He nodded and turned to rest his back on the railing, keeping her hand in his.

Ginny sighed and rubbed her forehead. "My sister-in-law contacted me last week."

Shock was the best way to describe the feeling that came over him. "Oh. Wow... Is everything alright?" Although he'd heard about her family enough, he also wasn't aware that they kept in contact.

"Yeah," Ginny nodded reluctantly, her fingers tracing the edge of the plastic lid on her cup. "They just haven't heard from me for a while and they were worried." She sighed and mirrored his position and Joe slipped his arm around her, settling it around her hip.

"They miss you," he said into her hair. A small swell of protectiveness—and jealousy, he had to admit—stirred in him. Whether he was jealous because Ginny actually had people out there that loved her, or simply because he wanted her all to himself, Joe wasn't sure.

"My family was always such a huge part of who I was growing up, you know," she said softly. "And I really miss them. But... sometimes it's easier to stay away than to admit that I can't see them right now." Her voice grew thick and she blinked several times, making Joe think she might be tearing up. "But that's horribly unfair of me, because I'm being selfish by doing that."

"I wish there was something I could say to you," Joe said as he wrapped his arms fully around her. All feelings of envy were banished when he saw how this was affecting her. "I can't imagine knowing that's out there and being denied it."

"I'll be fine," she insisted, forcing a smile on her face and pulling away. "I just... I guess I just sort

of got hit by it all at once.”

“If you want to talk about it,” Joe said softly, running his fingers through her hair. “I want you to know that I’m here for you.”

Ginny nodded and kissed him. “I know you are. Just... I just need some time to get it all straight in my head. I’m not going to let this ruin our holiday,” she shook her head. “I promise.”

“When you’re ready,” he agreed, resting his forehead on hers.

Ginny kissed him again and relaxed in his embrace.

\* \* \*

“I think that’s the last of it,” Ginny said, looking around at the flat that now only had the sparse furniture that it came with. She would miss the place a little, but moving into Joe’s place was something they agreed was best for both of them.

“You didn’t have very much,” Joe noted as he slung his arm lazily over her shoulder. “Do you need to turn in the keys today?”

Ginny shook her head and automatically reached down to her pocket, feeling the heavy weight of a key there.

“No, on Tuesday,” she shook her head. It seemed strange to carry keys around with her everywhere, but she did now; one for her flat, and several for the bar. She’d never carried keys before, having always used her wand to lock and unlock things.

Living virtually without magic was starting to mess with her head. She found herself forgetting that small things could be done with magic, that she even *had* that to rely on. And now that she and Joe were moving in together, she’d have it even less to do things like housework and summoning her shoes when she was running behind.

“Well, it’s not like I can carry around everything I own in a rucksack,” she said, looking over at the work bag that she *had* lived out of for so long. It looked old and tired sitting against the garish plaid fabric of the sofa, and the thought of ever returning to that life made Ginny feel just as worn out. “But you learn to live without all the unnecessary things at times.”

“Hmm,” Joe said, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Come on, Max and Pearl are going to stop off and get a pizza before they have to go into work. We may be able to get a few things unpacked while they’re gone.”

Ginny smiled and nodded, picking up her rucksack that held all the most valuable of her possessions. The things they had already taken down the stairs and put into Joe’s borrowed—legally, this time—car had only needed a handful of boxes.

Pearl had been scandalized that Ginny had so few clothes and shoes, and had vowed that she was going to have to change that, amidst Max’s rolled eyes and Joe’s laughter.

Sam had given Joe and Ginny the night off when he heard that she was planning on moving. In fact, he'd even hired two other bartenders to help try and give some relief to the four of them, and Ginny was glad. They could all use some time off to focus on themselves and building their relationships. Pearl was even talking about perhaps opening up her own bar, even though they all knew she'd simply take Sam's over one day. But she had grand plans for it if she ever did, that's for sure.

Hermione's call had really shaken Ginny and she was just now feeling as if she were coming out of a daze. Even though she was sure she needed to be here with Joe, it felt like a huge clock was ticking away somewhere, counting down to something... Whether it was someone coming to find them, or the truth about Joe's past coming out, something huge loomed on the horizon and Ginny just needed to find the right way to handle it.

Ginny's thoughts had been scattered for weeks now, but she had the looming feeling that she was going to talk to Joe soon. She'd gone over the story from every different angle, wondering how the best way to approach telling the man she loved that he wasn't who he thought he was. She still didn't know how she was going to bring it up, or when. And what Joe's reaction would be was a mystery.

\* \* \*

The sun, shining in the windows in the flat they now shared—something that Ginny still didn't have a grasp on, and probably wouldn't for some time—made the whole place seem roomier and friendly.

And seeing the few things she had to contribute scattered here and there made it seem more like they were really combining their lives into one.

Ginny sighed and leaned back into the sofa, watching as Joe put the last of the dishes into the dishwasher and tossed away what remained of the small, forgotten bits of pizza the four friends had devoured together before Max and Pearl had hurried off to Sam's.

"Tired?" he asked, watching her yawn and leaning his hip against the sofa.

"I didn't think I was," Ginny shrugged. She slid forward on the sofa happily when Joe nudged her forward and climbed in behind her, lightly rubbing her shoulders.

"Mmm, that feels good," Ginny mused as she cuddled back into him, sighing happily at how content she could feel.

Joe continued for a few minutes, but then his movements became slower, more distracted.

"Is that your family?" he asked and Ginny blinked up at the ceiling, trying to figure out what he meant. But then she remembered that she'd taken a framed photograph out of her bag while they were unpacking and set it on the coffee table. Thankfully, it was taken by a Muggle camera that her father had been fiddling with one year.

Ginny nodded and reached for it, her eyes seeing every detail as she lay back against Joe again. "That's them. We all look so young," she mused, letting her fingers slide over the glass.

"How old are you there?" Joe asked, peering over her shoulder at it.

"Eight, maybe?" she shrugged. "Nine? I forget when it was taken."

"And which one is the brother that died?" he asked.

Ginny felt a stab of anger and injustice shoot through her. Joe should know all of these people. He never should have had to ask her to name them for him, or tell him stories about them.

Rather than answering, she sighed and turned in his embrace, sitting up between his knees.

"Can I tell you about my life?" she asked. "I... I think I'm ready to talk to you about that."

Joe studied her for a minute before nodding, sliding up further in the cushions, while still keeping her within arms reach.

"We live in a little town called Ottery St. Catchpole," she began. "Well, really, we live outside of town. And our house is this..." She threw her head back, smiling fondly at the warm picture of the Burrow in her mind. It almost felt like coming home, just to remember what it looked like, what it felt like. "This... rambling, ramshackle thing where there are rooms and floors impossibly stacked onto one another. But it's still perfect."

"It sounds amazing," Joe mumbled as he stared at her, his fingers playing with the edges of her hair.

"Mum stayed at home with us; we didn't go to school in the early years. We learned to read and write there at the kitchen table. And she's the most amazing cook too." She glanced over at him, feeling a wave of emotion come over her at how he looked just then, the late afternoon sunlight showing off the angles in his face and making his eyes light up brighter than normal.

"You and your brothers got along?" he asked.

Ginny scrunched her face and chuckled. "For the most part. There were always so many of us that we stepped on each other a lot, and someone was forever getting the mickey taken out of them." Joe laughed, but Ginny wasn't sure if it was the picture she was painting, or the words she was using. They sounded foreign in her ears now that she hadn't heard the phrases used in so long.

"Your accent becomes thicker when you talk about it," he observed casually. "I like it."

Ginny felt her face heat at the intensity of his look. "Yeah?" He nodded, but Ginny cleared her throat. Now that she was started, she didn't want to stop. She wanted him to know all about the Burrow... and the longing for him to meet—again—the people she loved was almost overwhelming.

"We all went to boarding school in Scotland when we turned eleven," she said again. "One year, my brother Ron," she held up the picture and pointed to him, "he came back telling us the most wonderful stories about this new friend he had made. His name was Harry, and he was the most amazing boy."

"Kind of an old fashioned name," Joe mused, tilting his head to one side as if he were considering

it.

"You didn't think my name is really Ginny, did you?" She asked. "That's really a nickname."

"I guess I never really thought about it," he said, scratching his head and shrugging.

"My name is Ginevra," Ginny said, watching his face for a reaction. Harry had always said he liked the name.

"It's nice," Joe shrugged. "But I like Ginny best. It just seems to fit you better."

Ginny smiled and leaned forward to kiss him. He'd said exactly what he'd said the first time she told him what her full name was, out beneath the beech tree on the Hogwarts grounds.

"You like the name Harry better than Joe?" he asked, his eyes crinkling playfully at the edges.

*If only you knew what you were asking.*

Ginny shook her head and rolled her eyes. "A name is really just a name, isn't it? I mean, I *could* call you Stinky Cheese, couldn't I? And that's really what I *should* call you after finding all those dirty socks stuffed under the sofa."

Joe chuckled and poked his finger into her side. "I'll bet you were all kinds of trouble when you were little."

"I was," Ginny agreed. "I knew all the best ways to get what I wanted. That's the benefit of being the youngest, I think."

"I'll bet your brothers appreciated that," he mused, leaning his head into the cushions and wiggling to get comfortable.

Ginny chuckled. "Believe me I paid for it several times over. Being the youngest has its advantages, but it's also very hard. When you're the baby, no one ever thinks that you're grown up. They always see you as someone they have to protect, someone who still wears ponytails and runs around the back garden."

Joe watched her thoughtfully and Ginny continued.

"I thought that was all going to end when I went off to school. I had all these grand schemes and plans."

"I can only imagine," he said fondly.

"Well, not many of them came true," she shook her head. "At least not for a few years."

"I'll bet you were popular with the boys," Joe said, smirking lazily at her.

Ginny swallowed thickly, the memories of Hogwarts rushing back in and filling her head. "A few," she admitted. "But I kind of had my eye on one of them. He was always too busy to notice me."

"He was a fool," Joe mused, tugging at one long piece of her hair that hung down her back.

Ginny smiled at him and lay down in his embrace, placing her ear over his chest. "No, he was wonderful, just... preoccupied, you might say. He did notice me eventually. I was fifteen and he was sixteen when he kissed me for the first time, in front of about fifty people." She rolled her eyes at the memory, even though it made her smile.

"I've heard boys that age can be particularly..."

"Thick," Ginny supplied, making Joe chuckle.

"That word works," he agreed. "I don't remember being sixteen. I wish I did..."

"I wish you did, too," Ginny said, rubbing her hand on his chest.

"Tell me about this boy," he said. His hand returned to her hair, running his fingers from the scalp to the end of the strands, making Ginny shiver.

"It was Harry, my brother's best mate."

"I'll bet that went over well," Joe chuckled.

"Ron was great with it," she protested softly. "I mean, he didn't want to see us kiss or anything, but he knew how much I wanted to be with Harry. I'd had this horrible crush on him for years, but that eventually faded when I got to know who he really was."

"Did you love him?" Joe asked. There was something in his tone that made Ginny lift her head and look at him. He was staring off into the sunlight that streamed into the room, making rectangles of brightness fall on the floor and crawl up the side of the sofa.

"I did," she nodded.

"Was he the one?" Joe asked, his green eyes piercing hers.

"Yes," she nodded, trying to gauge what he thought of the whole idea. "But not for almost two years later. Harry had... things he had to do. We really only dated for a few weeks."

"That makes no sense," he shook his head, raising one eyebrow at her.

Ginny sat up and sighed while rubbing her forehead. "Have you seen my rucksack?" she asked. "There's something I want to show you. I think I've gone about this all backwards."

Joe scowled in confusion at her words but reached over the side of the sofa, lifting the bag and holding it out to her.

Ginny's heart thumped in her chest, threatening to crawl up her throat and outside of her as she rummaged for her wand. The rucksack slid to the floor as Ginny fingered the slick wooden wand. It felt cool, and yet warm, under her fingertips.

"Have you ever seen something like this?" she asked, holding it up to him.

Joe stared at the wood then looked away, his hands fidgeting. "I've seen you have it sometimes. What is it?"

"What does it look like?"

His lips scrunched up a bit and he shrugged. His guarded tone made her think that he definitely had seen a wand before. "I always just assumed it was one of those hair... things. Pearl has some strange sticks she winds in her hair."

Ginny laughed softly and shook her head. "It's a wand."

Joe stared at her incredulously. "Come on... like a *magic wand*?"

"Exactly," Ginny said. Part of her was excited to be able to show him something, while another part of her harbored the horrifying thought that she was really bollixing this up. "A magic wand."

Joe stared at her and then back down at the wand.

Ginny took a deep breath and glanced across the room. "Accio book!" she called out, softly but firmly. A book that had been sitting across the room zoomed straight into her hands and Joe slid back on the sofa, pulling away from her. His jaw dropped open as if he was going to say something, but no words came out. "Accio pillow!" Ginny tried again, making a pillow from the bed come to her.

Joe's jaw snapped shut and he stood abruptly staring at the book and the pillow. A flash of something dark shown on his face and Ginny was shocked to see something that resembled recognition there as well.

"I'm a witch, Joe," she said plainly, deciding that the damage was already started. "I can do magic—real magic, not the tricks you see on the side of the street and such." Ginny searched his face, worried because he hadn't said anything. "Are you afraid of me?" she asked softly.

His nostrils flared and he shook his head, finally raising his eyes to hers. "No."

"Good," she sighed, "Because I would never hurt you, Joe." She was quiet a minute, watching as his shoulders relaxed.

"What do you do with it?" he asked finally, sitting again on the sofa. The distance he kept between them annoyed Ginny, even though she understood it.

"Lots of things," Ginny mused, smiling slightly. "I went to a special school to learn magic. And all of my family is magic."

Joe's jaw tightened again and he nodded jerkily, probably to show that he was still listening. His eyes were dark but Ginny couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"Harry was magic too; he was a wizard."

Joe visibly flinched at that and stared off. Ginny almost wanted to reach forward and touch him, to make sure he was still listening and wasn't ignoring her completely.

"You were in love with him."

His words startled her, but she nodded. "I was. Horribly in love with him."

"What happened to him?" he asked, turning tortured eyes on her. Ginny flinched at the look in them, and hoped it wasn't directed at her, but rather the idea that she could be in love with someone else, or maybe at the idea that she was magical and hadn't told him about it.

"My last year of school," Ginny started, her mouth feeling dry and sticky, "Harry went to work for the government—he was an Auror. That's sort of like a police man, or a detective, in the magical world.

"He and a friend of his were working to help rebuild the Ministry—the government—after a war, of sorts." She pressed her fingers to her temples, knowing she was messing this all up. But the words were all jumbled in her head and falling out of her mouth randomly, in patterns that made no sense to her at all. "And they discovered that something bad was happening with the Ministry."

Joe blinked at her, his eyes feeling like beams of penetrating green light.

"We thought... we thought he was killed because of it."

"Wait a minute," Joe said, taking off his glasses and pressing his fingers to his eyes. "This... Harry... he uncovered some sort of government scandal and it got him killed?"

Ginny nodded. "That's what we all thought—that he had died. But, years later, after I had become an Auror myself, I found out that he might not have died. He was actually taken—kidnapped, I guess you could say—and no one knew where he was.

"For years I've been looking," Ginny said, staring at him, pleading with her eyes that he listen, and believe her. "I've been all over the world looking for him."

Joe stood and moved away from the sofa, staring out one of the windows, his back toward her.

"Why are you here, Ginny? And why are you telling me this?"

Ginny moved so that she was standing behind him a step, her face still in the shadow. The hot sun pouring through the window made her shiver at the contrast of feelings she was experiencing: the bone-chilling cold of revealing the truth to Joe, and the warmth of the light.

"I'm here because I found him," she said simply. "After years of thinking he was dead, and then hoping, praying that he wasn't. I found him."

Joe's shoulders fell and his head bowed. "Why are you with me?" he asked.

"Because I'm in love with you, Harry," she said, deliberately using his real name. "Because I know who you are, and I've finally found you after all these years."

Joe swore and shook his head. "I'm not Harry. I'm not... whoever you think I am." He looked over his shoulder at her and Ginny gasped at the coldness in his face.

"I can prove it," she said desperately. "I know you're Harry." She continued on over his silent, head-shaking protests.

"I know about Lucas." Her words seemed to echo in the small space between them and Ginny moved forward, holding her hand just above his shoulder. "I know what they did to you. I know about Momma Jessen and about—"

Joe screamed in agony and moved away from her, pressing his hands against the glass of the window. Magic flared dangerously in him, forcing a small wave of energy to pulsate out from her.

"I know you're magical," Ginny continued, her whole body quivering as she forced herself to take another step closer. If Joe lashed out at her, even if he did it unintentionally, she would be ready. She probably deserved it after waiting so long to tell him.

"This can't be happening," Joe muttered. "This can't be real."

"It did happen," Ginny said softly. "You really are Harry—the same Harry I've always been in love with."

"My name is Joe," he gritted out between clenched teeth.

"Ordinary Joe," Ginny confirmed with a nod, "Momma Jessen told me about the name."

Joe turned to her, looking caught between exploding in anger and vomiting. His chest heaved and the room crackled with energy. One of the windows next to them cracked loudly, lines spidering out toward the edges of the pane.

"You don't fucking know anything," he growled, grabbing her arms and hauling her roughly against him before pushing her away again. The energy around him pulsated intensely and Ginny thought for a second he was going to Apparate away. But then he spun on his heel and ran toward the door, slamming it open and thundering down the stairs.

Ginny gasped out a sob and wrapped her arms around herself, sinking to the floor.

"Joe, please," she pleaded loudly, the words dying in the empty flat. "I'm so sorry."

\* \* \*

The flat was dark and Ginny still sat on the same patch of floor, staring at the door that Joe had flung open when he left.

Her tears had dried long ago and she'd cursed herself for ruining everything several times.

"It hurts," she whispered, not sure if she meant the ache in her chest from Joe's reaction, or the way her back throbbed from sitting curled around herself for so long.

She stared at the bed that they'd shared so often lately, but it looked horribly lonely tonight, and Ginny knew she couldn't sleep there without him. She didn't know if Joe would ever come back.

He'd been running from his past for so long, maybe it was easier for him to force himself to forget

her and simply move on.

The idea made her chest feel tight again and Ginny slowly stood, wincing at the pain in her legs and the cracking sound her knees made.

The sofa seemed a manageable goal, so she made her way there, forcing the image of Joe's face, full of hatred and fear, out of her mind. She'd been so convinced that she was doing the right thing, first by waiting to tell him, and then by actually doing so. But maybe she had been wrong. Would it have been so wrong to not tell him anything? To simply begin a new life with him, leaving the past where it belonged?

Even as the question came, Ginny knew the answer to it. It *was* wrong. Their pasts were what formed them into the people they were, even if Joe couldn't remember that. He was fundamentally Harry, even if he had no memory of that part of his life.

She nudged her rucksack with her foot and slowly gathered the few things that were hers within reach into it.

She shouldn't be here when he got back. This was *his* home. It was probably better if she just... went. Maybe tomorrow, or in a few days, Joe would be ready to talk about this. But it wouldn't happen tonight. Joe always needed time to process things; to think them through and analyze every bit of them before he accepted fully what they might mean to him.

Ginny stood and lifted the rucksack to her shoulder, tears coming to her eyes when she thought that only hours before they had been laughing and playfully kissing, beginning a new life together.

She wasn't ready to give that up yet, but she couldn't stay here. The idea of crawling onto Pearl's sofa didn't sound appealing, even though she knew her friend would take her in without a thought. But then she'd need to explain what the argument with Joe had been—even though there really was no argument at all, just her inability to explain who they both were in a way that didn't make her a complete prat.

"I'm sorry, Joe," she muttered as she closed the door behind her. "I hope you can forgive me one day."

# Chapter 22: These Days

The blocks flew past Joe as he ran, almost mindlessly, dodging in and out of crowds and darting between cars. He knew he was crying, but he couldn't take the time to stop and wipe at his tears.

Betrayal and anger swirled inside him and Joe nearly fell over when he finally stopped, his lungs screaming in pain from the blocks and blocks he had run. He threw up in a roadside trash bin, ignoring the disgusted looks of the men and women around him in business suits, leaving the huge office buildings like ants abandoning the hill.

Without thinking much about it, Joe wove his way through the people and into the building, taking one of the elevators all the way to the top, fifty-one stories. No one tried to stop him; in fact, no one said a word to the solitary man wearing the broken expression.

Joe didn't allow himself to fully feel anything until he stood at the top of the building, in the middle of the helicopter landing pad, letting the winds buffet him this way and that as he stared out over the city.

He felt completely undone—scattered pieces whipped around by forces he had no control over.

How could this have happened to him? Nothing ever worked out for him—he should have known!

Standing on the top of the tallest building in New Orleans, he could scream as loud as he wanted, hurl curses and horrid words, and no one would be around to scowl their disapproval of him.

He cursed the world, and life in general, before sinking to his knees, head bent and exhausted. Everything swirled around him as the sun sank into the west, stealing the light from the day and scratching orange and gold gouges across the sky.

The colors reminded Joe of Ginny and he closed his eyes against it, feeling sick to his stomach. But he couldn't keep them closed forever and his chest tightened as the colors slowly faded, flashing brilliantly red before dying.

The poetry of it all seemed fitting as Joe let despair settle in around him like the cold. His skin prickled with goosebumps, but he ignored them, repeating Ginny's words over and over in his head, all jumbled together and pounding into his brain.

Flashes of her smiling and laughing overlapped with the pleading, panicked face she wore tonight. He could still feel her hands clutching at his shirt, begging him to listen to her.

But he couldn't. He just... couldn't.

It wasn't true—there was no way he could believe what she told him. He wasn't Harry. He wasn't this person she'd been searching for. And she didn't love him.

His heart twisted and he buried his head in his arms, feeling sick again.

Joe had given her everything. He'd opened himself up to her more than he ever had to anyone else,

and it was all a lie.

Had she lied every time she'd said she loved him? What about the touches, the caresses?

Her face swam before him and Joe's heart twisted. No. It couldn't have all been a lie, because it wasn't for him. He *loved* Ginny.

By the time he started shivering from the wind, Joe's anger had faded until he only felt remnants of it under all the hurt.

He growled in frustration, wrapping his arms tighter around his knees. The anger had been easier to deal with than the hurt, and he wished he could find it inside himself again. But it was also exhausting; draining him completely until he had no energy left to fight.

The blanket of night closed around him, shrouding him on the silent rooftop, yet it was no comfort. Joe missed Ginny's arms around him. He missed the warmth of her smile and the way her laughter bubbled out of her, drawing his own.

Unanswered questions, things Ginny said that seemed completely impossible, rattled around in his head, bouncing off things and reminding Joe of a pinball game he had once watched. A very small part of him argued with his irrational and stubborn side that if he would just take a minute and really think about what Ginny had said...

No! It *couldn't* be true. Joe pushed the possibility away and stood, moving slowly toward the edge of the building. He couldn't get right at the edge, which was probably a good thing; it wasn't that he'd throw himself off, but his concentration was so distorted, he might just wander over the edge before he realized what was happening to him.

The stiff wind that blew up the side of the building forced Joe back a step and he sighed in contentment. This had always been a guilty pleasure for him—standing on the edge of something high and feeling the freedom, closing his eyes and pretending he could fly. Soaring out over the city, feeling the wind ruffling his hair and being able to go wherever he wanted—that was real freedom.

'Maybe you can with... magic,' he snorted to himself, letting the phrase roll around in his mind. Sadly, the distaste that should have followed it didn't come, and Joe found that he didn't hate the word as much as he thought he should.

"Could it be real?" he questioned aloud and then scoffed at himself. The things Ginny showed him had been real enough; he'd watched the book and the pillow move with his own eyes. But they were parlor tricks, at most. What good were tricks other than to entertain children?

His knees braced against the low wall that surrounded the edge of the roof, Joe closed his eyes and deliberately brought forth the memories of Lucas, pulling them from the deep recesses of his mind. Why couldn't magic help to protect him from all of that? If he was this... *Harry* like Ginny claimed, and he was a... wizard, why hadn't he been able to save himself?

The answer slapped him in the face with a force that nearly sent him to his knees.

Maybe it *had*.

How else could he explain the things that happened to him? Things floating around the room when he was agitated, unlocking doors when he had no key, escaping when he and Johnny were surrounded by men with guns...

The possibility that Ginny was telling the truth—at least partially—crept in slowly and Joe slid down to sit heavily on the roof, staring at his shaking hands.

Was it possible? And if he allowed that thought in, hundreds knocked at the door of his mind, demanding entrance.

If it *were* possible that it was magic that he had done, that set him apart from everyone else... well, what did he do with that? Somehow he knew that a life full of making things float meekly around a room wasn't something he was interested in, despite the thousands of uses his mind was now dreaming up.

If it *were* possible... then was Ginny really who she said she was? Was he? The thought was painful at the same time it was comforting. He might have a past out there beyond waking up in a hospital tied to a bed. Then again, from what Ginny had said, that past was anything but pleasant.

'You had Ginny,' his mind whispered and Joe ripped his glasses off, pushing his fingers into his eyes until all he could see were black spots. The thought wasn't consolation right now as he wasn't sure how he felt about her. She hadn't lied to him, really, but she hadn't been completely honest.

'Neither were you.'

"Stop!" Joe yelled to no one, rubbing his hands against his face. He was beginning to be too rational about this whole situation and he really didn't want to be. He wanted to be angry and hurt and sulk—no matter how childish it felt.

But it wasn't working. As night closed in around him, clarity was coming and Joe finally gave into it, actually arguing both sides of the situation, sometimes verbally, until he couldn't handle it any longer. There were too many questions that needed answers. And, so far, only one person seemed to have any hope of answering them.

He needed to talk to Ginny.

"Yeah, that's going to get you anywhere," he scoffed, staring at the buildings far below him. "Because you got your dumb ass stuck up here until someone unlocks the building."

Part of him was happy he was stuck up here until morning. But that part was getting smaller and smaller, and Joe squirmed, realizing that he did need to talk to her. He felt like a fool for exploding the way he had and running out like that. He heard Ginny's agonized cry while he was running down the stairs, but his anger forced him to keep going.

The idea that he'd hurt her made him sick and Joe pressed his hands to the sides of his head. So much had gone wrong tonight—on a night that should have found he and Ginny celebrating a milestone in their relationship—and Joe didn't even know how to begin to fix it.

Slowly, he stood and paced around the rooftop, trying to even imagine a conversation he might have with her to begin to figure this out. But the words wouldn't come and his head hurt even more.

"You know, if you were really magic, you could get yourself out of this," he criticized aloud when even picking the lock on the door didn't work.

In his frustration, Joe swore and stared at the lock, willing it to open, which made his head pound even further. His arm tingled strangely and he shook it off, scoffing at the stupid idea that his mind could somehow make the impossible happen. Just because he'd made it happen once before... That was an entirely different situation. He walked away and pressed his back to the wall, resigning himself to the fact that he was going to have to wait until morning to even think about talking to Ginny.

The slow, dull thump-thump of a helicopter sounded in the distance and Joe's heart pounded along with it, praying it wouldn't land here. If it did, he'd surely be hauled off to jail for trespassing and then it would be even longer until he could talk to Ginny.

Thankfully, the helicopter flew over, the lights never touching the building he was on. He rolled his shoulders, letting the relief flow through him.

*Just try the door.*

The words started as an annoying little nudge, but soon became something that Joe couldn't ignore anymore. He stood, feeling incredibly stupid when he went to rattle the door handle once more, knowing it would be—

The handle turned and the door swung open, leaving Joe gaping at it and trying to count the times he'd tried to open it before. Surely it must have been a dozen.

"It must have been unlocked before," he tried to convince himself as he slipped inside and hurried down the stairs to the floor where the elevator was. Deep inside, he knew what had happened, but he just couldn't deal with it right now; not while his mind was so full of what he needed to say to Ginny.

\* \* \*

"Ginny, I—"

The apartment was dark when Joe burst in and he froze, flicking on the light next to him and staring, stunned, at the emptiness. Most of Ginny's things were still here—he could see her clothing still sticking out of the closet, where the door wouldn't close any more. But Ginny wasn't on the sofa, or in their bed.

"Ginny?" He tried once more, checking the bathroom and then standing helplessly in the middle of the apartment. The idea that she wouldn't be here when he finally came to his senses enough to talk to her actually physically hurt—possibly more than the idea that she'd kept secrets from him.

But where would she go? Would she have run off to try and find him? Or did she just leave?

His hand groped behind him for the sofa, as he stared at the empty bed. *She left*. In the hours he'd been gone, Joe had never even contemplated the thought that Ginny wouldn't be here, that she would leave. She wouldn't... would she?

Without much more thought to follow that, Joe rushed out the door, skipping steps as he ran. He needed to find her, needed to talk to her... In truth, he needed to hold her. No matter how angry he had been before, there was a Ginny sized hole in his chest now that he couldn't live with. He was in love with her.

Six minutes later, he was banging his fist on Pearl's door, yelling at her to open up.

"Have you seen Ginny?" he demanded when a bleary-eyed Max, clad only in boxers, opened the door. Joe pushed past his friend, nearly tripping on the clutter of the apartment as he looked around. His chest heaved from running all the way there.

"What happened to you?" Pearl demanded from the bed, clutching a sheet to her.

Joe was becoming frantic, standing in the middle of the room, ruffling his hair in frustration. "Is Ginny here? Have you seen her?"

Max came up beside him. "Haven't seen her all night," he protested. "What's going on, Joe?"

Joe's heart twisted painfully and a brief, but very painful thought entered his mind. "I've lost her."

"What do you *mean* you've lost her?" Pearl said, wrapping the sheet around herself and dragging it with her as she clambered off the bed and came right up to him.

Joe blinked down at her, his chest feeling hollow and... alone again. "We had a... an argument, I guess, and I left. She's not there now. I thought maybe..."

"Dammit," Pearl hissed, glaring at him and then looking at Max.

"I'll help you look," Max said softly, clapping Joe awkwardly on the shoulder.

"I'll look downstairs," Pearl said, rubbing her face harshly and staring around the floor at the mess of clothing. "Maybe she's downstairs getting loaded."

Joe nodded vaguely, even though he knew it wasn't true, he'd come in through the bar entrance. His mind reeled with places that he needed to check, yet he couldn't make his body move.

*I've lost her.*

The pain from that one phrase hurt worse than anything they'd done at Lucas to him. Life without Ginny... it just didn't seem to exist anymore.

"We'll find her," Max said hopefully. "I'm sure she just needed some time to cool down. She's got quite the temper."

Joe nodded dully, swallowing the lump that was in his throat. He needed/i to find her. The anger he'd felt only hours ago was gone now, replaced with the all-consuming need to hold her and tell

her he was sorry for hurting her. The questions he needed answers to were still there, but they could wait until he knew she was at least safe... and didn't hate him.

"Come on, Joe," Max urged. "Maybe we better stay together, you're not looking so good."

"It'll be faster apart," Joe mumbled as Max dragged him out of the apartment and down the narrow stairs to the bar.

"Yeah, but if one of us finds her, there's no way to tell the other. I don't have a cell phone and neither do you."

Joe nodded his consent, but it was more an automatic thing than him agreeing.

"She's not here," Pearl informed them when they reached the bar, now blazing with lights. "What the hell did you say to her, Joe? I swear, only you could fuck up something that good!"

Joe scowled at her, hating that she was thinking the same thing he was. "Me? Why do you assume it was *me* that fucked it up?"

Pearl stared at him and Joe growled in frustration. "She... she knew me... before." He looked up at Max, who was catching on. "Before when I can't remember anything about my life... she knew me. And... she didn't tell me." The part about the magic was on the tip of his tongue, but he called it back, unsure how they would handle it. He hadn't handled it well, obviously.

His two friends stared at him, Pearl's jaw gaping and Max shifting about uncomfortably.

"She loved... the person she says I was." He bit the inside of his lip as the real question ripped from his chest. "I don't know who she loves now, because even if I was that person once... I'm not now."

The silence that stood between them was painful and Pearl shook her head, wiping tears out of her eyes. "Oh Joe, she's in love with *you!* Whatever was in the past doesn't matter. I can see it in the way she looks at you, in the way you two look at each other."

Joe twisted away, the words tearing further at his heart. He *knew* that, and yet... "I need to hear it from her."

His whisper hung in the air for a minute before Max came up behind him and patted his shoulder, probably harder than he meant to. "Come on, let's go find her."

Joe nodded, feeling tears gather at the back of his eyes before he shook them away. There would be time for that later, when he was alone and after he knew if Ginny really did love him, or just some old story about him that might or might not be true.

"Did she still have the keys to her apartment?" Pearl asked just before they stepped through the door out to the street. "Maybe she went there."

Joe felt incredibly stupid as the question rattled around in his brain, shaking loose the memory of Ginny saying, just hours ago, that she would turn the keys in on Tuesday.

Max must have seen the realization because he nudged Joe forward. "Let's try there first, before

we start tearing up the rest of the Quarter.”

“Good luck, Joe,” Pearl said, coming up and giving him a quick, but tight, hug. “Don’t fuck this up anymore, okay? She loves you, you love her, what the hell does it matter what went on years ago?”

He wished he could answer honestly, that it did/i matter, but the overwhelming need to hold Ginny again was starting to grow.

Max insisted on paying for a taxi to Ginny’s apartment because he wasn’t sure Joe could make it the whole way. He said this with a teasing air, but Joe wasn’t so sure himself. The building was dark and quiet when they entered, but Joe trudged up the steps slowly, trying to hold back the rising feeling of... He wasn’t quite sure what it was, but his skin tingled and his heart raced, making his chest ache with how hard it was beating.

They reached the landing outside the door and Joe stared at it. “She’s in there,” he said decisively.

Max blinked at him. “Maybe. Let’s check...”

“She’s in there,” Joe nodded, suddenly feeling calmer. He’d found her, and although she had left their apartment, she hadn’t left him completely... not yet, anyway.

“I think it’d be best if I went in alone,” he told Max, trying to give a genuine smile in thanks. It died on his lips.

“You sure?” Max said, his gaze traveling between the door and Joe.

“Yeah,” Joe shrugged. “I’ll er... I’ll be in tomorrow.”

“Today,” Max corrected with a glance at his watch. “It’s after one.”

Joe nodded, not really hearing the words. There was a rushing sound in his ears and it felt as if something inside him was reaching out for Ginny, even through the closed door. His hand reached out and hovered over the doorknob, almost touching the cold metal.

“Good luck,” Max said, backing away slowly.

Joe waited until his friend was down the stairs before staring at the knob beneath his hand and willing it to unlock. A soft clicking sound answered him and something inside Joe both crowed with pride, and sank to the bottom of his stomach.

‘Later,’ he scolded himself, ‘deal with this first.’

\* \* \*

The idea that Ginny had completely, irrevocably ruined this whole situation up sunk in around midnight. It crept in, slinking in the shadows of her empty flat and soaked into her skin, bringing a shivering cold with it as she huddled on the bare mattress with only a thin blanket to cocoon in.

What she wouldn’t give for the past twenty-four hours back; to be able to stop herself from saying things the way she had said them. Something inside of her, however—and the part was so small it

was fairly easy to ignore—whispered that Joe would have reacted the same no matter how she had told him.

She really couldn't blame him. The whole idea that she could know who he was, and understand what he'd been through, was just completely... unthinkable. If the situation were reversed, Ginny had no problem picturing having a complete, and probably quite violent, breakdown.

Sleep was fleeting; coming and going as the lights of the city played on the white ceiling.

The bed sinking down next to her woke her, and Ginny grasped her wand tighter, rolling and pointing it at the black shadow.

She knew it was Joe. It smelled like Joe, and his hand stretched out across the expanse of bed, reaching for her. The magic inside her reached for his, extending down her arm and finally allowing her to fully breathe when it found him. Ginny swallowed harshly and put the wand down, letting his fingers weave in between hers.

It was a silent affirmation that she wasn't angry with him, that she still loved him, even though he had walked out.

He didn't say anything, but climbed fully onto the bed and wrapped around her, burying his face in her back.

"When I woke up, my arms and legs were chained to a bed. I knew it was some sort of hospital. The smell..." The words fell from his mouth, spilling and tripping over each other.

Ginny rolled in his embrace and cuddled him to her body, tears dripping into his hair that smelled like night. Her hand buried in the strands, lightly scratching his scalp as she listened to his whispered words.

"And I couldn't remember anything. It was like I was staring at a blank wall. I couldn't talk. I couldn't... think straight."

Ginny wanted to speak, but she was afraid if she did, Joe would close back up. She could feel the wetness of his tears on her shirt, soaking down to her skin as her own eyes stung.

"And... and I *knew* something was wrong with me, because I made things happen. They hated that." He sounded rather proud and Ginny couldn't help but chuckle. *That* was Harry through and through.

"Momma Jessen helped me to talk again. She... she was wonderful. But then they saw she was being too nice, spending too much time with me." He trailed off and Ginny could only imagine the horrors he had seen in that awful place.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that, Joe," she said finally.

He pulled back and took his glasses off, flinging them on the bed next to her. "I shouldn't have left like I did," he said, burrowing back in.

"I should have been more careful about how I told you," Ginny protested. "Although I'm not sure

what the best way would have been.”

Joe was quiet for a minute before he looked up at her, blinking his bright eyes in the dim light that shown through the windows. “Do you really think... I mean...”

“You’re Harry,” she said, nodding firmly. “I’m sure of it.”

He sat up, pulling away. She couldn’t tell from the small part of his expression she could see whether he believed her or not. “And what does that mean? For me—for *us*, I guess.”

Ginny sighed and pulled herself out of the blanket to sit next to him. “It means that I finally found you.”

He nodded mutely before turning. “You’ve been looking for me all this time?”

“Mostly,” she finally admitted. “At first... well, I didn’t know you weren’t dead.”

Joe shook his head and stared straight ahead, although his fingers found hers in the blanket. “I’m sorry,” he whispered harshly.

“You don’t need to be,” Ginny said, moving so that she could sit in his lap. She went slowly so that he could protest if he wanted. But his hands found her hips, holding her in place as he laid his head on her shoulder. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I want to remember you,” he whispered, pressing his lips to her neck and then following a line up to her jaw. “I want to remember when we met, and when I first kissed you... and when we made love.” Her chest burst with the emotion of his acceptance, even if it only lasted for a second, and he denied it later. In this moment, he believed what she said.

“I know,” she nodded, wrapping her arms around his head and holding tightly to him as his hands clutched at her. “I want you to have that too. But... if it’s not possible...” She shook her head and pulled back from him, reaching to hold his chin in her fingers. “If you don’t ever remember those things... I’ll tell you about them. I’ll always be with you, Joe.”

“You loved Harry,” he said, his voice hesitant as he tried to put it all into perspective. “How much of me is him?”

“More than you realize,” Ginny said, sighing. Her finger traced his stubbly jaw line, making a scratching sound in the space between them. “And yet... you’re different too.”

He nodded and hesitated over the next question. “Which one of us are you in love with?”

It was a fair question, and one that Ginny had struggled with since finding him. “Both,” she answered truthfully, “because you’re the same person, just shaped by different life experiences.”

“But... if you had to choose.”

“I already chose you, Joe, don’t you see that?” Ginny said, holding his face in her hands and pressing their foreheads together. “I could have stayed in England, believing the lies they told me about you. I wouldn’t have been happy, but I would have managed to find something to keep me

content.

"But I *chose* to look for you. I *chose* to spend months in some of the darkest places ever—both physically and emotionally—so that I could find you. And when I did find you, I stayed."

Joe's lips claimed her then, possessively moving against her mouth as his arms wrapped tightly around her.

"I love you, Ginny," he said against her mouth as he reached for the edge of her shirt. "I'm scared to death for what this means, but I'm not going to run from you anymore," he promised, kissing along her collarbone when it was revealed.

"No more running," Ginny agreed, kissing him back.

\* \* \*

Waking in Joe's embrace, after thinking she might have lost him, was wonderful. His chest rose and fell beneath her cheek, but she could tell he was awake, staring at the brightly lit ceiling. His fingers played with bits of her hair and it tickled her shoulders.

What small space there was between their bodies was warm and Ginny burrowed into his side further, snuggling under the thin blanket.

"You think too much," she scolded softly, spreading her hand out over his chest and rubbing the skin there. Her fingers traced the razor thin scars across one side of his ribcage that disappeared along the side, tucking under his arm. They were very faded, so much that she hadn't noticed them the first time she'd seen him without a shirt. Then again, she'd been rather... distracted that day. She knew what they were from, but wanted him to be the one to tell her the story in his own time.

"I know," he said in a rough voice, still heavy with sleep. His lips pressed to her temple and Ginny lifted her head as he stirred beneath her. "I always have."

Their eyes met as he shifted down to face her, his hand tracing lines up and down her back and side.

"Talk to me, Joe," she urged in a whisper. "Tell me what's in your head."

"I'm not sure I can," he admitted, his eyes roving over her face. Ginny could see the conflict in their brightness and sighed.

"I won't be angry," she promised softly, reaching up to rub his whiskery face.

"It's just hard to believe," Joe said. "I think... I think it feels right, but I have no way of knowing."

Ginny nodded and tucked her hand under her cheek, trying to think of the best way to approach this. "Us? Or magic?"

"You and I have always felt right, even when I fought it," he mused. "I guess part of me is wondering what I did right to get to have you in my life." His hand fumbled for hers and wound their fingers together. "And what I did so incredibly wrong if they put me... in that place."

"You didn't deserve to be there, Joe," she protested, her chest tightening at the vulnerability on his face. "You're not responsible for everyone in the world, or what they choose to do, you know."

"I know," he protested, even though she could see the shadow in his eyes.

"You've always been like this," she said, leaning across the inches that separated them and pressing her lips to his chest. "Always determined to save the world, and feeling guilty when anyone got hurt."

He huffed in annoyance and Ginny smiled into his skin. "I don't remember that. I don't remember... anything. As for saving the world... I'd settle for just knowing what might happen in my own life an hour from now."

"I know," she said, pulling her hand free and wrapping it around his back, threading the other one under him and holding tight, her cheek pressed above his heart. "I'm sorry you don't remember anything. I wish there was some way that I could give you all of that back, but there isn't."

He nodded stiffly, his arms holding her against him. "I feel strange when I'm around you," he admitted with awe.

Ginny chuckled. "Not sure if that's a compliment or not."

Joe was quiet for a minute, his hands rubbing the skin on her back. "My chest feels tight and my skin tingles. I thought it was just... love, but now I'm not so sure."

"It sounds like your magic," Ginny mused, pulling back so she could see him again. "I think... in some people, their magic *recognizes* other magic. I can feel mine reach for yours when we're together. You never realized because you had no way of knowing how close your magic sits to the surface, Joe. I've felt it so many times."

"You can feel it?" he asked, a shocked look on his face.

Ginny propped herself up on his chest and nodded. "When you're frustrated or angry especially, but sometimes when we're together—when it's quiet." She leaned down and pressed a kiss to his chest. "Here... close your eyes. Tell me what you feel."

Taking a deep breath, Ginny concentrated, just like she would if she were about to cast a spell, or Apparate. She held it there for a minute, and then released it, opening her eyes and blinking at Joe, whose eyes were dark and narrowed in a way that made shivers run down her body. Her stomach flipped pleasantly.

"*That's* what that was," he mused. "I've felt that before... the night in the alley, and then again right before the fight at the bar."

Ginny nodded. "I feel you all the time. It feels like tingles in my skin."

Joe nodded. "It's very..." his brow furrowed as he tried to think of the right word, "arousing."

A seductive little smile played on her face as she nodded. "Try being on my end, Joe... your magic is

intoxicating.”

He smiled and reached out to smooth a piece of hair away from her face. “I can feel it sort of... reach for you. Do you think that’s why I fell for you so hard and fast? Did it have something to do with our magic?”

“I think when you fall in love with someone, it’s a lot up here,” she said, pressing her finger to his temple. “But it’s also here, in your heart, and in your soul.” She laid her hand in the middle of his chest and rubbed lightly, swirling the black hairs around. “No matter how much they tried to steal from you by taking your memories, they couldn’t steal that. They couldn’t take your magic, and they couldn’t take who you fundamentally are.”

He was quiet and Ginny laid down on him, enjoying the way his fingers ran through her hair.

“I can unlock doors,” he said softly, as if it were an embarrassing secret. “I... I guess I never really thought about it before, but I did it last night. And... and while I was *there*.”

Ginny tilted her head and smiled up at him. “That’s a good sign.”

“It’s more than just about... tricks and unlocking doors, isn’t it?” he asked, staring off over her head. “I mean, it just feels/i like it should be more.”

“It is,” she nodded fervently. “Any mediocre wizard can make bangs and flashes, but magic is a subtle thing—an art, really.” She stopped talking when he got a pained look on his face.

“Can you... Can *it* make someone fall in love?”

Ginny saw past his mumbled question to what she thought must be bothering him. “Real love is one thing that magic can’t accomplish. There are spells and potions that may simulate infatuation and regard, but... it’s not real, and it fades quickly.” She sat up, tucking the blanket under her arms. “I would never do something like that to you, Joe. I was so nervous coming once I knew you were here. I...” she trailed off, shaking her head. “I didn’t know how I’d tell you... if I even could. And I had no idea how you would react to me—whether you’d reject everything I said, whether you’d have already moved on with your life. But I never would have forced you into something you didn’t want, Joe.” She slid to the edge of the mattress, letting her legs dangle over the side as she fumbled for the clothing that had been haphazardly discarded everywhere last night.

“I know that,” he said, scooting behind her and stilling her hands with his. “I didn’t mean to...” The frustration and questions rolled off of him and Ginny shivered, leaning back into his chest.

“I’m sorry. I guess I’m just emotional right now,” she whispered.

“I think we both are,” he said, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. “I just have so many questions... and I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Just ask them,” Ginny said, looking over her shoulder to his face, so close to hers. “And I’ll give you all the answers that I possibly can.”

"You want me to what?"

Joe raised an eyebrow at her and Ginny couldn't help but laugh.

"Blast that target." She nodded to where a large red bull's-eye floated in the air in front of the brick wall of their flat.

"Er..." he scratched his head and stared down at the wand she had placed in his hand. "And you're sure I won't blow the wall to bits? Cause this whole place to come down on us?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I think I'll take my chances. Besides, you're not 'blasting it' really. You're just... stunning it."

"But it's not a living thing. How can I stun it?"

"Joe," Ginny groaned. "Just do the damn spell!"

He smirked at her and took the stance that she had showed him earlier, pointing her wand at the target and taking a deep breath, his knees flexed a little.

"Let the magic build for a second inside you," Ginny urged. "Feel it rise from your core and move down your arm to the wand. Let the wand focus it for you. Intent is everything in magic, Joe," she said, moving closer until she could feel him struggling to contain his power, directing it to go where he wanted it to go, rather than where it wanted to go.

"Stupefy!" Joe said firmly, doing the small movement she had shown him as well. The target exploded into a thousand pieces, each raining down and disappearing into dust. The bricks behind it cracked menacingly and Ginny grimaced.

"Shit," she hissed, reaching for the wand. A quick repairing charm had them back to normal in no time. "I thought I did a strong enough ward on that."

Joe stared at the wall and blinked. "Wow." He looked down at his arm, amazement painted on his face.

"And that's with a borrowed wand," Ginny said in wonder. "I can't even begin to fathom what you'd do with your old wand."

"I had a wand?" Joe asked, his face lighting up before he shook his head. "Sorry. Of course I had a wand."

"It's okay," Ginny brushed it aside and held out her wand for him to take after conjuring several more targets. "Let's keep going. This time try varying the power you put into it. Whisper the words if you have to, just to let your mind use that as a focus."

Joe nodded and focused. Next to her leg, Ginny crossed her fingers, feeling foolish for doing so, but wanting Joe to succeed so badly. He really *needed* to be able to control his magic so that it didn't control him, as it had for so many years.

Her breath caught in her throat when the target flew back against the wall, but didn't shatter.

"You did it." She meant it to come out with much less awe than it did.

"Gee, thanks, Ginny," Joe scoffed, although his face stretched into a genuine smile.

"Don't get all huffy," she protested, directing him to the second target. "Do it again."

Hours later, Joe had mastered as many spells as Ginny could think of, and they were collapsed on the sofa, facing each other and smiling lazily.

"Is there a spell for making things disappear?" he asked. "I would think that would come in handy."

"Disappear as in... being invisible?" Ginny asked.

"As in... not being there anymore," Joe said, glancing around and then lighting up at a paper that was on the table in front of them. "Like this paper."

"Evanesco," Ginny said. She described the wand motion for him and he easily vanished the paper with a satisfied smirk.

"Does it work on other things?" he asked, his eyes wandering her body, making Ginny's face heat.

"Depends," she said, sliding over closer to him. "What did you have in mind?"

Joe smirked. "I can think of a couple of situations it would be handy in."

"Yeah," Ginny said, moving closer still and leaning up to kiss him. "You can do it the Muggle way, you know."

"Muggle?" Joe asked, his breath raising goosebumps on her skin as he exhaled against her cheek.

"Not magical," she said, reaching over to slide one of his buttons through the hole and then slipping her hand inside. "I could have done that with magic, but I like doing it... slowly."

Joe's stomach flinched when she trailed her fingers along it and he breathed heavily out of his nose.

"I like it faster," he said, swishing her wand and making Ginny gasp when her shirt disappeared.

"I did it," Joe said, grinning before he set the wand aside. "Maybe slower is better," he mused as he pulled her into his lap.

# Chapter 23: Runaway

"What do you see in our future, Ginny?" Joe asked while they were cuddling on their sofa. "Now that you found me."

Ginny thought about that for a minute. While she had grand ideas about taking him back to England and righting the wrongs that had been done to them both—as much as they could anyway—it was selfish of her to think Joe would just tag along behind her, following her around.

"I haven't made any plans, Joe," she said. "Because I think we should decide what to do together. This is *our* life, not just mine."

"You want to go back to England," he said, staring at their hands, rather than looking at her. "I think I know that much."

"I miss my family," she nodded. "But England is very complicated. England means facing the people that did this to you, Joe—the people that did this to us both. It means standing up and fighting again."

His chest grew tight behind her and his heart thudded away loudly. "I can't go back to where they had me, Ginny." His voice sounded so small and terrified that Ginny turned and clutched him tightly. "They pretended it was safe, that it was a hospital. But... at night... I could hear the others crying. And during the day..." He shook his head, his voice dying out. "It was a prison, only worse than I could ever imagine it, because I had no idea why I was there, or what they wanted to do with me."

"I only ever saw a few people. Momma Jessen, a couple of guards. The people they called Healers. There were two other men that I saw, too. I... I finally decided it wasn't a prison... it was an asylum. I had to have lost my mind to be there."

Ginny's tears leaked out and ran to his chest, making little puddles on his shirt, causing him to shiver. The cold, dispassionate way he spoke of it nearly broke her. The intensity was just too much.

"I can't imagine how you *didn't* lose your mind, being locked in there alone," she said, swiping angrily at the tears.

"I can't go back to that, Ginny." His voice broke in the middle of the sentence and his chest hitched, holding back a sob.

"You're not going to," she promised, sliding up to press their faces together. "We won't let that happen."

"It happened before."

"Because we weren't together," Ginny protested. "Together you and I are everything, Joe. We won't let them win again."

He nodded, but she could tell he wasn't convinced.

\* \* \*

The bright neon lights of the Quarter reflected on the windows, and off Joe's glasses. He'd grown used to them lighting up the inside of the small studio apartment that it would be strange if they ever left. He knew Ginny wanted to go back to England, but he just wasn't sure.

From what Ginny told him, his life back there wasn't all that great anyway. Although... there were friends, she'd said. Wonderful friends—more like family—who had missed him almost as much as Ginny had.

"Come back to bed, Joe."

His reflection smiled back at him in the window and he looked over his shoulder at Ginny, stretched out in their bed. "I will," he promised softly.

But she wasn't convinced; a minute later, her arms wrapped around his chest from behind and her warm face pressed against the skin of his back. "It was a lot to take in tonight, wasn't it?"

Joe nodded, not trusting his voice to answer. After coming home from work, Ginny sat him down and continued telling him about his life back in England. They'd talked for a long time about his years at school, about his professor, Albus Dumbledore, and about his fight against Voldemort. *Seriously, who came up with these names!*

There were so many questions about it all swarming in his head that Joe simply couldn't decide on which one to ask, so he had just listened.

"It feels a bit like a movie," Joe finally admitted, gently pulling Ginny around into his embrace. Her body was warm and melted against him, and Joe ran his hands up and down the back of her rumpled pajamas. "Or maybe like a bedtime story—but a really bad one."

She snorted and kissed his chest before looking up at him. "I'm probably mucking it all up in the telling too."

"Is there any good way to tell that story?" Joe said skeptically. He hated feeling so... disconnected from it all. Numb. It wasn't right that he had to hear these stories about a life he couldn't remember.

"I guess not," Ginny admitted, swaying them gently.

"I don't feel like the hero," he admitted. "I'm more... the bad guy type, I think."

Ginny snorted and shook her head. "Definitely not the way I remember it. But you never thought of yourself as a hero either, Joe. You always said you were just doing what was right."

Joe chewed on his lip and stared over Ginny's head out at the lights. "Did I really... do all of that?"

Ginny nodded and kissed his chest again. "You did."

"I'm not sure..." He felt like a coward for admitting it, but it needed to be said. "I'm not sure I would even *want* to remember all of that. Dying and having no parents, no family. Being hunted and having no home."

"You're leaving out all the best parts," Ginny scolded softly. "You're focusing on the bad things, instead of seeing all the good that happened, Joe. You're forgetting the relationships that you had—dozens of friends who fought right next to you, people who believed in you enough to put their lives in danger to help you."

Joe swallowed thickly around that idea. He hated it, actually, but mostly because he couldn't remember those people; and it felt like their sacrifices were in vain if he couldn't even picture their faces.

"And you *did* have a family, Joe; one that loved you as if you were born with red hair."

His eyes rolled, but the corner of his mouth twitched up. "Bet I look funny being the only one not red."

"There are others," Ginny shook her head. She looked pleased that he was pulling away from the darker thoughts. And... she should be; she was so good at reminding him to stop living in the shadows.

Ginny *was* his light.

"I know it's hard," she said finally, holding him tightly again. "But we've both been through so much, we've changed so much—we can't really be who we were ever again. Even if, by some miracle, you do get your memories restored, or back, you're still never going to be that Harry that everyone remembers. You can't be him anymore; the things you've seen and done are... they're always going to be there. They're always going to shape who you've become."

"You're not the same?" he asked, sliding his fingers into her hair and caressing the side of her head.

"Hardly," Ginny chuckled. "I've changed a lot—grown up."

"I can't imagine you being any different," Joe admitted. "You just... you're just you."

"I feel the same way about you, Joe," Ginny said. "I'm not in love with you because you look like Harry. I'm in love with you because you're him, just changed." She was quiet for a minute before blowing out a harsh breath. "Another explanation I've mucked up."

"I understand," he said, kissing her head. "I really do. I'm him... just grown because of what I've been through. And because I can't remember."

"Exactly. You're still everything I've always wanted, Joe," Ginny said, giving him a squeeze.

Joe nodded, not sure what to say. Parts of his past still bothered him because they didn't seem real at all. And parts were almost as painful as the memories he had of Lucas. "If... if we did go back," he stared, "I think I'd like to see their graves."

"Your parents?" Ginny asked, blinking up at him.

"Everyone's," he shrugged.

"That's a good idea," she said softly. "I'd take you to all of them."

He nodded and stared at the lights again, not seeing them, really. He still wasn't convinced that going back was the best thing for them. There were just so many unknowns waiting out there in the dark.

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"What if we just... run away," Joe said to her later, pressing his lips to her ear in the middle of the loud and crowded bar.

"What?" Ginny demanded as she opened bottles of beer and poured glass after glass of liquor. He grinned maddeningly and moved down the bar without another word.

The idea swirled in her head until the man she was supposed to be serving knocked his fist on the bar and motioned to the drinks she was holding, but not delivering.

"Sorry," she muttered, still trying to figure out what Joe meant. Run away. The idea wasn't new, but it was thrilling.

Joe passed her again and Ginny longed to pull him aside to somewhere quiet, somewhere they could sit and talk about this whole thing for hours. After their conversation the other day on the sofa, Ginny vowed to let him set the pace, even though it was hard. She knew what she wanted, but she couldn't—and wouldn't—push that on him.

His arm wrapped around her waist when he passed by again and he kissed her neck. "We could just... disappear. We could see your family sometimes."

And he was gone again, leaving Ginny nearly ready to scream at the frustration of it all. She looked at the clock and sighed, knowing she had at least three more hours before they could conceivably talk about this.

Pearl was off tonight and Max couldn't handle the bar himself, so there was no way to take a break.

"Maybe California," Joe said again, his shoulder butting up against her arm as he reached around her for glasses. "They have beaches... I'd like to swim in the ocean, and maybe try surfing."

The last comment made her smile and she promised herself that she would get Joe up on a broom soon. In fact, they *both* needed to fly again. Her chest ached thinking of how long it had been since she had properly flown. Too long.

"Or the mountains," Joe put in again, his face alight with the possibilities. "I haven't ever seen the snow."

Ginny wanted to protest, but here in a noisy, crowded bar wasn't the best place. And, as far as Joe remembered, he hadn't seen snow before. He had no memories of Great Britain's climate.

Resigned, Ginny let him play out his little fantasies, telling her all the things he'd like to do and see. She even started to get a little excited herself, seeing the enthusiasm behind his words.

But she could also see the fear behind it all. He was clearly afraid of facing his past—and she didn't blame him. Having survived what he had, and then voluntarily facing it again when you knew nothing of what the outcome would be was like staring up at the side of a sheer cliff and thinking that you needed to climb it, but not knowing how or where to start.

The idea exhausted even her and Ginny, at the end of the night, wondered if they *shouldn't* just disappear.

"You haven't said where you'd like to go," Joe accused in a small voice as they got ready for bed that night. He sat on the end of the bed in just his underwear and one sock, watching Ginny undress.

"I know," she said, pulling a t-shirt on and climbing into bed, holding his side of the covers open. Joe removed his final sock and tossed it toward the laundry hamper before sliding in and wrapping around her. His glasses made a click as he set them on the bedside table.

"I know you don't like the idea of leaving," he said, pressing a kiss to her shoulder.

"It's not that," Ginny protested, "I want to see all those wonderful things with you Joe."

"We could get married," he said in a small voice. "Travel the world and see... everything."

"We could," she agreed, rubbing his back. "We don't have to run, though. We could still get married, if you want to." The idea thrilled her, sending little jolts of pleasure down her body.

"Do *you* want to?" he asked. She could see his bright eyes reflecting the low light in the room.

"I do," she nodded. "Whenever you're ready, Joe. I'm ready for that kind of commitment in my life. I know I'm not going anywhere."

He nodded but didn't respond.

"Joe, I know it scares you to think about going back."

"But you want to," he said dully.

Ginny sighed and sat up in bed, turning and tucking her legs beneath her. "Have you ever heard the expression 'choosing between what's easy and what's right'?"

"I don't know," he mumbled, staring up at her.

"We could have a wonderful, amazing life if we forgot all about what happened to us both in the past and just got lost in each other. But would it be the right thing?" She rubbed her face harshly. "I know it's selfish of me to want to go back."

"It's not," he protested, running his hand along her leg. "You miss your family."

"I know you don't remember them, Joe, but they loved you."

His face grew tight and he nodded. "I'm not sure how I would feel going back there."

Ginny lay down next to him again, resting her head on his shoulder. "Don't you want to stop the people who did this to you, Joe? Don't you want to get justice for what you went through? For what the others went through?"

He was quiet and his hands were still against her body. "Maybe," he said with a sigh.

Ginny was glad to see that he was actually thinking this through, rather than simply letting his fears, or her, dictate what he wanted. This had to be a decision made with the both of them, because to step back into that world was going to take everything they had.

"They've hurt other people, Joe," Ginny said, feeling bad for playing on his senses like this, but she knew that it would work. "They hurt friends of ours to keep them quiet—they put two people in prison for nothing, Joe. For simply trying to help me find you! They took other's memories away. They slandered me and said horrible things about the two of us in the press. They shouldn't be allowed to get away with ruining peoples lives like that."

"No, they shouldn't," he said softly. "But what can just the two of us do, Ginny? You're talking about a whole government being corrupted. They're stealing people's lives."

"It wouldn't be easy," she shook her head against him. "But if we don't stand up to them, who will?" His arms tightened around her. She could hear his heart pounding away and his breathing become harsh.

"We wouldn't be alone, either," she protested. "We weren't alone in the war, even though it felt like it." He nodded, his eyes glazing over. Ginny thought he might be thinking about what she'd told him of his life before. The morning after she told him the truth, they'd spent hours cuddled in bed, talking. Well, Ginny had done most of the talking while Joe stared up at the ceiling.

"My family will stand with us. And Jasper, and Trammel... and a few other Aurors from the Ministry. The Order of the Phoenix. There are a lot of witches and wizards who are going to be thrilled to see you, Joe," she said.

"I don't know them," he shook his head.

"I know," she nodded, frustration welling up inside her again. "But staying here or running off around the world won't let you know them either. Don't let fear hold you back anymore, Joe. You were always one of the most courageous people I knew."

"You think I'm a coward," he said accusingly, although his tone wasn't biting. It was more... questioning.

"No," she defended. "I think... I think that you've lost a lot—more than you can even imagine—and you're being careful with what you have now."

"That's it exactly," Joe said nodding. His fingertips traced her face reverently and he placed

several kisses on her cheeks and nose. "I can't lose you again, Ginny. I can't lose who I am. If I do... they might as well strap me to that damned bed again, because I really will go insane."

"That's not going to happen," Ginny assured him, although she knew she couldn't really promise that, "Because we have a few advantages. Some of those people we'll be fighting against really do believe you're dead. And Harry Potter is a name and a reputation that carries a lot of weight in the Wizarding world, Joe. Even people that hated you and what you stood for recognized the power inside you.

"And they expect us to play by the rules," she continued. "But you and I both know rules are meant to be broken. They're meant to be questioned and tested so that no one person or ideal has complete authority over another."

"I would have to be him again, wouldn't I?" Joe asked, looking away from her.

Ginny sighed and rubbed her forehead. "There are a lot of advantages to being Harry Potter, Joe. But... if you really decide you don't want that, after we've done all that we can do... I'll go with you wherever you want to go. We'll disappear then."

He considered that for a minute before kissing her deeply, winding their bodies together.

"You'd do that for me?" he asked, his voice small right against her ear.

Ginny's heart leaped into her throat and she nodded. "I would. I love you, Joe."

They kissed for a while longer before cuddling tightly together. "Did I tell you that you have a godson?" Ginny asked, a picture of Teddy coming to her mind.

"What?" Joe said, pulling away. "I have..."

"A godson," Ginny nodded. "He's wonderful. His name is Teddy." She continued to tell Joe all she knew about Teddy, from before she had left, and from the small mentions in letters since.

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Joe knew he needed to make a decision about what he wanted, but it seemed like such an overwhelming task—choosing between what he and Ginny could have, and the unknown that waited for them if they returned to England.

In the end, his inspiration for the decision came from a very unexpected place. Ginny and Pearl had taken the morning to do something related to shopping or doing their hair... or something. Joe hadn't been too interested in the details once all the giggling and whispering had started.

Max had some sort of commitment also, so Joe was on his own one morning. Rather than sleeping in or lounging around the apartment, Joe decided to go for a walk. He caught a bus up to Armstrong Park and walked under the large arch that signaled the entrance. To his left was Congo Square, where several people playing drums caught his attention. Joe followed the paved patterns in the walk, circling toward the musicians and enjoyed watching them perform in the heat of the late morning.

His mind wandered as he walked down the tree lined sidewalks and finally found a grassy knoll that looked over a lagoon. Several groups were in the same area, but no one paid him any attention as he sat down and thought about where his life was going.

Ginny wanted to go back to see her family, that much he knew. She had promised him that she wouldn't say another word to influence his decision, but he'd seen her staring at pictures of her family several times. And he wanted to be able to give that to her, as nervous as he was about meeting her five brothers and parents. Something at the back of his mind kept whispering that they might not like him at all, despite how Ginny tried to convince him that they would love him. What if they didn't think he was good enough for their daughter?

The main obstacle in going back was Joe's overwhelming fear that somehow he and Ginny would be separated again and that either of them might end up in some place like Lucas.

Ginny freely admitted that she didn't know what to expect if they went back, and that made Joe's stomach turn violently.

He had been the one to suggest them simply slipping off into the night, disappearing and exploring the world together—and the idea still seemed wonderful to him. But... at the same time, it made him feel like a coward.

The heat of the day made a trickle of sweat run down his back and Joe stretched his legs out in the cooler grass, looking around and smiling at a young family that was seated not too far from him. The father looked to be Joe's age, or not much older anyway. He was playing with his son, laughing and tickling the small boy who had pudgy, fast legs.

Joe chuckled when the father pretended to fall while chasing the boy and then growled loudly when the child came over to check on him. The boy squealed happily and laughed when his dad picked him up, cuddling him close and kissing his face.

The mother laughed, shaking her head at their antics while she spread a blanket and began to set some food out. Joe watched her young face, free from cares and shining brilliantly in the summer sun. She turned just right and Joe could see her hand resting on the swell of another child growing within her.

His heart thumped loudly as he watched the drama play before him and he knew what his decision needed to be. What this little family had—Joe desperately wanted for himself and Ginny.

He wanted the days in the sun where all they had to worry about was laughing and ants stealing their food. He wanted to see Ginny grow big with his child, and he wanted to be able to play with their children, to laugh freely.

None of that was going to be possible—not completely—while their pasts still hovered over them, casting huge shadows and keeping the sun away.

It wasn't going to be easy—not at all—and the thought of facing the demons that had stolen everything from them made him sick, Joe knew it was the right thing to do.

His and Ginny's children needed to grow up in a world where they didn't have to worry about

monsters that stole people from their homes and chained them to beds.

One thing was for sure, though. Joe knew he couldn't—and wouldn't—do this without Ginny there by his side.

A smile spread over his face as he watched the family settle down to have their meal. The husband leaned over and pressed his lips to the wife's and Joe let his eyes glaze over, picturing himself and Ginny in his mind.

\* \* \*

Getting Ginny down to the riverfront was harder than he envisioned it being. He was sure he'd given his plans away at least a dozen times over the past day. The closest call was when he was looking at the modest ring he'd picked out and then quickly shoved it in between the mattress and box springs, stuttering about looking for his socks, when Ginny came out from the bathroom.

Ginny had been watching him closely, but must have either gotten used to his strange behavior by now, or just decided it was the stress of the decision that loomed over them both, because she didn't question him.

"We should all go down to Café Du Monde," Pearl sighed after the four of them closed up the bar.

Joe's head shot up and he nearly dropped the armful of bottles that he was carrying toward the garbage.

"That sounds great," Ginny agreed.

"No," Joe snapped, his face heating when everyone turned to him. "I mean... I'm rather tired and I think we should just, you know... go home." He shot a panicked look over at Max, praying his friend would somehow be able to either read his mind or see the alarm on his face.

Ginny blinked at him and Pearl rolled her eyes. "You're a big boy, Joe. I'm sure Ginny doesn't need to tuck you in."

Joe cursed her silently and glared at Max, who was quite pointedly ignoring his looks. He thought he could see his friend's shoulders bouncing with laughter, even.

"No, well, I know," he stuttered, giving up on Max and turning his pleading eyes on Ginny instead. "I just..."

Ginny, thankfully, had pity on him and shook her head slowly. "I think maybe we'll pass this time, Pearl, thanks."

Joe's heart started beating regularly again and his hand strayed to his pocket, feeling the ring that he'd been playing with all evening there, securely in his jeans.

"Maybe tomorrow," he shrugged, wincing when Pearl narrowed her eyes at him. He tried to shrug an apology to her, but he really wasn't sorry, and she could tell.

Tomorrow, when Ginny-*if*-Ginny was wearing an engagement ring, Pearl would forget all about the

way he had stomped all over her plans.

"Well, I'm going to order extra beignets, and eat them all myself, just to spite you," Pearl said as she turned the lights off in the bar, bathing it black.

Joe sighed nervously and patted his pocket one more time before following Max into the kitchen.

Ginny wrapped her arm through his as the two couples walked down the alley behind the bar toward the street that would take Pearl and Max to the café, and Ginny and Joe home. When they did split off, Joe breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't that he didn't want to be with their friends, just that he didn't think he could handle doing this in front of anyone other than Ginny—if he could even work up the nerve to do that.

They made it one whole block, with Joe's hand nearly sliding out of hers from the sweat built up, before he turned to her.

"I'm not really tired," he said, feeling his face heat. Ginny peered at him in the light of the street lamp. "I mean... well, I'm not."

"Okay," she nodded, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Do you want to go and join—"

"No," he said, shaking his head and stepping in front of her to stop them. "Can you... can you do that Apparition thing, and take us near the riverfront?"

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him and Joe squirmed. "You hated Apparating, I thought."

"I did—I do," he nodded. "But... I thought maybe we could walk along the river and... talk?" The urge to bang his head into the side of the building they were standing next to was great, but he just barely managed to stop himself. If he didn't get this straight in his head soon, Ginny was going to laugh at him when he finally did get around to asking her to marry him.

"Alright," she agreed, motioning him to a shadow in between buildings.

Joe clenched his teeth, knowing the squeezing feeling that was about to come would be unpleasant, but at least he wouldn't have to try and think of something to say to her in the walk to the river. They'd never run out of things to talk about, but the way Joe's heart was thumping meant he was likely to drop to his knee in the middle of some sidewalk, somewhere horribly unromantic.

"Ready?" Ginny asked, peering up at him.

Joe sucked in a breath at how amazing she looked right then, her eyes bright in the pale light of night and her skin almost translucent. He leaned down and kissed her slowly, feeling her breath tickle his skin. "I'm ready," he said, keeping them closely wrapped together.

Maybe it was having something else to focus on, but Joe thought the trip wasn't quite as horrible as the first time Ginny had taught him about Apparition.

"Here we are," she murmured, kissing him once again and then taking his hand, leading him out of an alley.

There were several couples walking up and down the riverfront, but the bench where they had spent their first night together—Ginny's first night at Sam's—was just ahead of them.

"I thought you wanted to walk," Ginny said when Joe steered her toward it.

"I... I want to sit," he mumbled, feeling like a complete idiot. Seriously, how did people do this every day?

Ginny blinked at him several times but allowed him to pull her to the bench.

"Joe," she finally said after they stared out at the river for a minute, watching the lights of the city dance on the surface. "What's going on in your head tonight? You've been jumpy and all out of sorts the past few days."

"I have been," he jumped in, too enthusiastically. His hand was still sweaty and Joe rubbed it on his jeans before reaching for hers. "Do you remember the first night we came down here?"

She nodded and settled back into the bench. "Like it was yesterday."

Joe licked his lips nervously and took a shaky breath. "I asked you about who you were."

"And I had no idea then," she said with a fond smile. "I was still wrestling with how I was going to tell you the truth, if you'd even want me in your life..."

"I felt like such a hypocrite asking you that," he admitted, smiling, "because I had no idea who I was."

Ginny was quiet for a minute before she looked over at him. "What about now?"

"Now," he sighed, "I'm still not sure, but I do know a few things." She nodded and he took a breath. "I know I love you."

"That's a start." Her smile stretched gloriously and Joe had the urge to kiss her again, but he forced himself to hold back.

"I know that I don't want to be without you." He looked out over the water, smiling when she squeezed his hand. "I know that I can't be what, or who, I once was... but that I want to be a better person. I want... I want everything, Ginny," he admitted in a whisper, turning to her as his hand delved into his pocket.

"I want to go back to England." His words shocked her and she sucked in a breath, looking at the ring that lay in his palm. "But not without us making a promise to each other."

"Joe, are you..."

"I'm asking you to marry me," he said, staring down at the ring, rather than watch her face. He just couldn't seem to convince his eyes that they needed to be looking at her.

She was quiet for a minute before she took the ring and placed it on her own finger. It had looked so small in the jewelry store when he bought it, and he felt bad for not being able to give her

something more. But today, on her hand, it looked perfect.

"I already told you I would marry you whenever you asked," she answered, leaning forward until their breath mingled, but their lips still didn't quite touch.

"Hearing the answer would be nice," he pleaded, his heart twisting.

Ginny chuckled and nodded. "Yes, I'll marry you, Joe."

Relief swelled in him and he launched himself at her, wrapping his arms around her and laughing as they kissed clumsily. The bench was soon abandoned as Joe lifted her into his arms and spun in a circle, laughing and kissing and... happy.

"Did you really think I wouldn't?" she asked when he finally set her back down.

Joe stared at her, his thumbs tracing her jawline and cheeks softly. "I had no idea what you'd say," he admitted. "I think my brain stopped working the minute I decided to ask you."

Ginny laughed again and threw her arms around him, planting kisses all over his face. "You're a git, you know."

"Probably," he shrugged. "If only I knew what that was."

"We're getting married," Ginny said, awe in her voice as they rocked side to side, foreheads together.

"And we're going to England," he sighed, reality trying to break into their little bubble again.

Ginny must have felt it too, because she nodded, her hands holding just a little tighter to him. "We're going to be fine."

Joe closed his eyes and reached for the feeling between them, pushing the bad thoughts out. He wasn't going to let them have this moment. This moment was *theirs*.

\* \* \*

"You're really leaving?"

Pearl's question made Ginny nearly drop the entire fifth she was putting on the shelves behind the bar.

"What?"

The woman looked stricken as she leaned on the bar. "I just overheard Joe telling Sam that the two of you are going to England."

Ginny blinked at her and then looked over at the doorway that led to the kitchen. She and Joe had told everyone they were engaged, but not that they were leaving. They hadn't even talked about a date to leave. But she knew it would probably be soon—that proverbial ticking clock still loomed over her. It was only a matter of time before someone from her family called again, or showed up.

Or worse, someone from the Ministry finally decided to check up on them.

This was the first indication that Joe had made a decision about their departure. And while Ginny was frustrated that he hadn't seen fit to talk to her about telling anyone first, her excitement that he *had* decided to face his past overrode all of that.

"We talked about it," Ginny finally nodded. She winced at the hurt look on Pearl's face. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but we hadn't fully decided when we were going yet."

Pearl nodded woodenly and moved around the bar to take one of the stools, leaning her arms on the bar and then laying her head down on them, still watching Ginny.

"I actually kind of expected it. Especially with you two engaged," she admitted. "I just hoped it wouldn't happen."

For the first time in a long time, Ginny felt the overwhelming need to reach out and hug a girl friend. She hadn't had many of those in her past, but Pearl had been wonderful, and fun, and bright.

"Joe's been like a brother to me," Pearl went on. "And you..." she trailed off, shaking her head and blinking suspiciously bright eyes.

"I'm sorry," was the only thing Ginny could say. She finished putting the bottles away and tossed the box to one side before taking a stool next to Pearl.

"Change is always hard," Ginny sighed, mirroring Pearl's pose and staring at her friend in the mirror behind the bar.

"I hate change," Pearl grumbled. Ginny chuckled, nearly rolling her eyes at Pearl's surliness. "I do!" Pearl insisted. "I'll probably stay here forever, long after Sam is gone."

"I like the picture of you and Max here in this bar forever," Ginny mused, smiling at the thought. She could easily picture them both with grey hair, serving drinks and po'boys, yelling at customers who had gotten too rowdy.

Pearl snorted and pressed her fingers into her eyes. "Max wants to get married," she mumbled. The slightly disgusted look on her face made Ginny laugh.

"You don't want to marry him?"

"It's not that," Pearl shook her head and sighed, spinning in the seat to stare out at the empty bar. "My mom married Sam when she was eighteen. Sam was older and... He's not my father, Ginny."

The news made Ginny's jaw drop. She had always assumed...

"Mom grew up in a small town not far from here. Her family was wealthy and kind of... elitist. But when she got pregnant by a boy she went to school with, someone they definitely didn't approve of her seeing, let alone having sex with, her parents threw her out. She came to the city looking for work and Sam offered her a job.

"I don't even know if she really loved him," Pearl said, shaking her head. "I mean, I know that Sam fell head over heels for her. They were married just before I was born, and told everyone that I was Sam's. And I know he's never thought of me as anything *ibut/i* his daughter."

"Have you ever thought about looking for your biological father?" Ginny asked.

Pearl scrunched up her face and shrugged. "Not really. I mean, there were times when I thought about it—usually after some fight with Sam—but I never really meant it."

"But you call him Sam?" It was something that Ginny had always wondered about, and now maybe her using his name, rather than saying 'dad' was more understandable.

"Sam will always be my father," Pearl protested. "The name thing came about when I was an early teen, and I decided that I could do things the way I wanted, rather than listening to what he had to say. It just sort of... stuck, I guess."

"I wonder if it bothers Sam," Ginny mused, imagining how her father would feel if she started calling him Arthur.

Pearl was quiet for a minute and started to pick at her nails, making the black polish chip off. "I hadn't thought about it that way before."

"So what does marrying Max have to do with all of this?" Ginny said. She didn't see the connection, even though she was fairly sure Pearl wouldn't have brought it up otherwise.

"Because," Pearl sighed. "Because I don't know if my mother really loved Sam, or if she just appreciated that he got her out of a tight spot. I don't know if she was truly happy before she died. I... I have to make sure I'm completely happy before I decide to do something as big as marry Max."

Ginny smiled slowly, shaking her head. "I never would have figured you for a romantic."

Pearl snorted and shrugged a shoulder. "I guess I am."

"There will always be a question of 'is there something better out there', because that's part of what makes us human," Ginny said carefully. "But I think wanting to spend your life with someone is less about whether you'll still love them as passionately in sixty years as you do today, and more about whether you will love them like that tomorrow. And then a string of tomorrows turns into that sixty years. I've seen you and Max together, Pearl. What you've got... that doesn't come around every day."

Pearl nodded and slipped her finger into her mouth, chewing away at the edge of it. "I guess so."

"It doesn't have to be right away," Ginny suggested. "Maybe the two of you can just talk about it."

"Like you and Joe talked about moving away?" Pearl snorted.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Just how much of their conversation did you eavesdrop on?"

Pearl grinned. "This place is fairly old. All the heating ducts connect together, and my apartment is right above Sam's office. I don't always listen in, but when I heard Joe's voice all serious and..." She

trailed off with a shrug.

"I left the decision up to him after I asked him to come with me," Ginny explained. "My family is all there and... And that's where we both belong."

"I understand," Pearl protested. "I really do, even if I have an impossible time picturing Joe as a proper English chap." Ginny grinned at the reference. "What if he had decided to stay here?"

"Then I would have stayed too," Ginny nodded firmly. "He and I..."

"You're in love," Pearl nodded. "I know that. You'll get married there?"

"With my family," she nodded. "Yeah. My mother would never forgive me if we eloped. It's going to be hard enough explaining all of this."

"I'm going to miss you," Pearl said, diving off of her stool and wrapping her arms around Ginny.

"I'll miss you too," Ginny said, returning the hug with a chuckle.

Pearl pulled away and blinked teary eyes before glancing around the room. "Now, we have a party to plan?"

"What?" Ginny asked, her mind not quite following Pearl's leap.

"Your going away party," Pearl rolled her eyes. "It's got to be spectacular. I think we'll put the band over there in that corner..."

Ginny shook her head and laughed as Pearl began rambling on about things she'd always wanted to do at a party.

\* \* \*

The button she pressed made a noise in protest and Ginny held the phone up to her ear before looking over at Joe, who was watching her with rapt attention, although his face betrayed his concern.

It rang four times before the connection was made and a very sleepy Hermione answered.

"Good morning, Hermione," Ginny said in an overly cheery voice. She'd counted the hours just right so that she was calling in the early morning—payback from Hermione's call a few weeks ago.

"Ginny?"

Ginny heard rustling around and Ron's groggy voice asking if it really was Ginny. "Good morning to Ron, as well," she chuckled.

"Is everything alright?" Hermione asked. "Are you hurt? Or in trouble?"

"Everything is fine, Hermione," Ginny said, reaching out to weave her fingers through Joe's. "Everything is... it's great, actually. I just... I need a favor."

Hermione was quiet for a minute before she cleared her throat. "I'll do what I can do, Ginny."

"I sent you a package a few months ago," Ginny explained.

"It's in our vault," Hermione said. "We haven't opened it yet, like you instructed in your note, although it's been a close thing a time or two."

Ginny chuckled, picturing Hermione's dilemma at not knowing what was in the box. She was sure it had driven her sister-in-law nearly insane. "You'll be getting a package in a day or two at your parent's home, when you do, go and get the first box. I want you to open it." The new packages she had mailed off just yesterday, to Hermione and Ron, the Shacklebolts and Trammel, contained the rest of her research material and her notes on finding Joe. "And pass this message along to Trammel and Kingsley too, will you?"

"What am I going to find inside, Ginny?" Hermione asked warily.

Ginny looked at Joe, who was biting his lip and pretending not to listen, before answering, "You're going to find the truth, Hermione."

The line was quiet for a long time, although Ginny could hear Hermione breathing.

"Are you coming home?" Hermione asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Ginny heard Ron swearing in the background, but couldn't tell if he was excited at the question, or perhaps he had fallen out of bed.

"Yeah," Ginny said, winking at Joe, who looked content, although slightly green, at their decision. "Yeah, I'm coming home."

\* \* \*

"Tonight was fun," Ginny sighed against him and her face pressed further into his chest.

"It was," Joe agreed, kissing the top of her head and letting his eyes trace the outline of New Orleans in the early morning pink light.

"It's beautiful up here," Ginny mused, her hair ruffling in the breeze.

Joe smiled guiltily and shifted. "This is where I came that night when I left. I... I like to be up so high." Her hold on him tightened reflexively. "Although now that I know I can Apparate, it makes it a hell of a lot easier to get up and down."

She laughed and looked up at him. "I'll bet. Merlin, I can't wait to get you on a broom."

Joe chuckled. Riding a broom, and playing Quidditch, were a lot of what Ginny was excited about showing him back in England. And that was fine with Joe, once she had him convinced that he would actually enjoy riding a broom, the idea of flying very much appealed to him.

"Pearl really went all out tonight, didn't she?"

"I knew she would," Ginny groaned. "I kept telling her that it was too much, but..."

"Pearl is all about excess," Joe dismissed with a fond smile. He would really miss Pearl, and Max, and even gruff Sam—who had literally cried tonight over their departure—when they left. They were the first people to treat him as friends, rather than someone they would never want to get close to, and they would always hold a special place in his heart.

"Sam cornered me tonight," Ginny said with a laugh. "He tried to talk me into staying here to get married. I think he just wants the chance to walk someone down the aisle. Pearl is resisting all of Max's efforts to even talk about getting married."

A smile spread over Joe's face, remembering his and Max's trip to a custom jeweler the other day to commission a one-of-a-kind ring for Pearl.

"He'll convince her soon," Joe confirmed.

"You know something," Ginny accused softly, digging her fingers into his side and making him squirm.

"Nothing I can tell," he replied, kissing her nose. "I made a promise."

"But we're leaving," Ginny pouted, "I won't even get to hear anything about it."

Joe gave in without much fight. "Max bought a ring. He'll wear her down soon and they'll probably elope that same night."

Ginny smiled brightly and burrowed back into his embrace.

"I never thought someplace besides England could feel almost like home," she muttered.

Joe's chest tightened as he agreed. "I know. I don't remember a place feeling like that, but... still, this place feels... like it has a magic all it's own."

"Exactly," Ginny yawned. "You're going to love the Burrow, Joe. It's so... warm and wonderful."

Joe nodded but didn't say anything. He was more than a little nervous about meeting Ginny's family, not to mention all that they had planned when they returned. He'd heard enough of the one-sided conversations between Ginny and that man Jasper to know that he was busily arranging things to happen rather swiftly once they got home.

"We can come back here one day," he assured them both, not sure if he fully believed the words or not. They made him feel better to say, so he did once more.

"Yes, we can," Ginny said.

They were both quiet as the red sun peeked up over the horizon fully, bathing them in orange-pink glow that they needed to blink against. It brought with it a new day; a day they would be going home.

# Interlude: Pages

Hermione stared at the mobile phone in her hand, watching as the light went out, leaving only that small bedside lamp glowing. It cast a warm yellow circle of light on the bed and down onto the floor, highlighting the red hair of her husband.

Ron, who had never risen from the spot where he'd landed on the floor, peered up over the edge of the mattress, his blue eyes wide.

"She's coming home?"

Hermione blinked several times before taking a deep breath. Her hand fell into her lap and she nodded distractedly. So many things were running through her mind that it was hard to focus on just one of them.

"When?"

"She didn't say," Hermione said, finally taking a large breath to clear her head. "We need to go to Gringotts."

Ron blinked at her several times, one eyebrow rising slowly. "It's three in the bloody morning."

"I know that, Ronald," she huffed out, pushing the covers off her legs and sliding her feet to the cool floorboards. "I didn't mean right this minute, although I would if I could."

"The package?" Ron asked, finally untangling himself from the sheet and standing up.

Hermione blinked at his long frame and rumpled pyjamas. "Ginny said it was time to open it."

Ron nodded, his eyes staring into the darkness of the room. "Did she say—"

"She said we'd find the truth," Hermione shrugged. Part of her wanted to storm into Gringotts right now and demand entrance. Ever since that package had arrived at her parents' house, Hermione's skin had literally been crawling to get inside it. Only Ginny's carefully worded note could have deterred her at all.

And so she had delivered the package to their vault the next morning, all the while wondering—even fearing—what it contained.

It had been a nerve-wracking several months.

Thankfully, time had helped in that regard, allowing Hermione to forget for longer and longer chunks of time that there was a mystery waiting, wrapped in plain brown paper and sent from the United States. She once even went two whole hours without the urge to march into the bank and tear into it.

Ron had been much calmer and rule abiding about the whole situation than Hermione liked to admit. Was this the same man who had run around with Harry at Hogwarts, breaking every rule they

could simply to do so? Where was that sense of adventure now?

She even wondered if Ron had been privy to more information about what was going on with Ginny than he had let on. The idea was ridiculous, however. If there was anything to share, she knew he wouldn't keep it from her.

"We're to contact Kingsley and Trammel, as well," Hermione said, moving toward the wardrobe. Three in the morning or not, there was no way she was going to be able to sleep now.

"You really think she's done it then?" His voice was small and, for just a moment, Hermione saw him as a vulnerable, gawky twelve year old boy who had lost his best mate. The vision nearly broke her heart.

"I'm honestly trying not to jump to conclusions. Jasper was incredibly careful about what he told us—too careful, if you ask me." She ducked her head into the wardrobe, trying to hide her own tears from escaping. There would be time for that later.

"George checked into Jasper Doell," Ron said, amusement, and a hint of intimidation, in his voice. "He has some contacts in Europe that help us procure rather... questionable ingredients."

Hermione scowled at him, making his ears flame.

"The stories they told about that man..." He shook his head. "He makes the Ministry Hit Wizards look like bloody saints, I tell you."

Hermione's heart pounded and her mouth went dry. "Why didn't you say anything? We've been letting Ginny run all over who knows where with him, and you neglected to mention he might be... Is he a Death Eater?"

"He's fine," Ron defended. "We spoke to Trammel about it, he explained some of the things that we had questions about. Doell does the Ministry's dirty work. There's no one better for Ginny to have been with because he knows how they work and how to get results."

Hermione paled when she thought about what that might mean. Ginny had been traveling with a... with a killer?

"Besides, you know that we never have a say in what Ginny does anyway," Ron dismissed, sinking down onto the bed.

Hermione's clothing was in her hands, being crushed and wrinkled by the grip she had on them, but she couldn't do more than stare at it.

All the feelings that she thought she had a handle on—remnants of grief from Harry's death, the aftermath of learning how to live without your best friend in your life, worry over Ginny who grew increasingly distant, the agony of the few days before Ginny left for good, and grief all over again at losing another best friend—came back like a rough wave crashing on a rocky beach. Hermione's knees weakened and she almost made it to the floor before Ron's arms came around her, lifting her up and helping her to their bed. Her clothing lay forgotten on the floor.

"It can't be real," she mumbled over and over. The battle with the tears ended as they spilled over her cheeks and onto Ron's chest. He held her and rocked her, whispering soft words that made no sense.

Scene after scene of Harry rang through her mind. Losing him had ripped a part of her heart out that even building a life with Ron hadn't been able to fill completely.

The idea that that part of her had been out wandering the world somewhere, and that they hadn't *known*, made it hurt even worse.

"We can't jump to conclusions," Ron said, his own voice shaky. "Not until we've looked at what she sent us. She might just need help finding something—everyone knows you're the best at research."

Hermione forced a smile, appreciating his attempt at humor. "You're right," she said, swiping at her cheeks to dry them. "We don't know if it's... Harry. Or if it's something entirely different that she needs from us."

Somewhere, deep inside of her, a flame that had been burned out for years, lit.

\* \* \*

It had taken all that she had not to tear into the wrapping on the package the moment she had it in her hands. But Ron's arm came firmly around her shoulders and he urged her forward through the halls of Gringotts, his jaw set grimly. They passed Bill, who stood in the middle of the foyer, looking as intimidating as ever. He nodded once to them and they picked up their pace.

Outside of the bank, George fell into stride on Hermione's other side, the tip of his wand just visible in his hand.

"All clear so far," he said almost silently. "Dad and Perce have the floo connection between the shop and the Burrow standing open."

Hermione shuddered and wrapped her cloak tighter around her, shielding the bundle that she carried in her arms tightly. All it had taken was one floo call to George—the longest they could possibly wait was four this morning—and this whole operation had been set in motion.

Bill met them at Gringotts and the moment the big doors had swung open at eight he called in every favor he had to get them quickly to their vault without questions. George had paid Madam Malkin's and Quality Quidditch Supplies to announce last minute, spur-of-the-moment sales to draw attention away from the front steps of Gringotts and down toward the opposite end of Diagon Alley.

If Percy was at the shop, that meant he had been successful in tracking down the package Ginny had recently sent. Hermione decided it was probably better—especially since she could be incriminated if Percy had done something questionable to retrieve the package—if she didn't know the details. Despite his normally law-abiding exterior, they all knew Percy would do anything he could to help a family member. That lesson had come very hard to him, but he *had* learned it.

"There are too many eyes around," Ron grumbled. "Walk faster."

"You got the other two messages delivered?" Hermione asked, peering first at Ron and then George.

"Done," George said, his mouth pulling into a slight frown as he watched two people peering into the windows of his shop, looking rather annoyed that the closed sign was still showing.

"Round the back, then," he motioned them between two buildings and down a dark, narrow corridor.

"Thought you'd be coming this way," Bill said, stepping out from the shadows. "All clear."

"Apparate straight in," George commanded. "Pity we couldn't have just Apparated from the bank."

"Their wards have gotten stronger over the past years," Bill said, an eyebrow rising as he looked at Ron and Hermione. "Seems they don't like getting broken into."

"Then they shouldn't harbor criminals," Ron grumbled.

Hermione tilted her head to the side. "Technically, we're criminals," she observed, lifting the package higher in her arms, "if what I suspect is in this package is correct. The Ministry isn't going to like it one bit."

"Get inside," Bill bit out, his clipped tone offending no one. There was simply too much at stake to get upset about brusque tones.

Once inside the back room of the shop, Hermione hurried over to the floo, where Percy stood, a similar bundle to the one Hermione carried, in his arms.

"Any trouble?" George asked his older brother.

Percy's ears turned slightly pink and he blinked behind his horn-rimmed glasses. "Your money bag is considerably lighter, and I was forced to use a mild Obfuscation charm."

"Yeah, but you're authorized," Ron smirked, "which is why we sent you."

Percy opened his mouth, possibly to protest, but clapped it shut and nodded once. "Father is waiting on the other end."

"I'll go through first," Ron said, stepping in front of Hermione. "You come next, love."

Hermione nodded, impressed with the speed and efficiency this whole plan was showing. Normally, she would have insisted on planning everything out, measuring everything several times, and then once more, just to be sure. But Ron and George were good at this type of impromptu task, it seemed. She certainly couldn't argue with their speed and thoroughness.

The green flames following Ron died down and Hermione took a deep breath.

"In you go," George urged her, his eyes widening a bit at her hesitancy.

And for just a moment, Hermione was undecided about what to do. If she stepped through that fire, she was on her way to opening this package and discovering just what was inside. What if it was

something horrible?

'What if it's something wonderful?' her mind argued back.

The package suddenly became much heavier in her arms.

"Hermione..."

"Yeah," she nodded, taking a full breath and accepting George's hand to help her into the fireplace. Her eyes met his as he tossed the floo powder for her and she thought, perhaps, he understood completely why she was wary about going.

"The Burrow," she shouted out clearly.

\* \* \*

Ron thought for sure he was going to wear a hole in the floorboards in front of the kitchen door. His pacing had irritated Hermione and Percy enough that they'd banished him from the room.

And that was *before* they'd even opened both packages.

"Should have brought some Firewhiskey," George grumbled from his perch on the stairs. His arms were wrapped around his knees and Angelina sat next to him, rubbing his back every so often.

"I could go get some," Bill offered, his cheeks flushing at the glare Fleur gave him. "Just kidding..."

Ron sighed loudly and ran his hands through his hair again, wincing when several strands caught under his wedding band and yanked out. "I don't think I can take it any longer," he huffed, taking a step toward the door, and then freezing.

He knew Hermione would shout at him if he interrupted her study of the piles of documents that Ginny had sent back.

"Do you... do you think it's possible?"

Ron looked up at Angelina's question. Honestly, he didn't know what to think of everything. Over the past months—since Ginny had left—Ron hadn't allowed himself to even contemplate what Ginny was doing out there. A deep, dark part of him prayed she was searching for Harry, that he would actually still be alive. But the more logical part of him—the one that had taken over when Ginny had shown up at the Burrow, ranting about Harry being alive—scoffed at the idea.

He couldn't allow himself to think of Harry out there and alone, because the guilt that followed that thought was too overwhelming to deal with.

The lack of sound from the kitchen didn't help the situation and Ron was just about to pound his hand on the wood when it slowly opened, revealing an extremely pale-faced Percy.

He looked just slightly more animated than Nearly Headless Nick.

Now that the door was open, Ron could hear Hermione's sobs from inside and shouldered his way

past his brother, barely hearing the words that were whispered.

“Harry’s... alive.”

Hermione was sitting directly on the floor, a chair tipped over next to her and papers scattered around her. Her whole body shook with heart-rending sobs and Ron fell to his knees next to her, wrapping his arms around her head and clutching her to him.

The sounds of her crying almost blocked out the scream of his mother and George’s whoop of glee.

Those outside sounds filtered out as he rocked his wife, his own tears disappearing into her hair.

“How could we?” she mumbled, clutching his shirt with one hand. “How could we have believed the lies?”

“We didn’t know,” Ron excused, feeling the words burn his mouth as they left. “We *should* have known,” he amended them a moment later. “We should have listened to Ginny.”

Hermione cried louder and crumpled the small paper she held in her hand as she clutched him.

“He’s with Ginny?” Ron finally managed to ask. Hermione nodded against him and shifted, sliding the paper she was holding—which was really a photograph—into his hand.

Ron tried to look at it, but his eyes were too bleary with tears. He used the collar of his t-shirt to wipe them away and blinked down at the still portrait of Ginny with her lips pressed to the cheek of... of Harry.

It was Harry, laughing, his nose scrunched in that same way Ron remembered countless times over the years when he would smile.

Harry, whose green eyes looked on fire behind his thin glasses.

Harry, whose arms were wrapped around Ginny’s body.

“I’ll be buggered,” Ron mumbled, thinking there were no better words to describe how he was feeling. Because his heart was somewhere floating above his head now, doing the backstroke in thin air...

Surprisingly, Hermione snorted, rather than scolding him for his language. “We owe her one very large apology,” she mused, using Ron’s shirt to clean the wetness from her eyes as well.

“Maybe you do,” Ron said, feeling as if he was drowning, and yet could finally breathe again after all these years. “I wasn’t the one who stunned her.”

Hermione half-heartedly hit his chest and Ron slid to the side, rolling onto his bum rather than his knees, as they both stared at the photograph.

“He’s coming home,” Hermione said, her voice breaking in the middle. “Harry’s coming home.”

Ron took a long minute to be able to say anything again. “They both are,” he smiled.

The appearance of a silvery lynx in the kitchen next to them startled Ron. It leaped through the open kitchen door into the living room.

"I have Trammel with me, Arthur. We'd like to come through the wards." The deep voice echoed through the house, seeming to shake the very walls. But perhaps that was just Ron's imagination.

"It's Kingsley," Hermione said, even though it wasn't necessary. Ron knew exactly whose Patronus that was.

Hermione buried her face in his chest again. "It's not going to be the same." Ron wasn't sure whether her words were to convince him, or herself.

"No, it won't," he said finally. "But it's better than I've felt in years."

"He's not going to be the same."

"Neither of them is," Ron nodded, lifting the portrait again and blinking away more tears. "We're not the same either."

"I don't even know what to feel," Hermione admitted, huffing as she stared at the table just above them, covered with papers that stuck over the edges.

"Angry," Ron admitted. "Confused."

"Hurt."

"Jealous," Ron admitted, feeling his face heat. "Ginny got to save him."

Hermione gave him a sympathetic smile and reached up to lay her hand along his face. "Happy."

"Relieved."

"Just... happy," Hermione finished off, exhaustion leaking from her voice.

And, for the first time in a long time, Ron could feel true happiness again.

# Chapter 24: Landing In London

Ginny winced as the airplane jolted and her fingers wrapped tightly around the arm rests.

Joe chuckled. "Why don't you like airplanes?" he whispered, glancing around at the other passengers in the dark interior. There was the only light on, casting a pale yellow circle over the top of Ginny and illuminating the notes she'd been making on the file spread across her lap.

"I just don't," she said, rolling her shoulders as the turbulence stilled.

"I thought you'd like flying," he shrugged.

"It's definitely not the same," she shook her head. "I prefer Portkey."

"Can you Apparate that far?" Joe asked. He was fairly sure they'd had this conversation before, but his head felt... stuffed. So much was going on and his emotions weren't helping him to decipher it all. Between meeting Ginny's family and confronting the people who had done this to them—Joe wasn't sure which one was worse right now—his head was a mess.

Ginny had even talked about letting him see her memories of his earlier life once they got everything settled. She promised there was a special, magical, way for him to see them. It wouldn't be quite the same, but it would be enough.

"No," Ginny said, sighing and closing her file before reaching up and turning off the light. "Apparition is best in short jumps." She moved the armrest between them and snuggled into Joe's embrace. He welcomed her warmth and the comfort that she gave by simply being there.

"Try and sleep, sweetheart," he said, kissing her head lightly. "I know you were up all last night."

"I can't help it," she yawned. "I just keep going over everything in my head, trying to find if we've forgotten something or..."

"It'll be fine," Joe said. It felt like a lie rolling off of his tongue, because he wasn't sure it would be. In fact, he had no idea what was going to be happening by this time tomorrow, or a week from now. "At least for you. You might be running from a whole country, but I have to worry about all of your brothers, too," Joe mused, his worry almost eliminating the dark humor he was going for.

Ginny smiled slightly and clutched his shirt. "Oh please, they love you."

"We'll see."

He knew she was just as anxious for him to meet her family—again!—as he was, but for probably very different reasons. Walking into Ginny's family home was just... Joe didn't even have the word for how it made him feel. Apprehensive. Terrified. Unworthy.

Similar words kept coming to mind and Joe shook his head, pushing them away. He knew Ginny was dismayed by his attitude, but he really didn't think it was too extraordinary. He really had no memory of these people, this life—and all of it was so important to Ginny. Mostly, he just didn't

want to disappoint her. What if he hated this place and couldn't get along with her family?

'Stop!' he commanded himself, cuddling Ginny closer to him and listening to her breathing even out and the slow hum of the huge engines beneath them. 'Everything is going to be fine. Whatever happens, Ginny's not going to walk away from what you have together.' His fingers found her hand on his chest, moving the engagement ring back and forth until Ginny's fingers closed softly around his. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the floral scent she always wore—something that was incredibly relaxing and almost hypnotic to him—and closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

Ginny and Joe disembarked the plane in the middle of the pack, and tried to blend in. It wasn't hard. Joe tugged the cap he wore down lower over his face and his eyes never stopped darting around, making Ginny pleasantly shiver at the reminder of just who she was with.

Despite the very rudimentary skills she had him practicing, Ginny was confident that Joe could protect them both if something were to happen. His stunning spells were colossal and his shielding was impenetrable—at least her attacks hadn't been able to get through the almost solid dome that appeared in front of him. And it would be even better if they managed to get a wand that worked for him, rather than the one they'd hastily purchased in Creole Town, New Orleans' answer to Diagon Alley. She was sure Hermione would have a dozen different theories about why Joe's magic was reacting the way it was—all in good time, she reminded herself.

"Think you can find them?" he asked.

Ginny nodded and lifted her rucksack fully onto her shoulders. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail and shoved under a hooded sweatshirt that a lot of the college kids in the States liked. She'd seen them all over New Orleans, despite the sweltering heat.

"Yeah, I know what to look for." Her hand flexed around her wand, which was hidden just inside the strap of her rucksack. Joe wore a similar one, which Ginny had charmed to carry all of his clothing and essentials. He'd stared at it for long minutes after she'd done the charm, and finally threatened to climb inside just to see how much it actually held, making her laugh.

He nodded grimly now and his hand fumbled for hers, giving it a quick squeeze before dropping it.

"So far so good," Ginny breathed, her eyes slowly canvassing the crowded terminal. Although she wouldn't fully relax until they were within the walls at the Burrow—and probably not even then—Ginny was able to take a deep breath. One step of their plan done—sadly, it was the easiest step.

"Come on," she urged him, tilting her head to the side to indicate which area of the airport they should move toward. Joe nodded and turned his head in a quick sweep of the area they were in.

Ginny was proud of him—granted, he'd lived the last few years on the run, worrying when someone might come and drag him back to Georgia—but Joe had really taken to her quick, and rather bodge job of Auror training. Perhaps it was just something ingrained in his very being.

Her eyes scanned the crowd in front of them once more and settled on a man wearing dark sunglasses and light brown hair sticking out from a strange looking hat. He had a homemade,

scrawled out sign that simply read 'Lucy' on it.

"Over here," Ginny muttered darkly, nodding the direction to Joe, who nervously tugged the edge of his cap down so that it shadowed most of his face. They wove their way toward Trammel, and passed him, watching for anything unusual. Ginny and Joe made a wide circle, Ginny searching for anyone who looked remotely like they were paying too much attention to the two American students.

"Morning Linus," she drawled as she came up behind him.

"That took entirely too long," he gruffed out, glaring at her from behind the glasses he snatched off of his face. "Come on then," he waived them forward. "I have a car waiting."

Ginny nodded and laced her fingers through Joe's. "Any problems?"

Trammel grimaced behind his 'borrowed' face and shook his head. "Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Even Dumber are around here somewhere," he waved his hand distractedly.

Ginny smirked, wondering if he was referring to Collins and Shepherd, or if he'd roped in Ron and George instead, for protection. The two telephone conversations she'd had with him, through Doell's mobile phone, had been very vague and rather frustrating. But that was Trammel in a nutshell.

"Please tell me you don't have any baggage," he sighed as they moved closer to the metal detectors.

"Only what we have on us," Ginny shook her head. Joe caught her eye and she tried to soothe away his concerns with a squeeze of his hand and a wink.

"Good," Trammel barked out, stuffing his homemade sign in a rubbish bin and glancing around before he pulled his wand from his sleeve. "Go on through. Collins is on the other side."

Ginny nodded as she and Joe set their backpacks on the conveyor belt. Joe looked more than a little nervous as he watched it go through the screening. He grinned when nothing inside set it off.

"Told you to trust me," she quipped.

"I do," he mumbled, looking around. "It's not *you* I worry about."

Rudy Collins stepped forward in an impressive black uniform with shiny gold buttons. "Mr. and Mrs. Brown," he nodded, his blue eyes sizing them up and staring at Joe longer than he really should have. "I... I have a car outside that will take you to your destination."

Joe tensed next to her and Ginny stepped forward just a bit. "Thanks," she said quickly, nodding at Rudy.

"Just get in the damned car," Trammel hissed from behind them, hurrying them through the last section of the airport. He glanced at a glowing green coin in his palm and swore, drawing the scowls of several people around them.

A long limousine pulled up beside the curb and Collins opened the door, motioning them in.

Once they were seated inside, Trammel on one side and Collins on the other, Shepherd navigating through traffic, his little black cap sitting barely on the top of his large head, Ginny turned to Trammel.

"Explain."

"You first," he quipped back, twisting his head so that his neck cracked loudly.

"That's disgusting, by the way," Ginny winced before sighing. "Linus Trammel, meet Joe Lucas... or..."

"Harry Potter," Joe leaned forward, staring intensely at the man. Ginny was surprised that he actually introduced himself that way. "Or so I'm told."

Trammel stared at him for a minute, ignoring the hand that was held out for him to shake. "My name is *inot/i* Linus."

Ginny rolled her eyes and smirked at Collins whose wide eyes hadn't left Joe's face. "Good enough."

"Are you really..." Collins' voice dried up as he looked between Ginny and Joe.

"Yeah," Joe shrugged, shifting uncomfortably. Ginny patted him on the knee and turned back to Trammel.

"Do I want to know where you got this?" she gestured toward the limousine.

"No," he answered truthfully with a grunt. "Do I want to know how many laws you've broken while out on your little quest?"

Ginny smirked. "No."

"Then we're even."

Joe chuckled next to her. "I like this guy already," he mumbled to Ginny.

"You should," Trammel said, staring at Joe. "I'm risking everything to do this for you both."

Joe looked as if he was torn between saying 'thank you' and telling the man to piss off. Either way, Ginny thought it might be amusing to watch.

"Here," Trammel thrust a familiar wand into Ginny's hand and she blinked at it. It had been polished recently, and the rich holly wood shown brilliantly. "Retrieved that just the other day."

"Who did they have in the box?" Ginny asked with trepidation as she handed the wand to Joe. The idea of them digging up the grave at the Burrow made her feel sick inside.

"No one," Trammel gruffly answered. "Transfiguration I suspect. We'll present the evidence as soon

as we have it all in line." His eyes went wide when a shower of brilliant red and gold sparks erupted from Joe's wand and skittered all over the interior of the car.

Joe grinned widely. "This feels right; even better than yours did, Ginny."

When she had time, Ginny wanted to remember this feeling, remember the sight of Joe holding his old wand, his face alight with the wonder that magic gave. But there wasn't time to reflect on that right now.

"What's the plan?"

Trammel sighed and scratched at his head. "I don't see why you couldn't have just let us handle this. Had to be in the thick of things?"

Ginny smirked. "I'm not really the wait-and-see kind of girl, now am I? And Joe doesn't care for the sidelines."

Joe grumbled something that sounded a lot like 'you bet your ass', but Ginny couldn't be sure.

Trammel growled low. He glanced at the coin again in his palm, sighing when it was a lighter yellow color. "We'll Apparate to the Burrow. Doell—remind me to kick you for somehow bringing that man into my life again—has been over there working on the wards."

Ginny chuckled and she glanced at Joe, remembering how Jasper's visit had completely rubbed him the wrong way in New Orleans. A confrontation between the two men wasn't what any of them needed right now. Joe insisted he was fine with Jasper, although Ginny wondered, because he still bristled at the mention of Doell's name.

"Don't worry," Trammel said, possibly sensing the animosity. "I've sent him on another errand right now. We've been trying to track down that Healer, Thiemann, but he's disappeared."

"It's not an issue," Joe shrugged. Ginny gave his hand a squeeze and he returned it.

"Good. Let's talk about what's going to happen over the next few days."

"Everything is in place?" Joe asked, leaning forward to stare at Trammel.

"Close," he nodded. "For now, don't make any plans to leave the Burrow—at all!" Trammel continued. "Until we have all the pieces in place, it's best if no one but your family know you're even here."

Ginny nodded, having anticipated that much already. "How long?"

"A few days... a week, at most," he shrugged. "We've been working while you were away."

"Doing what?" Joe asked, sitting up in his seat.

"Time to go," Trammel said, his mouth twisting into what passed for a smile. "I'll come by later."

Ginny took a deep breath and flexed her hand in Joe's.

"Ready?"

"Would you care if I said no?" he smirked.

"Of course I care," Ginny protested.

Joe sighed. "We *did* come all this way..."

"You'll live," she said as she kissed him on the cheek.

"Thanks," Joe mumbled. He nodded to Collins and then to Trammel before bobbing his head once in her direction.

"This is safe, right," he held up his hand as Ginny prepared to dual Apparate them. "Leaving from a moving car?"

"Don't know," Ginny smirked. "Never done it before."

\* \* \*

The world around them seemed a bit like a fairy-land, the way the sun shimmered in the leaves, dancing in the trees. The canopy of foliage cast a green glow all around the clearing and Ginny felt the silliest urge to spin in a circle, with her arms outstretched.

"Wow," Joe said, staring up at the branches, full with leaves. "It's beautiful."

"It's even prettier when it's just snowed," Ginny said, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing an excited kiss to his chin. "But I've always loved it here when it's all green like this."

"I've only dreamed of places like this," he said as they both stared up at the leaves, slowly rustling in the breeze. Joe smiled down at her, rocking her side to side. "I can see you as a little girl out here, laying in the shade and trying to see shapes in the way the leaves move."

Ginny laughed and shook her head. "More than likely I would have been on a broom, flying through these trees, but only if my brothers were busy somewhere else and I'd nicked their brooms."

Joe chuckled. "Why is that?"

She turned in place and laced their fingers together before tugging him forward, along the path that led to the Burrow, which she could just see through the trees. "Because they didn't ever want to let me play. I secretly think they were afraid I'd beat them." She sighed and Joe chuckled. "They were right; I would have."

"Flying on brooms," Joe said with a shake of his head. "It seems a bit... outrageous, really."

"No, it's brilliant," Ginny corrected him with a laugh. "And you were always the best at it. Really," she assured him when he made a skeptical face. "You'll see. When all of this is over, I'm going to take you up on my broomstick."

Joe chuckled and tugged her so that she was walking backwards with his arms wrapped around her.

"Shouldn't that be *my* line?"

Ginny laughed and scrunched her shoulders up when he pressed his lips to her neck. "You've more than shown me you're proficient with *that* broomstick."

Joe laughed against her skin, pressing kisses there before he pulled back, an intense look on his face. He glanced toward the Burrow that they could see clearly now.

"You sure we shouldn't have just gotten married?" he asked, his voice quivering as he asked.

"Joe?" Ginny stared at him, wondering what had brought this on right now. Yes, they'd decided to get married, but she thought he wanted to wait until all of this was settled first.

"Marry me," he insisted again, a crooked, although shy, smile lighting his face. His eyes darted toward the back of the house again and Ginny thought she might understand his motivation.

"I will," she nodded, leaning forward to kiss him. "I promise we will as soon as this is over. But just know you didn't have to ask again. I'm not going anywhere."

"Even if they don't think I'm right for you?" He looked down and wound their hands together, nervously playing with her fingers. "I just..."

"Joe," Ginny leaned forward and lifted his chin with her finger. "I love you. What happens here at the Burrow, or even here in England, isn't going to ever change that. No one is going to take that away from us again."

"They might," he suggested.

"You're right," she conceded. "They may try, but they're not going to succeed, because we're stronger together."

His lips pressed against hers and they kissed, slowly and methodically. Ginny wrapped her arms around his head and let him lift her up off of the ground just a little.

"I'm going to love you forever," he whispered.

"Not as long as I'm going to love you," she challenged playfully. They kissed several more times before Ginny slid down him and glanced over her shoulder at the Burrow. "Come on," she said, pulling him forward.

Joe ruffled his hair nervously but took several deep breaths and nodded.

Ginny needed to take similar breaths as they reached the back door. She clung to Joe's hand and reached for the handle. The kitchen was silent and seemed almost lonely when they walked in.

Joe's eyes went wide as he took it all in, a slow, nervous smile spreading across his face. "It's just like you described it," he mumbled, looking around.

"Except too quiet," she chuckled. "I'll bet they didn't know what time we'd be here."

He shrugged and continued to cling tightly to her hand.

"Ginny?"

They both turned as the door that separated the kitchen and living room cracked open.

"Dad!"

Joe dropped her hand, whether out of nervousness or simply because he felt that she might want to greet her family, Ginny didn't know. But she took advantage and flew at her father who caught her with a grin and a grunt of surprise.

"Oh, Ginny girl," he said, lifting her into a huge hug. "We've missed you so much."

His words brought tears to her eyes that Ginny cursed. "I've missed all of you so very much," she said. It seemed silly to be so emotional, but so much had happened during the months she'd been away that it felt more like years.

"I have someone you need to meet," she pulled away, backing up so that her father could fully see Joe.

"This is Joe, my fiancé."

Her father's face lit up with bewilderment and... something very deep. Ginny knew there was amazement, and grief, and love all mixed up in there somewhere.

She had no doubt the conversations over the past few days that these walls had contained were extremely emotional and intense. She almost wished she'd been a party to them finding out that not only was Harry alive, but that Ginny had found him and was bringing him home.

"It's good to meet you, sir," Joe said softly. His expression was tight, as if he didn't quite know what to say.

"Welcome home, son," he said, offering his hand for Joe to shake. "You can call me Arthur."

Joe smiled nervously and Ginny swore she could hear his heart pounding in his chest as he reached out and shook her father's hand, and then chuckled nervously when he was pulled into a short hug.

"Your mother... she was a bit too excited," her father finally said once he'd released Joe from the rather awkward hug. "She took a calming draught and is lying down."

"That's okay," Ginny said, swiping at the tears that were now flowing down her face. "I understand."

"We..." Her father shifted in place, his eyes roaming over Joe from head to toe and then starting again. "You can't imagine how we felt when Hermione told us."

"I'm sorry you couldn't have known sooner," Ginny apologized, tugging Joe toward the table.

"I'm sorry we didn't believe you," he answered, his eyes glittering with unshed tears. "I can never

apologize enough for how we treated you, Ginny. I'll always regret it." They all stared at each other for a moment more before Ginny hugged him again tightly.

"It's okay," she assured him.

"Here... lets all sit down," he motioned toward the table. "My legs are getting too old to stand forever."

Ginny and Joe took awkward seats at the table, their hands still linked. Joe stared around the room, his eyes narrowed as if he were trying to remember, or simply memorizing everything he saw.

"Do you... would you like some tea?" Ginny watched as her dad darted toward the cooker and began fiddling with the teakettle. "I think I can manage to figure this thing out."

His hands were shaking so badly that Ginny gave Joe a glance and then stood, placing her hands over her father's. "I can do this," she said softly. "You go and sit down."

Ironically, he looked almost as nervous as Joe did, sitting uneasily across the table from each other, both casting about for something to say.

Taking pity on them both while she filled the kettle, Ginny cleared her throat. "I expected the whole family to be here."

Her father shrugged. "We thought it best if we didn't overwhelm you and, er... Joe completely."

Joe smiled and nodded his thanks.

"That's probably a good idea," Ginny said as she set the kettle on the hob and tapped her wand to start it heating.

"When did the, er... engagement come about?" her father asked once she'd joined them at the table.

"Recently," Joe said with a small smile to her. His hand fumbled for hers and Ginny smiled at his nervousness. "We haven't had time to really make any plans yet."

"We wanted to be married here," Ginny added at the same time another voice spoke.

"Well, we can work on that while you're here."

Ginny's knees bumped into Joe's as they both turned toward the stairs. Her mother was there at the foot of them, staring openly at Joe while tears ran down her cheeks.

"Mum."

The words caught in Ginny's throat as she ran to her mother; they met in a consuming hug.

"You were right, Ginny," she whispered, and Ginny could feel her tears wet the shoulders of her sweatshirt. "I'm so sorry we doubted you."

"It's in the past," Ginny dismissed, wiping the tears from her mother's face.

"You must think we're all a bunch of crying babies, J-Joe," her mother said, pulling away and dabbing at her own eyes with a handkerchief.

"Ma'am," Joe said, standing and nodding his head toward her. He shifted about and Ginny was distinctly reminded of a twelve year old Harry, completely overwhelmed by the Burrow and the Weasley family, but belonging all the same.

"Oh, there'll be none of that, young man," she scolded and wrapped her arms around his chest. Ginny laughed at the panicked expression on Joe's face, but she couldn't help but think this was just what he needed right now.

Harry had taken a while to get used to the affection that the Weasley family easily doled out; Joe would catch on soon enough.

"You're family," her mother insisted while Joe patted her shoulder uncomfortably. "You always have been and you always will be."

Finally, Joe's face turned into something more relaxed and Ginny could have sworn she saw a smile play about the corners of his mouth.

"I appreciate that."

\* \* \*

"I wish I could remember this," Joe mused, annoyance and anger rolling through him as he stared down at a photograph of himself with Ginny alongside Ron and Hermione.

"That was a good day," Ginny said, resting her chin over his shoulder and looking down at it. "It was before you and I were together, though. We were just... enjoying the day, really. That was the summer before you discovered I was a girl."

"Yeah?" he asked, peering closer at it. "No, I could swear... look at the way I'm watching you." The picture Harry's eyes kept staring at the picture Ginny when the others weren't looking.

Ginny chuckled. "You had no clue what you were doing."

"Probably not," Joe huffed, letting his hand drop and then staring out over the edge of the bed where Ginny had helped him remove most of the contents of his old trunk.

"It'll get easier," Ginny said, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her face to his shoulder blade.

"I hope it does." Really, he couldn't have hoped for a better reception. But there had been this unexplainable fantasy he'd had ever since Ginny began telling him about his life before Lucas, that when he walked into this place, met these people and was immersed in this life that everything would flood back in; some wall within his mind would shatter and all of it would be given back to him. It was a stupid fantasy anyway, but Joe couldn't help but be disappointed.

"I told you my parents would love you," she said, rubbing his chest slightly.

"They seem very nice," Joe nodded. He meant it. But it was difficult to know what to feel right now, and how to interpret the way Ginny's parents had watched him. Perhaps they'd had the same dream he did about everything being set right when he walked in the back door.

He was grateful that they were allowing him to take steps at his own pace, rather than thrusting him into the center of family life, as he'd feared would happen. Ginny's parents even excused themselves when they could tell Joe was pulling more and more into himself, rather than participating in the conversation.

Ginny had decided it was the perfect time to take him upstairs for a bit of quiet time.

"You think they'll let us stay together," Joe asked, staring at the partially closed door for a minute, his fingers absently running along her arms. The idea of sleeping apart sounded horribly intimidating right now.

Ginny snorted. "I think they'd look the other way if you decided to shag me in the living room."

"Gin," he scolded, grimacing. "I don't mean for *that*. I'm not sure I even *could* with them just in the other room." The very idea made him shudder.

She chuckled and released her hold so that she could crawl around to climb into his lap. "I'll bet you'd be surprised at what you could ignore if you were properly... distracted," she said as she kissed his jaw and then moved toward his ear, nipping slowly.

"Gin," he protested through a clenched jaw, although his hands found her hips and clenched them. If she kept that up, he might just be able to...

"Do you think us having separate rooms would really stop me, Joe?" she asked, clucking her tongue at him and shaking her head, a giggle of happiness bubbling out of her. "I've broken into the French Ministry and countless other places. A locked door couldn't keep me away from you. You steal cars."

"Please don't tell that to your family," Joe groaned as he kissed her. That's *just* what he needed them to know.

Ginny chuckled and kissed him back, winding her hands into his shirt and gasping in surprise when Joe laid her backwards, right into the pile of photographs, Gryffindor uniforms, discarded homework and one Order of Merlin, First Class. His weight was on her a second later and they resumed kissing.

"We shouldn't be doing this," he mumbled, sucking on her ear as her fingers scratched lightly up his back. "Someone could walk in any time." The thought made him briefly pause, but then she slid her hand under his shirt and her fingers tucked under the edge of his jeans and onto the sensitive skin of his bottom.

"Let them," Ginny protested, arching her back when his hand wandered up under the edge of her shirt. Her soft skin intoxicated him and Joe's heart pounded in his chest. He quickly discarded his glasses and kissed her again.

"You'd think that Ginny would have the decency to close the door before she molests our newly discovered friend."

Joe pulled his lips away from Ginny and stared down at her, horrified at the voices behind them. He tried to pull back, but Ginny held him in place with her arms and her knees at his hips as she turned her head to look.

"Indeed, dear brother," one of who Ginny's brothers quipped, tilting his head to the side so that he could look straight at Ginny. "Although it does appear that *he* was doing the molesting."

"Shit," Joe cursed, burying his face in her neck for a second and drawing in a deep breath while they all laughed at him. Any interest he had in what they were doing a minute before faded as if someone had dumped a bucket of water on him, and Joe took slow breaths, willing his body to calm down.

"That's because I can be very persuasive when I want to," Ginny explained, holding Joe to her. "Don't you prats have anything better to do?" The amusement in her voice was evident.

"I can tell when I'm not wanted," the shorter man huffed, sounding affronted, but only joking—Joe hoped. "Honestly, we come up here to welcome you both home and this is the greeting we get."

The taller man chuckled, although his eyes were on Joe who had pulled back now and was rubbing his face harshly, his glasses dangling from one finger.

"Give us a few minutes?" Ginny asked, sitting up and sighing.

"Only if you don't go at it again."

Joe swore again and stared at the blurry floor.

"Take as long as you need," the taller brother said softly.

Joe groaned loudly when the door closed and finally looked over at her. "I told you it wasn't a good idea."

"Oh, don't worry about them," she dismissed with a wave of her hand. "They're both married; they know all about sex. Plus, they kind of know we had sex before."

"What did we do, announce it at a family dinner?" he grumbled, picturing the two men waiting outside the door to pummel him when he exited. No doubt they wanted to... hex his privates off!

Ginny laughed and struggled off the bed before trying to pull him up with her. "No, but that would be a good idea. Maybe we can do that tonight. 'Hi, everyone, this is Joe. He and I are engaged. *Aaaannnnddd... we have sex!*' "

"Ginny!" he groaned, trying to return to the bed. Maybe he could just crawl in here and pretend he was too tired to see anyone else. Maybe if he slept, he could wake up and start this day over, without making himself look like a complete pervert.

She laughed and planted her feet, hauling him back up. "Come on," she said, kissing his chin and

then his neck. "You'll live. Merlin knows I've walked in on everyone else in this family enough times. Plus, we weren't really having sex."

"Close enough," he grumbled. He sighed and tried to run his fingers through his hair, probably making it stand up even more. Ginny just smiled fondly at him. "I'm not sure I'm ready for this." His admission sounded more like a whine and he grimaced.

"You'll be fine," she assured him.

He nodded and mumbled the names of her brothers and their wives, praying he could keep it all straight in his head.

"You don't need to impress them, you know," she scolded softly. "They loved you back then and they'll love you now."

Her surety almost convinced him and he reached for her hand. "I can do anything if you stand right there beside me," he confirmed, more to himself than to her.

"Come on, lover boy, let's go prove that." She laughed when he pinched her bum on the way down the stairs, and then stared ahead unrepentantly. "You'll pay for that later."

"It's a date," he said softly as they reached the last landing and the crowded kitchen came into view.

\* \* \*

"Wow, so much for a quiet welcome," Ginny mused, staring down at all the faces that looked back up at them. Joe's hand clutched hers but he took a deep breath and nodded slightly.

"Hi," she said to the whole room. "Er... everyone, this is Joe. Joe, this is..."

"Everyone," he said softly, a tight smile on his face.

They hadn't made it very far off the stairs when Hermione bowled into them both, hugging first one of them and then the other. Her words were almost incoherent in between her laughing and crying.

Ron came up awkwardly, trying to pry his wife off Joe, who was patting her back clumsily and looking slightly green.

"Sorry about that." He finally gave up and let Hermione continue. "She says she's missed you," Ron said, shrugging one shoulder and smiling crookedly. His eyes didn't leave Joe as he groped for Ginny's hand, squeezing it tightly when he found it.

Hermione mumbled again and broke into a fresh set of wails, which caused Joe to open his mouth and close it again several times before patting again.

"And that you always did get into too much trouble."

Ginny snorted and wrapped her arms around Ron's chest, nuzzling her face into it. Everyone was chuckling now as Hermione continued to talk, garbled phrases that Ron felt the need to interpret.

“She, er... she says she’s going to kick your arse for not telling us what was going on at the Ministry, and...”

It was clear that Ron was grasping at straws now, but it helped to ease the tension in the room. Joe had given up on being awkward and simply wrapped his arms tightly around Hermione, returning the hug of a woman he didn’t remember.

Ginny’s chest tightened as she looked around the room. All the people she loved most were here. And they were smiling—some even crying—and laughing. Finally, *finally* she felt like she and Joe just might have made it home.

“She says now that you’re here, and done groping my sister, it’s time to eat,” Ron finished, wincing when Ginny ground her heel down on his foot.

“You just couldn’t resist, could you?”

“What?”

\* \* \*

Everything felt incredibly surreal right now, Ginny decided, as she looked around the table lit only by floating candles and the occasional firefly who wandered into the garden.

The colors were hazy and smudged at the edges, like an old painting, and the sounds were muted, filtering slowly into her brain. She peered at the red liquid that remained in the bottom of her goblet, wondering if George had spiked her wine with something to make her feel all warm and... wonderful.

The sound of Joe’s laughter, perhaps not as full as Harry’s would have been in the same situation, made her insides melt in happiness. She fumbled for his hand under the table and he wound their fingers together, like he usually did. He seemed much more relaxed tonight than she’d expected, and she was grateful.

Ginny’s family had been nothing but wonderful and she would be eternally grateful that they weren’t pushing for answers, or demanding explanations right now. Every once in a while she would feel the weight of someone’s stare, but as the night wore on and they listened to Joe and Ginny’s stories—his pulled much more reluctantly from him than hers—the stares had slowly evolved into looks of awe and wonder.

Ron was busy peppering Joe with facts about Quidditch, much to everyone’s amusement, while random questions burst out of Hermione periodically. Joe seemed to be handling everything well, answering what he could and politely ignoring what he couldn’t. His magic flared a few times in response to several probing questions and Ginny would simply pat him on the thigh and change the subject.

For now, it seemed that Hermione was content to listen as Ron gave Joe a full history of Harry’s exploits on the Quidditch pitch and Joe seemed actually interested, asking insightful questions.

“I can’t believe you did it,” George muttered from Ginny’s other side. “You... you really did it.”

Ginny turned, emotion suddenly overwhelming her. George's face looked even more blurry through the tears that rose in her eyes. "I did."

"How did it feel," George continued, his eyes darting over Ginny's head to Joe, "when you first saw him again?"

"Like heaven, and home, and perfection all at the same time," Ginny answered honestly. They must have been the words he was looking for because he nodded sharply and took a long drink from his wine.

"You'll let me know if you need anything to, er... be getting on with things?" he said, not quite meeting her eyes. "I think some of our products could be strategically placed."

"I think we can handle it," she chuckled, blinking away the emotion of the previous moment.

George's face spread into a slow grin and he laughed softly. "I wouldn't mind being there, you know."

"I know," she said. "But... you have a family George." Her eyes darted across the table to Angelina and the round bump of their child that was barely visible. "You can't be running around overthrowing governments."

He sighed and his shoulder sunk slightly. "Ruddy boring life I lead."

Ginny couldn't help but laugh at that. George's life was anything but boring, she imagined. "I know," she shrugged. "But leave the espionage and conspiracy to people trained to do it, yeah?"

He considered that for a minute, his face screwed up. "I guess... if I must. Can there at least be explosions? Even small ones?"

Ginny's laugh drew the attention of most of the table. "What's so funny?" Ron demanded, but Ginny couldn't stop laughing long enough to answer.

The mood, it seemed, was catching because sniggers turned into chuckles, which melted into belly-holding laughs, until everyone, even little Victoire, whose giggle was priceless, was wiping tears away.

Later that night as they cuddled in bed, Joe asked Ginny what had been so funny, and Ginny honestly couldn't remember.

"I'm just so glad to be home," she said, nuzzling her face into his chest.

"It does feel like home, doesn't it?" he asked, awe in his voice.

Ginny picked her head up and blinked at him in the darkness. "Do you remember something?"

"No," he sighed. "It just... it feels like home is supposed to be. It's stupid—"

"It's not," she protested, lying back down. "Home has always been more of a feeling than a place to me."

Joe's fingers traced her skin on her shoulder and he nodded. "You're my home."

# Chapter 25: It's Not My Time

The Burrow was quiet when Joe awoke in the early morning. The grey light cast strange shadows around the room he and Ginny were staying in and he studied them before deciding that he was never going to get back to sleep. Ginny shifted in the bed when he lifted his legs off the mattress and he stilled, wanting to let her sleep as long as possible. He knew she'd been very stressed about coming home.

Once Joe had forced his fears to the side, he'd actually enjoyed last night, sitting in the back garden and talking with Ginny's family. The stares and questions had made him very uncomfortable at first, but hearing Ginny laugh the way she had, and seeing the way her shoulders relaxed more than they ever had—well, Joe would go through just about anything to see that.

And the way she'd held him last night, clinging to him as they made love, her tears sliding down her cheeks as she whispered how much she loved him over and over again, replayed in his mind this morning.

'Thank you for bringing me home,' were her whispered words just as she drifted off to sleep and Joe felt them reverberate inside his own body as he wrapped around her.

This morning, in the light of day, he felt much less apprehensive about everything than he had been yesterday. Because it really felt as if *Ginny* was the one who had really brought *him* home—even if it was never a place.

Careful not to disturb her too much, Joe tucked the blanket around Ginny and kissed her forehead before he pulled on his clothing and went in search of a bathroom. The stairs creaked loudly and Joe winced at each step he took, praying that he could keep from waking anyone who had actually stayed last night. He was fairly sure Ron and Hermione had stayed, and possibly George and Angel—er... Angelina?—he thought that's what her name was, anyway. There were almost too many to remember.

He finally managed to locate the bathroom, but his hand groped along the wall and he swore softly, trying to find the light switch before rolling his eyes at himself and fumbling for his wand, trying to remember the spell for making it light up. His full bladder wasn't helping him concentrate, however.

"Er... Lumiare." Nothing.

"Luminos?"

The tip of his wand stayed dark and Joe sighed. "Light, damn you," he commanded, almost dropping his wand when it flashed brightly. He stared at it and scratched his head. That wasn't what Ginny had taught him, but perhaps, as she'd said, intent was everything. Giving up his mid-hall musing, Joe stepped into the bathroom happy that he'd now be able to see where he was relieving himself, rather than groping around in the dark.

Thankfully, the toilet worked as it should and Joe proceeded to step in front of the sink to wash his hands and splash water on his face.

"You've grown up well."

His fingers gripped the sides of the sink and he fumbled for his wand, gasping. But no one was in the room with him and he blinked back at himself in the mirror.

"You look so much better without the scar, dearie."

The cheerful, feminine voice made Joe startle again as he peered at the mirror.

"What the..." It seemed as if the mirror itself was actually talking to him. He slowly brought up his hand and gave a small wave, feeling incredibly stupid staring at himself.

"Well, hello to you as well."

Joe's shoulders slumped and he shook his head, blinking at the mirror. Trying his best to ignore the thoughts a talking, cognizant mirror brought to mind, Joe washed his face quickly and hurried out the door, praying there would be no more commentary.

"Off," he commanded his wand, pleased when it stopped shining. He wasn't sure what he was planning to do when he got downstairs, because he wasn't sure if anyone else was up, or what he'd do if there was someone awake. Maybe he could sit out on the back porch and watch the sun rise. He'd noticed a rugged bench of sorts out there last night. The idea of watching the sun rise here, in a place he had once called home, appealed to him. The urge to wake Ginny and have her join him was great, but he resisted.

"Good morning, Joe." Mr. Weasley—or Arthur, as he kept insisting Joe call him—was standing at the kitchen sink when Joe made it to the kitchen. "I hope you slept well."

Joe's face heated and he determinedly looked away, praying that the question was casual and not in reference to anything the man may have heard from their bedroom last night. Ginny assured him that she cast a Silencing Charm, but Joe's faith in that sort of thing was rather untested.

"I did, thank you."

"Ginny said you came in on an airplane yesterday," he smiled and Joe took a minute to really study this man. His face was year-worn, lined with wrinkles and the faint marks that may have been freckles once. The hair was almost gone on top of his head and barely red, but Joe was drawn to his eyes mostly. They were blue, like some of his sons', but creased with layers of lines that betrayed a hard, well-lived life. The kindness seemed to seep out of the soft-spoken man, just as Ginny had told him in stories.

"We did," Joe confirmed. "The first flight for me. Er... I think." The idea that he could find any amusement in a missing past was new—something he could thank Ginny for—but it seemed all right to do so now.

Arthur chuckled softly. "Airplanes... I've always wanted to learn about them."

"You should take a trip on one some day," Joe suggested, casting about for anything he could talk about. He just didn't feel comfortable since he had no base for a relationship with this man.

"Maybe I will," he smiled softly before turning back to watch out the window. "I've always loved to watch the sunrise."

"Me too," Joe said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Although... usually I'm just coming in, rather than waking up." A surge of fondness for Sam's caught him unawares and Joe had to take a deep breath to sweep it away.

"Ginny told me about the pub the two of you worked in," Arthur said. "It sounds like an enjoyable place."

"I'll miss it," Joe agreed. "But it was time for both of us to move on."

They were quiet for a minute before Arthur cleared his throat. "You and I had a conversation once—"

"I don't remember it," Joe said, scrunching his face and staring out the window at the light that was beginning to glow.

"I know," Arthur nodded. "If you'll indulge me, I'd like to have it again."

Joe thought about it for a minute before shrugging. He was sure it would be something along the lines of 'don't hurt my daughter' or 'maybe the two of you should be married before you sleep together' kind of thing. But, if Mr. Weasley felt it needed to be said...

"You always had such a special place in this family. I know you don't remember it, and that's okay." Arthur spoke to the window and his words were low, but Joe could still hear them perfectly. They made his chest ache in a pleasant way.

"There was a time when I would have imagined what happened to you was the worst thing ever." Blue eyes met Joe's and he was stunned at the depth of the emotion there. "And I would never compare my pain to yours, but losing a child—losing *two* children like we did—well, I can't even begin to describe what it feels like. And to have you back again—so in love with our Ginny..." Joe felt his face heat, but he smiled despite his embarrassment. "I can honestly die a happy man, Joe."

"Sir, I..."

"You're good for her, Joe," Arthur nodded, his eyes bright. "And she's good for you. I can't imagine the hell you've gone through—either of you, really—but you've found each other again."

"I'm in love with her, sir."

Arthur chuckled and Joe was taken aback. He hadn't imagined a declaration of love for Ginny would bring laughter.

"That's exactly what you told me last time we had this talk, Joe."

A soft laugh escaped Joe and he shook his head. "If it was true then, it's even truer now."

"I don't doubt it," Arthur nodded with a satisfied smile. "No matter what happens out there," he said, nodding toward the window, "hold on to each other. The love you share between you is the

most important thing there is."

"I will, sir," Joe promised around the lump in his throat. "I didn't get to ask your permission before I proposed to Ginny—"

"You have it," Arthur nodded. "You've always had it."

\* \* \*

"How can you not be nervous?" Ginny accused, pacing back and forth and glaring at Joe, who was sprawled out on a sofa in Grimmauld Place, his eyes taking it all in.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Seems to me the worst is over."

Ginny rolled her eyes and chewed on her fingernail before ripping it out of her mouth in disgust. It was a habit she needed to break. But at times of stress, like today when she was facing the whole Order—or what was left of it—and their friends and family, she found herself nibbling on each of her nails methodically, chewing them until they bled.

"How can you possibly say that?" Ginny demanded, flopping next to him and stuffing her hands under her thighs to keep from chewing her nails off. "I've only got to go in there and face people I've known for most of my life and tell them that not only am I not crazy, but that the Ministry is corrupt. And, to top it all off, the person that they thought had been murdered really wasn't. Surprise!"

Joe laughed at her hysterics and reached out to pull her into his embrace. "Ginny, calm down," he commanded softly. "Your family knows now. They trust you and love you. And... despite the fact that I was an absolute... idiot... last night—"

"You *were not!*" Ginny defended with a roll of her eyes.

"I really feel like I fit in. For once in my life."

His words wiggled their way past her nervousness and Ginny sighed, burrowing into his embrace.

"You always say just the right thing to make me love you all the more," she said, making him chuckle.

"It's a gift," he said, kissing her head.

"You're really not nervous?" she asked, looking up at him.

Joe sighed. "As callous as it sounds... no. These people might have meant something to me once—hell, they might again one day—but I don't remember them, Ginny. So, it won't really upset me if they don't believe who I am or what we have to tell them. Because I can live without them. You, on the other hand, I *can't* live without. And your family falls in there too. I wanted to make a good impression because they love you; they're a part of your life, Ginny, and since you've agreed to marry me, they're now a part of mine. So, I was more nervous about them."

"That makes sense," she nodded, seeing his point. "But we need these people if we're going to take

down the Minister and his followers.”

“Which would be wonderful,” Joe protested, “but not entirely necessary.”

Ginny sighed. Again, he had a point. “It’ll be over soon, and then you and I can run away. We can get married—”

“That’s the best part,” Joe grinned. “Say it again.”

“I’m going to marry you,” Ginny obliged, lifting her head up to kiss him.

“I like the sound of that.”

“Do you two *ever* stop?” George sighed dramatically from the doorway.

“Bugger off,” Ginny growled, kissing Joe one more time.

“They’re ready, little sister,” George chuckled. “Should I just tell them you’re too busy?”

Ginny sighed and gave Joe one final kiss. “Wish me luck.”

“You won’t need it,” Joe said, slumping back against the sofa.

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Ginny took a deep breath before putting her hand against the cold wood of the kitchen door. They always had these meetings in the kitchen, she mused, remembering how she used to throw dungbombs at the door back when she was fourteen and not allowed to participate.

“Hi, everyone,” she greeted the full room, surprised to see so many faces. The room surely had been expanded with magic to fit so many people, including Hagrid, into it. Several people waved and smiled, while others narrowed their eyes and searched her—probably intent on finding some obvious sign that Ginny was a big time narcotic potions dealer now.

“Er... thanks for coming,” she said, rocking on the balls of her feet. “I don’t know how much you’ve been told...”

“Just the basics,” Trammel gruffed out. His chair was tipped precariously back against the wall, teetering every so often on the back legs.

Ginny nodded and took a deep breath. She found Ron and Hermione in the crowd, both of them giving her winks and smiles of confidence.

“I’m here today to try and get your help.” Best to get right to the point, she decided. “The Ministry is corrupt, or at least parts of it are.”

“Why should we believe you?” someone called out from the back. Ginny couldn’t tell who it was, but several people scowled.

“I can’t make you believe me,” Ginny shook her head. “All I can do is tell you what I know, what

I've seen and witnessed. I'm sure some of you think I'm a nutter. And that's okay," she chuckled softly. "There have been plenty of times when I thought I was myself."

Several people shifted, but no one said anything, so Ginny continued. "In late 1996, there were two Unspeakables working on a project in tandem with several other governments around the world," she said, reciting what she'd pulled together from various sources over the years. "They were studying the effects of long term memory charms and even memory removal."

"Memory charms can be broken, can't they?" Dean asked. "There was that one woman... Jenkins or something—"

"Jorkins," Ginny's father supplied. "Bertha Jorkins."

Dean nodded. "Yeah. I remember Harry telling us about how Voldemort had broken through memory charms placed on her."

Ginny smiled at him and nodded. "They can," she agreed. "But what they were studying was the effects of layering memory charms, as well as removing the memories first before the charms were placed. It's really complex, and to tell the truth, I didn't fully understand all of the research when I read it." She glanced around the room, glad that everyone was at least letting her speak. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed a little.

"They called it Project Lucas, and it was held in the States, on a military base over there. Not a lot is known about it, really, but I've met one of what we believe is the first survivors."

Ripples of whispered questions ran up and down the room, but Ginny simply raised her voice over it. "His name is Marius, and he was from South Africa."

Her eyes met Jasper's and he nodded, either confirming what she was saying or giving encouragement.

"You said survivors?" McGonagall asked, her small jaw locked in what Ginny assumed was distaste.

"We think there may have been several deaths because of the rigorous potions and charms used, as well as the methods they used to break those charms. We have witnesses to at least one death, but no others yet."

"What does this have to do with our Ministry?" someone else called out.

"The Project seemed to be going well," Ginny explained. "But they wanted candidates who had stronger memories to overcome. Like Marius, they were often times political dissidents; people they felt it was safe to make disappear."

Several people seemed as if they were following where Ginny was going. Shock and disbelief painted the rest of the faces.

"So they took people," Ginny said simply. "And erased who they were."

"And our Ministry was complacently obliging," Trammel growled, glaring darkly into the crowd,

although Ginny got the impression it was an overall glare, rather than directed at one person.

She took a deep breath and prepared for the climax of her story. "They took Harry Potter," she said, her soft voice ringing like a loud claxon in the room. Chaos erupted and arguments started, people banging their fists on the long table, people crying and others shouting over the top of everyone else.

In the middle of the room, Kingsley Shacklebolt stood slowly, his one eye traveling over the crowd. He stood silently until everyone was now looking at him.

"She speaks truth," he said, his voice hoarse and grating. "Harry was alive when they did this." He pointed to his face and Ginny watched Andromeda slide her pale hand into his darker one. "He was alive after I was attacked. I remember."

"They were supposed to take Kingsley also," Ginny explained. "He and Harry had stumbled upon corruption in the Aurors; corruption that the Minister is not only aware of, but supports."

"You'd better have evidence if you're going to go around making claims like that, Ginny," Ernie MacMillan warned from near the back.

"The proof is there," Hermione spoke up for the first time. Her words seemed to appease MacMillan for the minute, at least. He nodded, although it was slow.

"It's all hearsay anyway, isn't it?" Another man—one whom Ginny had seen around the Ministry, but couldn't remember his name—said. "We all saw Potter's body; all went to his funeral."

"We all bought into it," Ginny said, "that much is true."

"And where's your proof that they took him?" he asked. "What makes you think he didn't die exactly like they said he did?"

"Because I'm not dead," Joe said, stepping out from the doorway.

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Pandemonium erupted in the small kitchen, the noise level deafening.

"You do know how to make a dramatic entrance," Ginny complimented, reaching for his hand.

"I try," Joe sighed, wincing when George set off a loud bang with his wand. Trammel was standing in front of the two of them, blocking them from a few wands that were now trained on them.

"Sit down and shut the hell up!" he barked, glaring at everyone. "Let the lad have his say and then you can go insane."

Joe smirked at him as Trammel threw himself into the chair, making it screech across the flagstones.

"Is it really you, Harry?" Neville, who had been completely silent all evening, asked as he slowly stood.

Joe looked at Ginny and then nodded. "It's me."

"If they were stealing memories—"

"Prove it!"

"It can't be him..."

Joe held his hand up and waited until the voices lowered to just whispers. "I don't have my memories," he shook his head. "I don't remember anything before waking up at that military base. But... everything I do know, everything I've seen, has convinced me that I am Harry Potter."

Hermione stood and cleared her throat. "An Auror's magical signature is documented when they are accepted into the Academy. We compared Joe's signature to the one that was on file for Harry's—they match perfectly."

"Can it be forged?" Rudy asked. Ginny noticed that he avoided looking at her and Joe, but focused on Hermione instead. She wasn't quite sure what was going on with him; was he simply intimidated by Joe, or just jealous. Ginny knew he'd had a crush on her starting back when they were in training.

"No," Professor McGonagall said as she stood. "A wizard or witch's magical signature is like a fingerprint; each one is unique and has defining characteristics."

"What about using fingerprints?" Dean asked. "Or DNA?"

"We're looking into that," Hermione nodded.

"It's him," Ginny said. Exhaustion settled on her shoulders and she suddenly wanted to be anywhere but here. Maybe Joe had been right—it wasn't necessary for them to go through this.

"If Ginny believes it's him," Neville said, "then I believe it."

"So do I," Seamus said, standing and nodding toward Joe. "I doubted ya once, it won't happen again."

"I'm in too," Dean said. "Gryffindor brothers and all."

"I believe in ya, Harry!" Hagrid boomed from the back.

Joe shifted nervously next to her, but nodded his thanks.

"Where have you been all these years?" Cho asked softly.

"In the States," Ginny supplied at the same time Joe said, "Lots of places." They shared a smile and Joe continued.

"I got away from Lucas and ran. I lived lots of places the first year and then ended up in New Orleans. That's where Ginny found me." He squeezed her hand and in the middle of it all, Ginny felt a burst of affection toward him.

He didn't need to do this. For him, it wasn't really necessary to have vindication or revenge; it was enough for them to be together. Maybe he had been right. Maybe they didn't need all of this scrutiny and prying into their lives, let alone the risk they were taking by standing up to a force that had already ripped them apart once.

But he was willing to do anything for her, and if he benefited along the way by stopping the people who had hurt them all, then that was just something extra he could enjoy.

"You're amazing, did you know that?" she whispered.

Joe blinked at her, confusion and amusement at her timing written all over his face. He opened his mouth to respond but Ron's voice interrupted.

"So... what's the plan? Because we need to act fast before word gets out that you're both back."

Ginny and Joe both looked at Trammel, who seemed to be chewing on the inside of his cheek for a long minute before he stood.

"We need to strike hard and fast, take them down before they know what's happening."

"And how do we do that?" Joe asked.

"Surely you're not suggesting... vigilante style ruthlessness," McGonagall said.

"I'm suggesting whatever it takes to stop them from stealing people from their homes and their lives, Minerva," Trammel challenged back. "Of course we start by legal means, but if those don't work..."

"Could we use the press?" Ginny's father asked, standing, worrying the brim of his hat in his hands, and almost mangling it. "They certainly used it."

"That's part of it," Trammel nodded. "We have one reporter that will stand behind us and print what we need."

"As long as it's not Skeeter," Seamus called out angrily.

No one answered him directly but murmurs and even mild threats were growled at the name, making Ginny smile.

Joe's forehead was wrinkled in thought as he listened to everything around them. "What we need is a way to get the Minister to confess what he's done. Otherwise he'll figure a way to wiggle out of it; he's a politician, it's what they do best."

"I agree," Ginny said, adding her voice to several who agreed instantly.

The noise died down as Trammel rocked back and forth on his feet, his eyes intense as they stared out at nothing. "We strike tomorrow," he said firmly.

"What do we do if we're caught? Or we're not successful?" Neville said, looking directly at Joe, even though his question was general. "I only ask because I've got a family to worry about now." His

hand trailed over and rested on Hannah Abbot's knee, surprising Ginny. She hadn't heard that they'd been married.

"For those of you going—and I'll be hand selecting a team—it means possibly giving up everything you have, everything that you love. It means fleeing if things don't work, or suffering the consequences of having your memories altered, or taken completely."

A heavy silence settled over the room as people contemplated Trammel's words.

Surprisingly, the first to comment was Molly Weasley. "It's no different than when we stood up to Voldemort. We were risking our lives, the lives of our families, to do what was right then."

"She's right," Joe said firmly. "I'm not asking you to do this for me, because I don't need revenge for what they did to me. Ginny and I could be happy living away from England. But... if people don't stand up when something bad happens, if they just allow it to go on and on... then pretty soon they don't have any rights at all. Don't do this for me, or for Ginny... do it for yourselves, and your children. Do it for the chance to live in a world where it's alright to question authority and have a voice."

Ginny's heart beat loudly as she watched Joe step into the mantle of a leader—the one Harry had worn for so many years. Surely no one could doubt who he was at this moment, with his bright green eyes flashing and the magic nearly bursting out of him as he spoke so passionately about something he believed in.

"You'll have my wand," Kingsley said, standing, "for what it's worth." For a minute, Ginny thought Andromeda might stand as well, her whole body vibrated and she lifted off of her chair several times, but Kingsley blindly patted her shoulder and she stopped moving. Ginny breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that she needed to be there for Teddy.

"The Weasleys are in," Ginny's father announced. All of her brothers nodded firmly.

"I'll follow wherever yeh lead, Harry," Hagrid said. "Excep' I'll be one step in fron' of yeh."

Ginny had to chuckle and a swell of affection for this man, who had given so much, rose up in her. He'd protected them all so many times...

Seamus, Dean and Neville all exchanged looks before Neville stood. "The Gryffindor boys are all in. Whatever you need us for." He looked green as he said it, but Dean and Seamus smiled and waggled their eyebrows, seemingly itching for a fight.

"The Aurors will be the first in," Trammel nodded. "Let's get the rest of the plan laid out..."

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The silence of the house was eerie. Although, when you were used to living in the middle of the French Quarter, that never stilled, almost anything would seem too quiet.

Joe's chest rose and fell rhythmically beneath Ginny's fingers and he could make out her silhouette in the moonlight coming through the window.

It was well past midnight, but Joe couldn't make his mind still. The plans for tomorrow kept running in his head, replaying over and over like a film until they got all mixed up and mashed together into one jumbled mess.

It seemed Ginny was having the same problem as he was in sleeping. She shifted around next to him.

"Are you still awake?" Joe's whisper startled her and she sighed.

"Yeah."

His lips lifted into a smile and rolled toward her until they were face to face. "Worrying about it won't make it any better, you know," he murmured.

"I know," she said, scooting closer and burrowing into his embrace. "But I can't seem to stop thinking about it."

Joe pressed a kiss to her head and wound their legs together. "Let's talk about something else then," he suggested. "Take your mind off things."

Ginny nodded and Joe tried to think of anything but what was planned for tomorrow.

"Why didn't you want to see Teddy today?" she finally asked.

Joe sighed and rubbed harshly at his face. Immediately after the meeting at Grimmauld Place, Andromeda and Kingsley had invited Ginny and Joe to dinner with an offer to reintroduce Joe to Teddy.

"The kid has already lost so much," he said. "I... I just didn't want to have him lose someone else if things go badly tomorrow and we have to run again." Ginny opened her mouth to protest, but Joe pressed his finger to her lips instead. "Just in case," he explained. "I just can't see putting him through that. *if* everything goes well, then there will be time to get to know him."

Ginny nodded against his shoulder. "I understand now."

"It's not that I don't want to see him... but I also don't know exactly what I have to offer him." He'd seen pictures on the mantel downstairs of a vibrant little boy with bright blue hair, smiling and waving as he went about his life. He'd stared at them for long minutes, trying to imagine himself there as well, playing in the back pond with his jeans rolled up around his knees, like in one of the pictures with Teddy holding a fat frog up for the camera, but it was hard to picture.

"You have loads to offer him, Joe," Ginny scolded softly. "You're a wonderful man who has been through hell and back. And Teddy's a great kid from what I hear. Maybe... maybe you can both offer each other a little healing."

"Maybe," Joe said. Ginny must have been able to tell he wasn't convinced so she scooted up and rested on her elbow, looking down at him.

"Do you want to have kids, Joe?"

The question startled him and his mind jumped back to New Orleans and the little family in the park

once more. "One day," he said, shrugging his shoulder. "I... I can't say I've really thought *much* about it, simply because I didn't ever see myself with someone like you. And you have this... amazing family..." He wasn't quite sure why he hadn't told her about the park and the image of them as parents that seemed to be burned into the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite bring himself to say it aloud, as if saying it might jinx it and make it simply an impossible dream.

"Having a family wasn't something I ever really thought about, you know," Ginny admitted. "Although it was different for me. I never thought about it because I just always assumed it was in my future, you know."

"Not really," he said with a dry chuckle. Perhaps he had been that way once, but years of being on his own, dealing with the issues that Lucas had caused... Well, it wasn't something Joe could say he'd allowed himself to ponder much. They cuddled back together and were quiet for long minutes.

"It's going to go okay tomorrow, isn't it?" she asked.

The vulnerability in her voice made his stomach twist. He knew she regretted saying it, from the look on her face. She was worried about him and how he would deal with all of the pressure of the press and the prying eyes. Even if they wouldn't be fighting directly, Ginny had told him story after story about how he'd fought in battles. He didn't remember them, and it unnerved him. But he knew how to deal with things when they all went to hell and left you scrabbling for pieces. He'd been doing that for years now.

"I can't make you any promises, Ginny," Joe said finally, hating that it was the truth. "But I know we can't keep living in a world where people take everything away from us. It's time for us to start taking it back.

"It's time for you and I to live, Ginny—to really *live*. And we can't always worry about who might be around the next corner, or if one of us will wake up and not remember anything again.

"Until we take care of this, we can't even think about having a family, or what type of house we're going to have, or anything else.

"I wasn't sure of that before we came here; before we met your family and I found that I really do have a past."

His words seemed to sharpen Ginny's resolve and she nodded firmly. "We're going to go down fighting if that's what needs to happen."

"You bet your arse," he said, his fake British accent making her laugh. He let his voice return to normal as he stared at her, reaching out to brush his fingertips along her cheek. "They're not taking me down again, Gin. And I'll go through hell and more to protect you."

"I know you will," she murmured, pressing a kiss to his chest as they settled back down into the bed. "I believe in you, Harry."

The sleepy use of his real name actually made Joe smile. He still wasn't sure how everything was going to play out tomorrow, or if they'd need to flee the country to be safe. But as long as he had Ginny by his side, he knew he could handle pretty much anything.

The Burrow was in a state of chaos the next morning, people coming and going as they prepared to implement the plan.

Ginny watched with nervous anticipation, but also a growing feeling of frustration. She and Joe were being left behind. Doell and Trammel had argued for a long time yesterday about the merits versus the risks of having both of them there at the Ministry.

It had been Joe who stepped into the conflict and calmly suggested that it was probably best if he and Ginny stayed hidden away until everything was brought before the courts. Ginny was both relieved and disappointed. She wondered if Joe was worried about his fighting skills or hers, but he had taken her aside and lovingly wrapped his arms around her, whispering that sometimes the hardest thing to do was to walk away and let others fight for you. He'd never been able to do that before, but it was what he felt was right in this situation. Their fight would come later.

Ginny looked up from the breakfast she was supposed to be eating and pushed the untouched plate toward the middle of the table. Her eyes scanned the room, looking for Joe amidst all the others crammed into the kitchen. He hadn't eaten this morning either.

"Too nervous," he'd mumbled before lifting his cup of coffee to his lips. But he'd even pushed that away after a few swallows.

She found him across the room, talking to Kingsley.

Ginny stared at the two men who spoke in hushed whispers that she couldn't make out before George nudged her shoulder.

"You're too used to being the one who saves him," he accused with a knowing smile and a soft tone to his voice.

"I am not," Ginny argued petulantly, looking back over to where Kingsley's hand rested on Joe's shoulder and Joe nodded at something the older man was saying. His face looked much more settled than it had all morning; he even smiled.

"It doesn't always have to be you, you know," George offered. "Sometimes it's okay for him to save himself. Or for someone else to do it, as well."

Ginny wanted to argue, but she just couldn't, because what he'd said was right. She was jealous that something Kingsley was saying was having such a profound and calming effect on Joe, when she felt all she'd done was make him more anxious. It wasn't anywhere near a logical thought, but it was there anyway. And it made her feel guilty.

"Don't give me that face," George protested.

"What face?" Ginny shrugged, trying to smooth the scowl away.

George grinned at her and rested his hand on her shoulder. "The one where your forehead gets all wrinkled and your nose scrunches up—"

"It does not," Ginny said, purposely trying to straighten her nose.

"You know what," he said softly. "Nevermind... I missed that face while you were gone. You can make it anytime you want."

She just couldn't be angry with him when he said it like that, and it caused her to laugh, drawing Joe's attention away from Kingsley.

How did George always manage to pull her away from her dark thoughts and make her laugh? It was a true gift that both he and Fred had been given, in spades.

"It's a good thing you're nearly as charming as you think you are, George Weasley," she threatened, "otherwise I'd have to hex you."

"You could try," he drawled out, moving away as she took a swipe at his arm.

Joe wandered back over and, instead of taking the seat next to her, he took her hand and pulled her up to stand in front of him, his arms wrapping around her as his chin settled on her shoulder. Everyone who was going to the Ministry was starting to gather their things, making the room feel even more crowded and the tension palpable.

"It's hard to be the one who stays behind." Jasper's voice startled both of them and they turned to find him staring at them.

"Goes against everything I thought I was," Ginny chuckled. She glanced over her shoulder at Joe, seeing his jaw tight. She knew his instincts were fighting this too. They weren't made to stay home and wait for news; they'd always been in the thick of things.

"I know," Jasper said with a short nod. "You let us take care of you two for once." His dark eyes settled on Joe who, in that moment, seemed to want to abandon the plan in favor of jumping into the fray. His magic rumbled low as his arms clasped tighter around her and Ginny rubbed his skin gently, feeling her magic respond in kind.

"If something goes wrong..." Jasper trailed off and blinked, looking away from them. "If it goes pear shaped, I just want you to know I'll take care of it."

The way his eyes flashed worried Ginny and she stared at him. "Don't do anything stupid, Doell."

He smirked as if he had no idea what she was talking about. "I have a lot to make up for."

"Getting killed won't accomplish anything," Joe said softly.

"I lead a charmed life," Doell said, his face stretching into a grin. "Nothing can touch me." He held his hands up innocently and Ginny felt a stab of anxiety and fear. Somehow, she had the feeling this was the last time she was ever going to see Jasper Doell.

Joe's arms went slack around her and she lunged forward, catching all three of them by surprise as she wrapped her arms around Jasper's neck tightly.

"Are you happy?" he whispered.

"I am," she answered back, feeling tears threaten. "So much."

"That's all I need then," he patted her back awkwardly and then forced her away from him, clasping Joe's hand in a firm shake and then winking at the both of them.

"Self sacrificing bastard," Ginny hissed through blurry eyes. But Doell didn't respond; he just walked away, slapping people on the back.

"One day you'll need to tell me all about that man," Joe said softly, staring after him.

Ginny snorted out a laugh and shook her head. "One day."

\* \* \*

"The waiting is the worst thing."

Joe looked up from his spot on the back porch into the blue eyes of Ginny's brother, Ron. "It is," he agreed.

Ron folded himself onto the step next to Joe and shifted around awkwardly. "Usually it was you and I in the thick of things, with Hermione around to pull our arses out of the fire, you know."

Joe forced a smile. "I don't remember," he admitted. "But it sounds about right. I'm always in trouble."

Ron stared at him for a minute before chuckling. "I'm not going to get overly sappy, mate, but I really missed you."

Joe couldn't help but chuckle at that. He wanted to be able to say it back, because it seemed right, but he just couldn't yet. "That was pretty sappy."

"Wanker," Ron hissed.

Joe just blinked at him before a slow smile spread over his face. "Is that supposed to insult me?"

"Merlin," Ron groaned. "You don't even know a proper insult when you hear one."

They both laughed. "Guess you'll have to teach me all the best ones."

"And tell you all the best stories," Ron said, sobering.

Joe nodded. "I may have a few to tell you too." They lapsed into a much more comfortable silence and Joe's eyes found Ginny, as if they were a magnet drawn to her. She and her mother had taken Victoire and Teddy to the edge of the grass and were playing some sort of game where Ginny conjured shapes and letters in the air and the children loudly guessed what they were.

"Mum used to play that with us when we were little."

Ron's words floated toward Joe as he stared at Ginny, smiling happily. Every so often she would turn and look at him, her cheeks blooming pink before she changed the shape to the delight of the

children.

"I used to take the mickey when you looked at my sister like that," Ron said, nudging Joe's shoulder.

Joe simply smiled. "It didn't bother you? Ginny and I?"

Ron looked at him and pulled a face for a moment before it melted into a smile. "I couldn't have asked for a better person to fall in love with my sister."

"Twice," Joe put in softly.

"Yeah," Ron agreed with a shrug. "I guess it was meant to be."

"I do love her," Joe said, looking down at his hands and then back up at Ron. "I feel like I need to repeat that to all of you." The last admission slipped out and, even though it was the truth, he felt bad for saying it. It wasn't as if he thought they doubted him—maybe he doubted his own ability to make Ginny happy more than anything. But he was definitely going to spend the rest of his life proving that he could try.

"You don't," Ron said. "We can see it in the way you look at her; in the way you touch her." He scrunched up his nose. "Still don't like seeing the two of you kiss much, but I'll get over it."

Joe snorted and shook his head. He turned to look at Ron, who was studying his sister. "She's happy," he finally shrugged before looking back at Joe. "And you're happy."

"More than I've ever been," Joe nodded.

"That's good. Its all any of us can ask, really."

Joe sighed, feeling as if he'd passed some sort of test. "Maybe... maybe when this is all over... when everything is settled down, you and I can get a beer or something."

"A pint," Ron corrected with a smirk. "We'll go and get a *pint*. And I'll tell you about the time we saved Hermione from a troll."

Joe's eyebrow rose and he stared at Ron. "Troll?"

Ron laughed loudly, his head rocking back on his shoulders, drawing the attention of his mother and Ginny. "Yeah, a fully grown Mountain Troll."

"Sounds like a story I need to hear," Joe shrugged.

"Let's go see if we can rescue the sprogs from too much learning, give them a bit of fun today."

Joe smiled and nodded. "Sounds good." And it did. Keeping busy was a good way to distract himself from the fact that they hadn't heard anything from the Ministry yet. Ginny tried to tell him earlier that no news was good news, but her tone had been even less convincing than her face.

"Ever tossed a garden gnome?" Ron asked as they began walking toward the edge of the garden.

“Er... no,” Joe laughed. “But I’m sure you can teach me.”

Two loud popping sounds shot through the air and then it sounded like popcorn going off everywhere as people swarmed the field behind the garden, yelling and shooting spells all over the place.

Ginny’s mother screamed and tried to shield the children as one man in dark blue robes headed right for them.

“Bugger!” Ron swore and pulled his wand, shooting a jet of red light at the man.

Ginny had her wand drawn as well as she shielded her mother and tried to help them scramble toward the house where Andromeda was urging them forward. The kids were crying loudly and Ginny’s sister-in-law was screaming from one of the windows, foreign words flying from her mouth as fast as the spells coming from her wand.

Joe gripped his wand, flexing his fingers around it as his eyes darted, trying to find the best place he could help.

“Dammit!” Ron hissed as a spell caught him, slicing his shoulder. He pulled Joe down just in time as another spell whizzed over their heads, making a screaming sound as it went by. “Bastards are aiming to kill. Get back inside, Harry!”

But Joe didn’t answer. Something inside him raged as he scrambled to his knees, staring at the battle that erupted all around him. Kingsley was struggling with one man, attempting to direct his wand away from them while spells shot into the air. Arthur was dueling with another as the oldest Weasley son, Bill, took on two men. A handful of others, including Trammel and the two Aurors that had picked him and Ginny up at the airport, were fighting as well.

“No!” he screamed out as Ginny streaked past him, running to help her father. Ron got up, clutching his shoulder and followed after her.

Arthur went flying as a spell caught him in the chest and landed with a crunch of bones on the ground. Ginny huddled over him as Ron took up the fight with the man who had beaten his father.

“No!” Joe said, tripping forward as he ran toward Ginny. The spells she had taught him back at their apartment in New Orleans floated around in his brain and he forced himself to focus.

“Stupify!” he roared as a man ran toward Ginny, bearing down on her while she tried to stop the flow of blood coming out of her father. The jet of red light that shot out of Joe’s wand nearly knocked him backward with its force, but the attacker flew several feet away, crumpling to the dirt. Joe’s magic rippled through him, filling his insides with a burning determination to protect Ginny, above everything else.

“It’s Potter!”

Someone yelled and Joe flinched, knowing he’d just drawn the attention of the attackers right toward himself, Ginny and her injured father—exactly where they didn’t need it right now.

"Shit," Joe swore and tried to think of the right spell to do... His whole body felt like it was on fire as he stared at the men approaching.

"Protego!" he bellowed out, thrusting his wand in front of them and then falling to his back as a huge golden shield erupted around them. It extended out several feet from them and knocked the approaching men backward forcefully.

Joe concentrated hard, staring at the light coming from his wand; a continuous gold thread that flashed and danced.

Ginny swam into view above him and he could feel her hands on his face; her voice swimming toward him through a haze.

"Hold on, Joe. Keep the shield up."

He tried to answer her, but spots started to appear before his eyes and all he could do was stare up at the ceiling of shining gold above them before the spots melted together into black.

# Chapter 26: When It's Over

Ginny stared at Joe's prone form, lying in their bed, in their bedroom at the Burrow.

"It seems like this is all we ever do around him," Hermione said from the doorway and Ginny beckoned her in. "Wait until he wakes up."

"At least this time he's not seriously injured," Ginny shrugged, fussing with the blankets around Joe. "Just exhausted."

"Ron told me about the shield," Hermione said as she sank down to the edge of the only chair in the room. "He said it was... magnificent."

Ginny couldn't help but smile proudly. "It was. I've never seen one like it before. I'm not even sure if anyone could ever replicate it."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully and looked as if she were doing some sort of calculation in her head. "Harry's magic always was strong. And Joe seems to have a deeper connection to it than Harry did."

"I think it's from not being allowed to use it outright," Ginny guessed, reaching out to run her fingers along the side of his cheek, scratching his stubbly cheek with her fingertips. "He had to hide it for so long."

"Perhaps," Hermione said. "It's almost as if his magic knows how to react, but his brain is just trying to catch up."

"That's it, exactly," Ginny smiled. "Stealing someone's memories doesn't take who they really are. I told him that once," she said wistfully. "Joe's magic is still there, it's just hindered by what his brain thinks is possible."

Hermione sighed. "Whatever it is, I'm glad it helped today."

Ginny nodded. "How is Ron's shoulder?"

"Fine," Hermione dismissed with a wave of her hand. "Your mother sealed it right up. In fact, I think he's angrier that his lucky shirt got ruined. He acts as if he doesn't have four more of those ghastly orange shirts at home."

Ginny snorted and shook her head. "It's over now," she sighed, the weariness of the day—the Ministry, the attack, everything—pressing down on her. "It's finally over."

"Mostly, yes," Hermione agreed, reaching forward and gathering Ginny to her. "Everyone was so terrified when they came storming into the Ministry," she said, shaking her head. "They barricaded the doors to the Law Division until I assured them everything was fine. I thought my supervisor was going to stun me himself when I insisted on doing what I could to help."

"Has there been any word on Jasper?" Ginny asked, picking her head up. Like she'd feared, he had run headlong into the fray, taking on the Minister himself.

"You haven't heard?" Hermione asked, making Ginny look at her, praying that the worst wasn't—

"He'll be fine," Hermione said with a chuckle. "He's going to be recovering in St. Mungo's for a few days at least, but he'll be fine."

Tears sprang to Ginny's eyes and she turned her head away, swiping at them. "Stupid, bloody..." Her words died out and Hermione chuckled. "He didn't get to be a martyr after all."

Hermione shook her head. "I guess I don't understand."

Ginny shifted uncomfortably. "He's less than a saint, Hermione. I think Jasper viewed this whole thing—everything he did to help me find Joe—as his... penance of sorts." She ruffled her hair tiredly and sighed. "But I'm glad he didn't die. Maybe he can find something out there to live for."

"Maybe," Hermione mused in a thoughtful voice.

"Dad?" Ginny asked, yawning. She wasn't sure if it was watching Joe sleep or just the exhaustion of the day, but her eyes were starting to droop lower and lower.

"He'll be sore for awhile," Hermione winced. "He had a few broken ribs. But the healers patched him right up and sent him to bed. They said your spell work probably saved his life—that and Joe's shield. Your mother is in fussing over your father right now."

"Probably driving him insane," Ginny chuckled before another wide yawn made her jaw crack.

"You're exhausted," Hermione said. "Since your mother isn't around to do this, I guess it falls to me." She sighed, although Ginny could see a ghost of a smile playing there at her lips. Hermione stood and placed her hands on her hips in a classic 'mum' pose. "Get right into bed, young lady, and I expect you to get some rest."

Ginny couldn't help but snort and follow her directions, climbing under the thin blanket next to Joe and melting into his side. There was more she wanted to ask Hermione, but the questions could wait. "My mother would never tell me to climb into bed with a man I'm not married to, you know."

Hermione's mouth gaped and she opened and closed it several times before turning red and looking away. "Well, it's Harry," she shrugged, as if that explained everything.

Ginny's smile got wider and she curled around Joe, pressing her ear to his chest. "Yes, it is."

\* \* \*

Joe was warm and happy. He floated just on the edge of awake; enough to feel Ginny's heavy weight holding his shoulder down, to smell the scent of her shampoo mixed with something... smoky, but letting go of the last bit of sleep seemed nearly impossible, so he clung to it instead.

His dreams had been unsettling, but weren't the nightmares of the past. This time it was men wearing robes, bright flashes of light; but over it all, a calming, golden aura that made him feel completely confident and strong.

The realization of what that golden light was forced Joe to fully open his eyes, staring up at the

plaster-white ceiling. He'd done magic—real magic, not some silly trick where he floated a book around—and he'd protected Ginny.

While pride burst inside of his chest, anger lived there too. Why had he *needed* to protect her? How had those men come to be at the Burrow? His next worry was if everyone had survived the attack. He remembered Ginny telling him to hold the shield, but nothing after that. At least Ginny was here.

His head lolled to the side and he pressed a kiss to her head, unable to help himself. She mumbled something against him and the arm that was wrapped over his middle tightened reflexively.

"Ginny?"

It was as if someone flipped a switch inside her, turning her back on; her eyes flew open and a wide smile blossomed on her face as she grinned at him before peppering his face with kisses.

"You're awake!" she cheered softly. "Joe, I'm so proud of you. You really did it, just like I knew you could."

"I had to protect you," he said simply, trying to shrug his shoulder. It stung; pins-and-needles pain shooting through it where Ginny had used him as a pillow. "I wasn't going to stand by while they hurt you, or took you from me." His hand traced her cheek until he pulled her on top of him, kissing her deeply. "No one will ever hurt you while I'm here."

Ginny responded with an equal amount of passion and Joe was afraid they might get carried away when Ginny pulled away. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been asleep for days," he admitted after thinking about it. "It... hasn't been that long, has it?"

She laughed softly and fussed with his shirt, smoothing wrinkles across his chest. "No, it's only been part of a day. That shield... Merlin, that shield was amazing, Joe. I've heard about dome shields, but I've never seen one before." He blinked at her, not quite sure how to respond. To him, it hadn't been anything that amazing. He just did what he needed to protect the woman he loved.

"Is everyone okay? Your dad?"

"They're all fine," Ginny nodded. She laid back down in his embrace, running her fingers through his hair in a way that made him sigh in relief and desire. "A few bumps and bruises."

"Who were those men, Ginny? The ones attacking?" He closed his eyes, focusing on the gentle scratch-scratch of her fingernails on his scalp.

"They were two of the Aurors from the Ministry—the bad ones—and some of the potions dealers that they worked with." Her voice had just enough of an edge that Joe squeezed her shoulder, hopefully giving her enough strength to go on with the explanation.

"Things got a little... intense at the Ministry, I guess," Ginny continued finally. "The Minister put up quite a fight and Jasper was able to subdue him finally, but he was hurt in the process."

“Bad?”

Ginny nodded against his shoulder. “It’ll be a long recovery, I guess. And Trammel did well with Robards, the Head Auror. But the other two Aurors really involved, Williamson and Stinson, somehow either figured out what was going on, or had some sort of tip off, because they came straight here as soon as they got out of Bill’s still trying to figure out where the leak came from.”

She went quite for a minute, her fingers winding in the extra fabric of his shirt. “Rudy Collins was killed. Trammel said he didn’t suffer. I...” Ginny trailed off and Joe kissed her head, feeling horrible that someone had died.

It took a minute, but Ginny continued, speaking in a low voice. “Your shield distracted the attackers long enough that the Order was able to take everyone into custody. We had to stun Ron to keep him from going after the Aurors when they were bound on the ground.” She shuddered just a bit and Joe kissed her head once more, rolling in her embrace until they lay side by side, facing each other.

“When they came after you...” His words died out and he had to swallow past the lump of his throat. “I just knew they weren’t going to take you from me again. I had no idea what I was doing, but...”

“You were brilliant,” she defended, leaning forward to kiss him. “You did everything right, Joe.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t react fast enough. If I had, maybe your dad wouldn’t have gotten hurt or—”

Her finger pressed to his lips made him stop speaking. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard a more ‘Harry’ thing come out of your mouth, Joe.” She rolled her eyes playfully and moved up on one elbow, hovering over him. “I have to admit, I didn’t miss the martyr attitude. Let’s tuck that one away in the past, shall we?”

Joe wanted to protest that he was right, but her fingers found the edge of his shirt under the blanket and the tip traced his stomach enough to completely distract him.

“Feel up to closing the door and setting a silencing charm?” she asked as she leaned forward and nibbled on the edge of his earlobe.

Joe’s eyebrows rose high and he chuckled. “Maybe,” he shrugged. “I have no idea where my wand is, though.”

“Try it,” she challenged, giving him a blazing look that nearly set the whole bed on fire.

Concentrating only on the desire to be completely alone with her, he thrust his hand out toward the door. It slammed and made a squelching noise just as her lips met his.

\* \* \*

Some time later, Ginny curled into Joe’s embrace, her hand drawing lazy circles on his chest.

“Watching you jump into the fight like that today, and hold that shield, was dead sexy, you know,” she grinned.

Joe seemed to chew on that idea for a minute before he replied. "Yeah?" Even without looking at him, she could hear the smile in his voice.

Laughing, she lifted herself up until they were eye to eye. "Yeah. Although I don't think the others find your magic nearly as arousing as I do."

He snorted and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her down into his embrace. "Let's hope not."

"We should probably get dressed and see who's about," she sighed after they were quiet for a few minutes. "I'm surprised someone hasn't pounded on the door yet." She glanced over at it, only to burst into laughter. There was no door anymore. Where it had been was now a blank section of wall, slightly more brownish in color than the rest of the wall, but completely sealed. "What did you do?"

Joe sat up and peered at it, squinting across the room. "No idea," he defended. "I just wanted to be alone with you."

Ginny laughed harder and began to pull pieces of clothing from the floor, sorting them into piles.

"Is that sexy too?" Joe asked cheekily as he pulled his shirt over his head. "Me sealing us in here?"

"It's hilarious," Ginny said with a nod. "And a great way to make sure none of my family came in to interrupt us. As if they couldn't guess what was going on in here."

Joe's cheeks flushed and he stared at the underwear in his hand before pulling it on.

"But, yes, it was sexy," she said, standing and giving the crown of his head a kiss. "You're probably starved, exhausting yourself out the way you did with that shield."

"Does magic usually do that to you?" he asked sincerely, running his fingers through his hair and fumbling his glasses onto his face. "If so, then we'll probably be spending a lot of time in a sealed room."

Ginny rolled her eyes and tugged him off the bed. "No, it doesn't work that way all the time. Huge spells, like the shield you did, will probably drain your magical energy quickly, while other spells you won't even be able to tell you've used any energy at all."

He nodded thoughtfully, hopping on one foot to slide his leg into his jeans. Ginny stared at his rumpled hair, his pink cheeks and his unfocused eyes. It was horribly distracting how attractive he was. She had no doubt that one of her brothers, if not all, would take the mickey forever for Joe sealing them in. But the time together was what they needed to get past what they'd just gone through. They needed that small affirmation that they were alive and together.

She'd let them have their laugh, but she wouldn't let anyone make them feel bad for being together. Both of them more than deserved it.

"Come on," she said, reaching for his hand and tugging him toward the door. "Think you can undo it?"

Joe stared blankly at the wall. "I have no idea what I did. How do you expect me to fix it?"

Ginny laughed and pulled him toward the window. "Let's try this way." A wonderful idea began to take shape in her mind and she wanted to see how he'd react.

"I'm not climbing out from the third floor, Ginny," he protested, pulling back on her hand.

"Who said we're climbing?" she asked innocently, pulling his wand from his pocket and holding it out. "With conviction now," she said, opening the window, "Accio Cleansweep."

He stared at her for a minute before sticking his wand out in front of him. "Accio Cleansweep," he commanded, his voice strong. It only took a moment before something burst outside and a wonderful broom came sailing in the window. Joe's eyes bulged, making Ginny laugh. "Did... did I break something?" he asked, peering out the window.

"Probably put a hole in the broom shed," Ginny shrugged casually as she climbed into the broom. "Climb on behind me. I'll do the steering for now. But you owe me one ride."

One eyebrow arched perfectly over the edge of his glasses as he eyed both her and the broom. "Riding a broom," he shook his head slowly, but threw his leg over, his arms winding around her waist. "I'm riding a broom."

"Hold on," Ginny warned him before urging the broom slowly forward. They both had to lean forward almost even with the broom handle to make it through the window, but once they were out, Ginny let loose with a whoop of joy. Joe's arms flexed tighter around her as the broom sped up, but he laughed in her ear, the movement of his chest rippling along her back.

"I knew you'd love flying!" She looked over her shoulder to find him grinning, his eyes in constant motion as he took in the ground whizzing beneath them, how her hands gripped the broomstick, the fluffy white clouds in a bright blue sky above them, and everything else.

Slowly, his arms relaxed and she felt him really start to enjoy the ride. He let go fully as she dove, raising his arms behind her and whooping with glee when she finally leveled off.

"That is the best feeling in the world!" he crowed once Ginny had landed them in the back garden. "I missed it," he said, a bit of awe in his voice. "All this time, I had these dreams about flying, being able to just... soar. I had no idea what that was about. I thought it was some sort of strange metaphor my brain had come up with. But... it was really flying."

Ginny's chest tightened and she impulsively wrapped her arms around him, going up on her toes to kiss him. "It was flying," she assured him. She squealed when he wrapped his arms around her and spun them in circles, kissing her back enthusiastically while laughing like a mad man.

The fact that she'd only ever seen Harry let go completely like this a few times brought tears to her eyes as they laughed, and spun, and finally tipped over onto the grass.

"Thank you for showing me that," he said sincerely, kissing her once more. "Only being with you can beat that feeling, you know." His cheeks turned pink at the admission and she giggled.

"I feel the same way."

"Why is there a hole in the damned broom shed?"

They both looked behind them to see all of her brothers and father standing in the middle of the garden, their wands drawn.

Ron, however, was staring at the large hole in the middle of the door to the stone outhouse where the Weasley's had always kept their brooms.

"You frightened us, Ginny," her father said. There was no scolding to his tone, however. Ginny thought his eyes looked a little misty as he looked at the both of them, jumbled in the grass. "We heard someone scream."

"I'm sorry," she said, laughing as she and Joe untangled and stood up, brushing themselves off. "We, er... had a little problem with the door to the bedroom and..." She glanced at Joe and almost laughed at how red his face was, and the way he was intently studying his feet. "Decided we'd fly out the window."

"You broke the broom shed," Ron answered dully, as if he were just coming into the conversation.

"It can be fixed," Bill said, patting his brother on the shoulder and smiling knowingly at Ginny.

"What about the door in the bedroom?" George said, wagging his eyebrows. "Think you can fix that, Bill?"

"I rather like it as it is," Joe defended, taking Ginny's palm in his sweaty one. He blinked at her and then smiled, surprising her with how bold he was being.

It was quiet for a minute before they all burst into laughter, putting their wands away and trailing back toward the house.

"That was brilliant, by the way," Ginny whispered to Joe, who smiled nervously. "Don't let them push you around."

"They're going to cut off my—"

"No," she laughed. "They're not. They'll be fine. I think they're all impressed that you stood up to them."

He gave her a look that said he was doubtful his bits were going to survive her brothers, but she just pulled tighter into him. "Besides, they'll have to get through me if they want at those parts." She winked at him and Joe laughed. "I'm rather fond of them."

They were just sitting down to a huge spread of food that her mother had levitated to the table when Percy came walking in, his robes frayed and singed, and dirt smudges on his face.

"Had a rough time of it at the Ministry, Perce?" George asked, dodging a playful swat from Angelina.

Ginny started at his somber face, however. "What is it, Percy?"

Her serious brother stared at them all for a minute before he sighed. "The Minister... he committed suicide."

Everyone gasped and Ginny leaned back in her chair. Joe took her hand in his, peering closely at her. "All right?" she managed to mumble to him. He nodded and raised his eyebrow in question. "I... I don't know what to feel," she admitted.

Her father guided Percy to a chair and patted him on the shoulder. "He was in a holding cell," Percy explained finally. "The Wizengamot has been handing down arrest warrants and sending out summons all day long. We had to borrow owls from Hogwarts to keep up with everything. When Minister Winters got his summons to appear before them..."

"Weren't there Aurors watching him?" Bill asked.

Percy shook his head. "They've all been busy, rounding up potions dealers and trying to see how deep this conspiracy actually goes. There simply aren't enough Aurors to get the work done."

"Maybe they need me back in," Ginny said softly, ignoring the concerned look on Joe's face and the way he clung to her hand.

"No," Percy finally said, sighing. "Trammel said to tell you to stay put. After the Minister was discovered... Trammel found a hidden safe in his office. Everything was there, letters and paperwork, everything documented—the Wizengamot are there now, putting everything in order. Hermione said she'll probably be there all night, along with the rest of the Law Department." Ron nodded absently, as if he had already expected that.

"They've already noticed a huge drop in potions floating around," Percy said, reaching for a piece of bread and staring at it dully. "I can't believe they were so involved in that. I just... I can't see the motivation behind it."

"Greed," Bill grunted out. "Money from the potions. The weak being eliminated by dependence on the drugs." His eyes met Ginny's over the table. "A ready excuse to get away with anything they wanted."

They all contemplated that quietly, picking at their food. The sound of forks scraping and people shifting in their chairs filled the room.

"Did they ever find out why Winters did... what he did?" Ginny's mother asked, her eyes darting between Percy and Joe.

"I don't know if we'll ever fully know," her father said, patting Percy on the shoulder before moving to stand behind his wife. "My guess would be ambition and hatred—never a good combination."

"It doesn't really matter why." Joe's scratchy voice surprised them all.

"I guess you're right," Ron shrugged. "It's over now."

"Almost," Bill corrected. "There will be trials and hearings. And rebuilding the Ministry. Again."

"Trammel has been named Head of MLE," Percy sighed, rubbing his eyes under his glasses.

"Not a better man for it," her father defended when they all nodded.

"And Kingsley has taken over as Minister again," Percy said, a small, pleased smile spreading across his face.

"He'll do a wonderful job," Ginny said, feeling her throat tighten down.

"If he'd only stayed there, none of this would have happened," Ron grumbled.

"That's not fair," Ginny defended. "Kingsley was one hell of an Auror. Being stuck behind a desk must have been torture for him."

"He's a good man," Joe said softly. "If anyone can help recover from the mistakes of the past..."

"Here, here," George said softly. Silence reigned before Ron reached out and took a sandwich from a platter heavy with them. The movement startled them all, but then everyone seemed to realize that they were hungry at the same time. Dishes began to circulate and silverware clattered against crockery.

"What do the two of you have planned next, Harry? Er... Joe. Sorry." George asked, looking right at Joe and Ginny.

They exchanged a look and Ginny wondered what Joe was thinking when a slow smile stretched his face.

"I don't mind you calling me Harry; it's my name, after all."

Low chuckles sounded around the table and Ginny watched this man she loved more than anything as he slowly filled his plate.

"I think... I think we'll be planning a wedding," he said shyly, looking at her as his cheeks turned pink. "If you still—"

"I do," Ginny answered his question before it was out of his mouth, surging forward to kiss him.

Her mother gasped, making them all laugh. "I always will," Ginny murmured against his lips.

\* \* \*

Watching the crowd was like watching the ocean, Joe decided. They flowed in and out of the garden in waves, laughing and drinking, dancing and talking. Their smiles all blurred into a watercolor of movement after a while and Joe took a deep breath, leaning against a tree.

Ginny was out on the dance floor with her brother Bill, twirling around and around in his arms. The way she smiled—he could hear her laugh from here—made his chest feel tight, although extremely happy. She deserved to be happy after all that she'd gone through; they both did.

Sometimes it felt like years had gone by since they'd come to England, even though it was only two months. So much had happened between now and then that Joe wasn't even sure his brain could remember every detail.

The media frenzy that ignited around he and Ginny was overwhelming, and they tended to hide inside the Burrow more often than not. Bill and Ginny had woven spectacular wards all around the home to keep anyone who shouldn't be there out. And when they did go out in public, there were often a slew of photographs and stories that flooded the tabloids after.

Giving testimony before the Wizengamot wasn't something Joe hoped would ever happen again, although he knew that was wishful thinking; there were still the hearings in America to go through. At least they'd allowed him to only speak once, instead of calling him for each and every trial that took place. Ginny spoke several times, but she assured him that it didn't bother her overly. She'd even gone with Kingsley to Azkaban to retrieve Katie Bell and Oliver Wood. They both insisted that Joe wasn't in any shape to be near Dementors. After hearing what a Dementor did to a person, Joe agreed. He wouldn't have been able to handle that.

But, finally, it felt as if things were settling down. The wedding was over and he and Ginny were now married.

Joe's face split into a wide smile and he reached his thumb across his palm to brush against the warm metal of the ring he now wore. Being married, although it had only been for... three hours and twenty-six minutes, was brilliant. He and Ginny had already slipped away for a bit of private time, interrupted by Hermione who scolded them until she burst out in laughter at Joe's ruffled appearance.

He still thought of himself as Joe, and Ginny still called him that, even if everyone else had fallen back to calling him Harry. It just... worked better that way. It wasn't as confusing as he thought it would be.

Ginny's laughter rang out again, echoing through the trees that he was in now, on the outskirts of the celebration. The need to escape the crowd had been overwhelming and Joe simply slipped away into the night. He wouldn't stay long, but sometimes the whole family and friends thing got to be...

"It can be overwhelming at times, can't it?"

He spun on his heel, his hand automatically going for the wand in his pocket, but it was Molly who materialized out of the night.

"At times," he shrugged, smiling as she joined him, looking out over the dimly lit garden. Clumps of candles floated here and there, glowing fairies perched in bushes and plants, lending their light to the festivities. Overall, it gave a very calming, relaxed feel to the whole place.

"They're a boisterous, obnoxious lot," Molly sighed, her shoulder brushing his arm, "but they're mine."

Joe chuckled at her rather resigned tone and held up his left hand, wiggling his finger. "Mine too now."

Her face split into a smile and she nodded, her eyes suspiciously bright. "That's a good thing."

"It is," Joe agreed, watching as Ginny danced around the floor, Teddy in her arms. Her white robes swished back and forth, skimming the ground. To Joe, it looked as if she were floating elegantly around the dance floor, like some sort of angel, or mythical creature that he didn't know the name of yet. Whatever it was, she was gorgeous.

"Ginny used to dream about her wedding when she was little," Molly said, smiling fondly as she watched her daughter too. "She always wanted an outdoor one, just like this."

"She got what she wanted then." Joe smiled in satisfaction.

"Yes, she did." He shifted and felt his cheeks heat when Molly stared at him. "She always was one for going after what she wanted."

"I'm grateful, believe me," Joe said, ruffling his hair slightly. "If she'd given up..."

"My Ginny was never the 'giving up' type," Molly shook her head, turning back to watch Ginny mingle through the crowd, her head turning this way and that. Joe wondered if she was looking for him. He really should have told her he was getting some air...

"I never thought about my wedding," Joe said softly. "Never thought I'd ever meet anyone that I could love enough to *want* to be married. But then, Ginny walked into that bar... And something inside me just... knew."

"It's amazing how fast a moment can change your life, isn't it?" Molly asked in an almost-whisper. "You think you have it figured out, where you're going, what you're doing. And then it all changes..."

"That happened with you and Arthur?" Joe asked. He felt a bit silly asking, but he really wanted to know if anyone had the same experience he'd gone through—or close enough, at least.

"No," Molly answered, surprisingly, with a smile. "It wasn't Arthur. He and I were a gradual thing, actually. We fell in love at school and just knew we'd be together after. But that shocking moment when I knew my life had changed forever... that came many, many years later. It was another young man who walked into my life, brought into the kitchen by my sons one summer morning. He was horribly thin and painfully shy..."

Joe's face heated and he looked down at his feet, scuffing his polished shoe against the dirt at the base of the tree. He knew she was talking about him, but it still felt incredibly uncomfortable not being able to remember for himself any of the moments that other people remembered so clearly.

Ginny, and Ron, and Hermione, and the rest of the Weasleys, had all shown him as many memories as they could pull from their minds, so he had a fairly intense overview of his life from watching them. He hadn't been able to be in the room when they removed them from their temples, however; it was just too painful to watch the silver being pulled from them.

And knowing that he had destroyed all those memories in the flight from Lucas... Joe felt horrible about it. It was something that Ginny and he were still working on dealing with.

"But there was something about that twelve year old boy that just... it changed our world forever," Molly continued. "I felt it in that moment, and in a lot of the moments that followed in the years to come. You're an amazing man, Harry. And I always knew you'd change our lives."

"Not always for the better," he said, feeling incredibly... something. Guilty? There was that too, but he didn't remember the events he'd heard about, couldn't feel the intense emotion surrounding them, so that wasn't the feeling exactly. Perhaps 'strange' was the only word that really fit.

"The path we have to walk in life, Harry, isn't always pleasant," Molly said, patting his arm gently. She suddenly looked older, more like a mother who had lost so much over the years than the cheerful woman of just a few hours ago. "Our family chose where we stood, and we always chose to stand with you. The costs may have been high at times, but... love is always the right choice, Harry."

Her soft words made his heart race and his eyes found Ginny again. She'd seen him on the periphery of the garden and smiled knowingly before moving off to speak to another group of people.

"Love is always the right choice," he repeated, the words burrowing into him in a way that warmed him all over.

They stood quietly for a few minutes, enjoying the warmth of the night and the sound of people finally happy.

"When do you and Ginny leave?"

Joe was startled by the question and he guiltily searched for the right answer. "Tonight," he answered, feeling as if he was deceiving her a little. "Bill arranged for a villa in France..."

"And where to after that?" she asked. Her eyes bore into him and Joe knew that she had at least an idea that he and Ginny weren't coming back anytime soon. "I know my children, Harry. All of them. I know the two of you need time alone to heal from all of this. Time away from the cameras, and the stories, and the staring."

"I don't know how long we'll be gone," he shrugged.

Molly smiled softly and patted his arm again. "But you can come home now whenever you want. No more running. No more hiding. Just..."

"Just living," Joe filled in with a smile. "Just the two of us, living."

"As it always should have been." She nodded knowingly. "I'll explain to everyone."

\* \* \*

"May I have this dance?"

Ginny turned, her smile spreading widely as she nodded to Kingsley and took the arm he offered, allowing him, in his slow shuffle-step way, to lead her onto the floor.

"Thank you for coming today, Kingsley," Ginny said as they swayed slowly to the song. She knew he

had a hard time moving fast these days, but he seemed amazingly better than he had been last year.

"My pleasure," he nodded. His face twisted into the grimace that passed for a smile and Ginny had to sigh at how far they had both come. "You are happy."

It was a simply statement but it drove right into her heart. "So are you," she complimented, glancing over their linked hands to see Andromeda watching them fondly.

Kingsley's chest rumbled and he too looked at Andromeda. "Owe it to you."

"You don't owe me anything, Kingsley," Ginny denied. "I only wish I could have done more in those early weeks to help you. If I'd known what was happening to you or what they'd done—"

"Not your fault," Kingsley grunted out softly, holding up a thick finger to her. "You were my friend, Ginny," he said. The sound of his scratchy voice didn't bother her anymore, like it once had. Instead, she ignored the scars and rather shocking appearance he had in order to see a man who had been her friend, who had risked everything to help her.

"That means more than anything," she nodded, understanding exactly what he meant.

"You gave me life again," Kingsley said, a surprisingly tender look coming into his eye. "Never thought I'd have a family."

Ginny's eyes flooded with tears and she smiled. "Your family is wonderful, Kingsley. Andromeda and little Teddy."

"You and Harry," he nodded, including them in the sentiment. "We are family."

"We both appreciate that," Ginny nodded. They trailed off into silence for a minute, swaying to the music until it ended. Kingsley pulled her to his chest in a rough hug, and Ginny held him for a minute, silently apologizing for what he'd been through.

"Go build your family, Ginny," he said softly, kissing her head softly and then walking away, toward his wife and Teddy who was covered in chocolate cake and smiling widely.

Ginny laughed at the scene as Kingsley lifted Teddy into his arms and poked his large finger into the little boy's belly, making him squeal with delight. His hair flashed bright blue for a minute and Ginny was forcibly reminded of Tonks and Remus. She had the distinct impression that they would be more than thrilled to see their son so well taken care of and so loved. Teddy Lupin was a little boy surrounded by love, and it made Ginny's heart nearly burst in appreciation.

"Have you saved a dance for your favorite brother?"

Ron's voice behind her made Ginny gasp and she swiped at the tears in her eyes before turning to him.

"I could probably manage to coax another dance out of my tired feet," she said, suddenly feeling the tiredness of the day catch up with her.

Ron studied her for a minute before holding his elbow out to her. "How about a turn around the garden instead? A little fresh air."

Ginny smiled and accepted his arm, suddenly loving the idea of getting away from the crowd. She glanced back over her shoulder to see Joe still talking with her mother near the trees. She'd be back before he could come looking; her mother was probably talking the poor man's ear off.

"That sounds perfect, Ron," she said, allowing him to lead her away to a quieter, darker area where a slow line of garden gnomes was now trying to sneak back in through the fence. When they saw Ron coming, they all squeaked loudly and scattered, making Ginny and Ron laugh.

"You look... really pretty today, Ginny," he said in a low voice, as if it surprised him that she actually *could* look feminine.

"Thank you," she said, tugging at his dress robes. "You clean up pretty well yourself, Ron. I always thought maroon was your best color."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Wasn't my choice, believe me. Hermione picked them out."

Ginny laughed and nudged him playfully as they sat on the edge of the low stone fence that separated the garden from the field behind it.

"I never said... thank you for... for finding him," Ron said.

Ginny stared at him, seeing his ears turn red even in the faint light seeping out from the celebration. "You don't have to thank me," she denied softly. "I set out for horribly selfish reasons, you know."

He smirked at her, but it faded. "I wasn't strong enough to see what you saw. I just... I just wallowed in my grief and buried myself in memories, rather than seeing what was going on around me. And then I was so horrible to you... not listening, not understanding."

Ginny was quiet for a minute. "Are you finished yet?" Her tone surprised him and his eyes bulged as he gaped at her, his mouth hanging slack. "Feeling sorry for yourself, I mean."

Slowly, the anger in his expression slid away, leaving a slightly amused look. "You never let me get away with anything."

Ginny sighed and laid her head against his shoulder. "I know how you feel, Ron, but it's in the past. It's time for us all to move on and start to live."

He nodded jerkily and Ginny could see there was so much more that he wanted to say.

"I tried to join the Aurors, you know. After you left."

Ginny gaped at him, pulling away. The idea was just... ridiculous! After all that she'd been through, to have Ron step into that dragon's den of a Ministry... "I would have come back to strangle you, you know," she shook her head.

"Trammel cuffed me along the back of the head," Ron shrugged. "Called me a whole lot of names I

didn't even understand and then told me to stop being so bloody stupid as he set fire to my paperwork."

Ginny snorted at the mental picture. It sounded exactly like something Trammel would do.

"I was kind of jealous that you were out doing something while I was... stuck here, being watched and minded like some sort of child." He chaffed under the suggestion and squirmed in his spot. "I just wanted to do something."

"I can only imagine how hard it was, Ron, being on the outside. I would have..." she trailed off, knowing she would have done exactly what he did if *she* had been the one left behind.

"But it was *you* who needed to find him," Ron said finally, firmly. "You always understood him better than the rest of us. And I think that's what he needed right then."

"He could use a best mate now," Ginny offered. "Joe is... he's going to be hard to get to know again, Ron. But he's really trying."

"I know," Ron said, the side of his mouth quirking up. "I think he had fun at the pub the other night."

"He did," Ginny smiled. "I'll bet you didn't think he could drink all of you under the table." Watching Joe help her slurring, stumbling brothers in the back door of the Burrow that night had been hilarious. Joe had been more than a bit pissed himself, but Ginny knew from working alongside him in New Orleans that he knew how to pace himself through drinking.

"I was rather impressed," Ron shrugged. "For such a skinny blighter, he sure can hold his drink!"

Ginny laughed and shook her head as they lapsed into comfortable silence.

"I'm sorry for not talking with you about things," Ginny offered, feeling years of guilt spill out of her now that it was all over, "when it all happened. It was wrong of me to hold it all inside and... and not try and help anyone else."

"I think I understand," Ron shrugged. "We were all doing whatever we could to just stay alive then. I didn't write to you, or try and get you to talk to me either."

They were quiet for a minute and Ginny glanced back to see that Joe and her mother were no longer in the trees. Maybe she ought to try and find him. If he was as tired as she was...

"I'm going to apply to the Aurors again," Ron said out of the blue. "I... I think it's time for me to do my part."

She couldn't help the thrill of fear that went through her, but it died out quickly. Kingsley and Trammel were doing a lot to turn the Ministry around. Perhaps Ron would make a good Auror.

Ginny had no idea what she and Joe were going to do with their lives. They'd talked about it generally, but their plans to travel for awhile were going to come first. Their Gringott's account was still full, and they had plenty to live off of for a long time. Perhaps while they were traveling they

would stumble on something that would interest them. Until then just being together sounded wonderful.

"I like the idea," she complimented, feeling the weight of Ron's eyes on her, searching for her approval. "Mum will have kittens."

But Ron's smile stretched wider. "She's going to love me," he shook his head. "Hermione's pregnant."

Ginny burst out laughing. "That's perfect, Ron. Tell her that first!" They both chuckled and Ginny slipped off the wall, throwing her arms around Ron's chest and squeezing him tightly. "I'm happy for you."

"I'm bloody terrified, to tell the truth."

"It's a big step," Ginny nodded, pulling away. "But I think you're ready."

Ron stood and gathered her to his chest once more, lifting her off the ground. "You should have one too," he blurted, inspiration striking him right then.

Ginny laughed loudly. "I don't think we're quite ready for that yet."

"Soon then," Ron urged. "They could go to Hogwarts together."

"Come on," she took his hand and pulled him back toward the party. "Let's go find our better halves."

Ron tugged her back and Ginny blinked up at his mischievous face. "George and I wanted to get you a wedding gift."

"You didn't have to," Ginny protested. "You've already given us so much. The money from the store—"

"This didn't cost us anything," he shook his head, his smile growing wider. "We wanted to get you something you could really use, that no one else would ever be able to get you."

Her curiosity piqued, Ginny tilted her head to the side. "What—"

He pulled her close to whisper in her ear. "Trammel's given name is Meriwether."

All coherent thought left her as the statement sunk into her, bringing with it a very evil smile.

"Don't ask how we found that out, we could both go to Azkaban for it."

"Merlin," Ginny gaped. "I... I don't know whether to laugh at the possibilities that you've just given me, or tell you to run for your lives if he ever finds out."

"Use the knowledge well," Ron said, waggling his eyebrows as he backed toward the party.

"I will, believe me," Ginny said, her mind filling with a hundred different scenarios in which she

could slip that little nugget of priceless information into conversation.

\* \* \*

"There you are," Ginny sighed as Joe appeared out of the crowd before her. He looked adorably rumpled and was wiping pale pink lip gloss off of his cheek. It seemed as if Victoire had gotten to him after all. The little girl had quite the crush on her 'Uncle Harry' it seemed, and followed him around everywhere, asking him all sorts of questions.

Joe took it all in stride and Ginny knew that he was secretly a little thrilled that Victoire and Teddy made so much of him as a person, rather than as Harry Potter. They idolized him because he played hide and find, snuck biscuits for them when Fleur and Andromeda weren't looking, built the best tree swings ever, and never seemed to get tired of pushing them back and forth.

"Sorry, just needed some air," he said, his arms wrapping tightly around her waist as they began to sway back and forth, dancing without even planning to.

"I missed you," Ginny said, smiling as she used her finger to wipe away the remaining shiny spot on his cheek. "I see Victoire got to you."

He chuckled. "Just as I came into the garden. She and Teddy wrapped around my legs. There's chocolate cake all over my trousers."

"Those two are a pair, I tell you," Ginny said, sighing happily. It was strange to think that her dreams were slowly starting to come true. How different her life was from just three years ago. Now she had Harry back—was married to him, in fact—and her family was here and well... Looking around, she saw most of them dancing only a few feet away. George and Angelina were swaying close, his hand caressing her round belly. Ron and Hermione were staring into each others eyes, both looking incredibly content.

"I told your mother we were leaving," Joe said, sounding incredibly guilty. His eyes didn't quite meet hers and she had to giggle at him. It wasn't as if they *planned* on keeping it a secret, they just hadn't found the right time to tell everyone.

"I knew she'd break one of us eventually," Ginny sighed.

Joe grinned at her. "You knew it would be me. I can't lie to that woman."

"None of us really ever could, you know," Ginny dismissed. She found her mother across the floor, dancing with her father, and fussing at his collar. She looked good today; happy and healthy. Her hair was almost completely gray now, and there were many more wrinkles than should be there... but she was smiling and laughing. "How did she take it?"

"She understands," Joe said, his fingers tracing the edge of her jaw. His eyes had that sort of unfocused look he got when he was completely distracted by something, and Ginny guessed that he was getting tired of being in the crowd and wanted to get to somewhere entirely private. Not that they hadn't had a brilliant time sneaking away just after the ceremony, but Ginny wanted long hours spent in bed, remembering every touch and movement that made Joe shiver and sigh in pleasure. "She said she'd explain it to everyone."

She nodded, laying her head just above his heart and drinking in the scent of him.

Three years to get to this point. It still seemed amazing. There were days when she awoke, terrified that all of it had been some horrible dream; that she'd stayed at the Ministry, believing their lies and had never found the courage to go after Harry. But then Joe would shift in bed next to her and reality would settle in, and Ginny would happily roll over and study the face of this man who was so brilliant.

Jasper danced by with a woman on his arm—a dark haired, Latina on his arm—and looking as if he'd never seen a day in hospital in his life, making Ginny smirk. She knew he'd been off tracking Aubrey Thiemann, trying to discover where the man had vanished to. But it looked as if he'd found time to meet someone new, someone he could bring as his date to the wedding. At least he was trying to enjoy life. She'd heard Trammel say he was considering having Doell teach either at Hogwarts, or more likely the Auror Academy. Ginny thought either sounded like a good idea. At least he wouldn't be getting himself into trouble in some foreign country; there was plenty of trouble to be had right here at home.

"Where do you want to go?" Joe asked, his fingers playing with the edge of one of her curls, making it spring back. "After France, I mean."

"I don't know," Ginny admitted. "It doesn't even really matter, I guess. Just... somewhere."

He chuckled and the sound rumbled underneath his ear. "Somewhere will be nice," he said, pressing a kiss to her forehead, "as long as we're together."

Ginny smiled and looked up at him. She lifted her hand and stared at the rings that looked incredibly perfect there on her finger. "I'm pretty sure... correct me if I'm wrong... but didn't we just promise to be together."

He laughed again, his fingers winding through hers. "I think I remember something along those lines, Mrs. Potter."

Ginny smiled. "I've waited a lot of years to be called that."

He kissed her then, sweet and full of promise. "I'll remember to call you that every day, then."

"It's a deal, Mr. Potter," she answered back. Joe's arms pulled her to him as he deepened the next kiss.

"I could get used to that too," he whispered against her. They kissed for several long minutes, playfully nipping and caressing, drawing more than one whistle and laugh from those dancing around them.

"Let's go, Joe," she whispered.

He pulled back, his eyes rather glazed behind his glasses. "I'm ready," he answered softly.

# Interlude: Live For Today

Jasper Doell had always lived a charmed life; for as long as he could remember, anyway. Growing up the only child of an older, Wizarding couple, Jasper's childhood had been one of wealth and privilege. Given the best of everything—although not spoiled, really—Jasper had learned that sometimes he needed to push the edge, just to remind himself where it was.

He hadn't been trouble in school, but then again, what no one knew about couldn't be held against him, yeah? Studies came easy and he was heavily recruited by the Aurors and the Department of Mysteries when he finally left Hogwarts. He debated internally for several weeks and discussed it with his aging, widower father before accepting the position with the Aurors—the chance to be out, traveling and actually *doing* something was much more appealing than the mysterious job in the heart of the Ministry.

It was times like this, however, that really drove that need for adventure home to him. Trammel was doing his usual nattering away about procedure and caution, causing Doell to roll his eyes in frustration and anticipation. He just wanted this over with.

Maybe it was Ginny's worried expression, or the fact that everything seemed to be falling into place, when nothing ever went this smoothly, but something was off today. Something at the back of Jasper's mind hinted that his penance may just be finished today. And that didn't bother Jasper, as long as the end came swiftly and in the heat of things.

It wasn't that Jasper *wanted* to die, but he probably deserved it for all that he'd done in the past. What scared him was thinking back to that building in Georgia and knowing what had been done there—there were things much worse than death, Jasper knew.

"... Doell will be going after the Minister."

Jasper's head snapped up, hearing his name. The few people in the room were all looking at him and he nodded, pretending that he'd been listening all along. Most of these men were Aurors, and those that weren't had definitely fought enough battles in the past. They didn't need Trammel marching back and forth reminding them of things they knew. But... it was Trammel's way.

"No offense, but... why him?"

Jasper almost laughed at the tentative question by the blonde, good-looking kid. Collins... that was probably his name. Jasper knew that Trammel had told him once, but it really didn't matter, so Jasper had forgotten it.

"Because I'm better than anyone else," Jasper quipped, simply explaining the truth. Trammel rolled his eyes at Jasper's arrogance and Jasper shrugged unrepentantly. He wasn't so good at the humility thing, especially not when he was about to go into battle.

"While we all get our egos in check," Trammel drawled, "go over your part of the plan again, make sure you're not going to muck it up and get yourself hurt... or killed."

Jasper smiled at the white faces that stared back. "Finished scaring the kiddos?" he asked brightly

as Trammel came over, a scowl fixed on his face.

"I don't like this," Trammel said, staring unseeing at the wooden walls of the Leaky Cauldron. "Something feels... wrong."

"Need Potter here?" Jasper asked hopefully. He'd fought long and hard to include the man in today's mission. Hell, Ginny herself would be an asset; she knew what was at stake here.

"No," Trammel growled. "He's better off where he is. Something just feels... off."

Jasper nodded, knowing it was a correct assessment. He couldn't figure it out either.

"You think someone has tipped our hand?" he asked, knowing they had discussed this issue no more than twenty times already.

"Maybe," Trammel said, chewing on the side of his mouth. His eyes roamed over the faces in the room. "No one here," he grunted, shaking his head.

"It wouldn't take more than one word, you know," Jasper shrugged. "One word to the wrong person, even unknowingly, and everything would come falling down."

Trammel looked at him for a minute. "You willing to risk it?"

"Hell yes," Jasper grinned. "I'm not about to back down now."

"Planning on being a martyr?" Trammel said, his dark eyes clouding over.

"No plans in the near future," Jasper denied, chuckling. "But it wouldn't be the worst way to go out."

Trammel looked as if he was going to say something, but then shook it off and rummaged in his robe pocket before shoving a photograph into Jasper's hand.

"Let's get ready. The signal should be coming soon."

Jasper stared down at the picture of Reginald Winters, hating the man all the more now that he knew how dirty he really was. Jasper focused on his eyes, and then the cheekbones, how they angled in the face. As his skin began to tingle, several people in the room gasped and moved back slightly.

"What do you think?" he asked, holding the photograph near his face and smiling. "Good enough to fool people?"

Bill Weasley chuckled and shook his head slowly. "There were always rumors about you being a Metamorphmagus."

"Should have listened closer to those rumors," Jasper said, waggling his eyebrows. It felt weird though; Winters' face was more round and his skin was tighter, somehow. It just felt... strange.

"Let's try not to subdue the wrong Minister, yeah?" Trammel grunted, shaking his head at the wide

eyes in the room. The humor broke the tension in the room a little and Jasper rolled his shoulders and pulled forward the thought he'd been developing and focusing on for days now.

It really was an ingenious idea, one that Trammel should be very proud of. Jasper had been completely prepared to go in, wand blazing with a take-no-prisoners attitude, but Trammel's idea definitely had merit. And if it didn't work, they'd agreed that Jasper would finish it off before disappearing for awhile. He really had no qualms doing that—it wouldn't be the first man Jasper had taken care of, and this was much more justified, in his mind, anyway.

The room lit with an ethereal glow as a silvery eagle floated in through the ceiling.

"That's the signal," Trammel said, his voice shaking just a little. "The Minister is in his office. Percy Weasley will be doing a surprise inspection of the MLE Offices in ten minutes. Send the message to Hagrid, Weasley."

Bill nodded and a bright flash of light shown before disappearing into the wall.

"Five minutes and we can Apparate straight to the Atrium. Hagrid's *diversion* should buy us time to get to our positions. You all know what to do and where to be."

Jasper rocked on the balls of his feet, letting anticipation and excitement for the confrontation build inside him. Once they got inside the walls of the Ministry, things were going to get insane—but that's the way Jasper liked it to be. Confusion was one of the best allies an attacking force had. People who were confused rarely resisted. Logically, he knew that wasn't going to be the case today; there were several Aurors and one Department Head, not to mention the Minister himself, who were bound to resist forced change.

"Five, four, three, two..."

Trammel's voice faded out as Jasper let the squeezing feeling of Apparition take him.

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The Atrium at the Ministry had always had a particular smell that Jasper was able to recognize a moment before opening his eyes. Even though the Fountain of Magical Brethren had been destroyed and never replaced, the large room still smelled of water somehow. Water and floo powder.

But that smell was overpowered today by... wet dog.

Jasper wrinkled his nose against the smell and recoiled automatically when he saw the massive beast with three heads standing near the Wand Registry desk, great drips of slobber pooling on the floor.

The urge to laugh at poor Eric, the security guard, was great as he quivered away from the panting jaws of the beast, edging further and further away with every moment.

"See, I got this 'ere let'er," Hagrid explained, his beetle-black eyes tracking the men in Auror robes as they walked toward the lifts. "And it says I hafta bring Fluffy 'ere in to 'ave him licensed." Hagrid waved a piece of parchment in front of Eric, who paled even further.

It was almost criminal how easily they were able to simply walk into the Ministry. Jasper supposed it was the navy blue robes that made everyone not even think twice about what they might be doing wandering through the halls. Damn complacent people! No wonder Voldemort had been able to waltz right in and take over—

“Look sharp,” Trammel growled. Arthur Weasley joined the group, coming out from some small hallway that Jasper had never paid attention to before—although, to be fair, he wasn’t around the Ministry much.

“*Minister,*” Arthur greeted Jasper, staring directly into his eyes. “I wonder if I might take a minute of your time and go over these latest Muggle Artifact reports with you.”

Jasper nodded and caught Trammel’s eye, passing along the silent message that Arthur’s coded words had conveyed. Everything was still a surprise.

“Might want to get your Aurors into the Department,” Arthur smiled tightly at Trammel. “I heard they might be doing an inspection sometime today.”

The “Aurors” in their pressed robes, some of them wearing the deep hoods, turned off and Jasper let out a heavy breath. This was it.

The Minister was alone in his office and the Aurors had been sufficiently distracted enough. There would be no guards outside the Minister’s office either—Arthur and several others had seen to that.

“I’ll see you to the door,” Arthur said under his breath. “And then we’ll fall into place.”

Jasper nodded. Arthur and the others would secure the hallway leading to the Minister’s office in case the Auror Department couldn’t be completely subdued.

But Jasper trusted Trammel to have things under control. It helped that Kingsley Shacklebolt was wearing one of those cloaks with a hood. His presence would calm a lot of fears and sooth some tension—the man was still incredibly respected among the Aurors.

“This is where you hold,” Jasper said, laying his hand on Arthur’s arm.

“I’d wish you luck,” Arthur said, “but Ginny already assured me that you hate that.”

“I do,” Jasper grinned, feeling the tight face of Winters stretch. “It’s always had the opposite effect for me.”

“What you’ve done for us...”

Jasper smiled and patted the man on the shoulder. “No thanks are necessary.”

Arthur looked as if he was going to say more, but then he nodded sharply and rolled his wand in his hand. “Three loud bangs is the signal.”

Jasper nodded and took a deep breath before rapping his knuckle on the door and entering without being welcomed.

Watching someone's face when you walked in looking just like them was an amusement that Jasper had never grown tired of. It was amazing to see the different reactions.

"Good morning, Minister," Jasper said, striding right into the inner office, never taking his eyes off Winters, who stared wide-eyed at him.

"You... who are you? Guard! Guard!" The Minister rose from his chair quickly and his wand shot a bright colored spell that Jasper dissipated with a quick shield.

"Now, now, is that any way to greet me?"

Winter's spluttering, and continuous calls for the guards outside his door—the ones who were now being held in some other office—made Jasper chuckle.

"I think it's time you and I had a little chat, *Minister*." He needed to dodge a few hexes, but was finally able to disarm Winters and bind him to the large leather chair that sat behind the desk.

"Who are you?" Winters hissed out, staring directly at Jasper's eyes.

There was a slight pressure inside his head, and Jasper allowed it, but only brought vague surface thoughts forward, keeping what he wanted secret out of the way.

"Let's call me a concerned citizen, Minister."

Jasper sat directly on the Minister's desk, crumpling parchments under him and knocking a few items to the floor. He brought his foot up and rested it on the arm of the chair Winters was sitting in, playing with the Minister's wand—rolling it back and forth in his grip.

"It's come to my attention that you, Mr. Winters, are a fraud."

"How dare you—"

"You know," Jasper drawled over the man's incoherent sputtering, "if you keep interrupting me, we'll be here all day. And I don't know about you, Minister, but I have things I'd like to do."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, you... impostor! I demand you untie me at once and I shall have you arrested."

Jasper rolled his eyes and gave the chair a shove with his foot, watching as it spun around once fully before he caught it again. "Have you never watched a good Muggle film?" he scoffed. "You completely mucked up that whole line. It's 'untie me *or* I shall have you arrested'. If you're going to say it, at least get it right. The way you said it, while probably the truth, gives me no real incentive to want to untie you, does it?"

The pressure in Jasper's head increased and he needed to take a deep breath to keep his Occulmency shield in place.

"Tell me everything you know about Project Lucas," Jasper commanded in a low voice, relishing the

way Winters' eyes bulged slightly before a look of complete indifference took over.

"I have no idea—"

"Do we really have to play that game, Minister?" Jasper said, sighing mightily. "I was so hoping we could dispense with the whole process. Because you're going to tell me 'I have no idea what you're talking about'. And then I'll be forced to tip my hand and prove to you that I know all about your dirty little secret. You'll splutter and deny it again, and then I'll be forced to bring out my knife."

Winters' Adam's apple bobbed twice as he stared at Jasper.

"And I hate using my knife; it's a bitch to clean."

Jasper spun Winters around once more, in the opposite direction this time, before leaning closer. "So let's skip to my favorite part, shall we?"

Winters started to protest but Jasper leaned even closer until they were almost cheek to cheek—mirror images of each other—and spoke directly into the Minister's ear.

"I've seen Lucas, Winters. I've been in the bowels of your little torture chamber. I know what you did to those men; I've seen their blood smeared on the walls and tasted the cold metallic air in the rooms they were held in." He pulled back, grinning widely at the whiteness of the Minister's skin. "Now it's your turn."

"I... I have no secrets."

Jasper clucked his tongue and leaned even closer, loosening a small tendril of his magic. Winters shuddered.

"Who... who are you?" he demanded, fear finally taking over his voice completely.

"Someone who you underestimated, Minister," Jasper sighed. "And someone you should never lie to." They stared at each other for a minute, small stabs of pain shooting through Jasper's head. Winters was getting desperate now, searching for anything he could grasp that would give him an edge in this very one-sided fight.

"Let's try this again," Jasper rolled his shoulders. He knew he was probably running out of time. The signal hadn't come yet, but surely it hadn't been so easy to contain an entire department of Aurors. Even if not all of them were involved—highly unlikely—someone was bound to figure things out eventually. Trammel suspected it was only a few of the Aurors who actually knew there was any kind of conspiracy. Jasper needed to push the plan forward.

"You want to know who I am?" he asked, grinning. His foot rocked the chair side to side several times, the Minister's head jerking left and right. "I'll give you a little hint."

Jasper gave the chair one good kick and it spun several times. Each time the Minister's face would pass, Jasper would alter his appearance. The first time he looked exactly like Trammel. The next pass, it was Kingsley, with his disfigured face. And the third and final time, it was Harry Potter himself that leaned into the Minister's face.

"You fucked up, Minister," he drawled, smirking when Winters gasped. Harry's body was much more comfortable than Winters' had been and Jasper stretched out a bit, glad to have a lanky frame back, instead of a shorter, rounder one.

"You... you can't..."

"You should have killed me," Jasper said, letting his magic loose just a little more. The lights in the room flickered slightly and Winters paled even further. "But now you're in big trouble."

"You can't be him," Winters shook his head, his voice hoarse.

"Why?" Jasper chuckled. "Because you thought I didn't exist anymore? Is that what they told you?" The chuckle was a full laugh now as the idiocy of the situation was revealed. The Americans had fooled the British.

"What was your ultimate goal, Minister?" Jasper demanded, leaning in closer and watching as Winters shied away. "Was it simply to get rid of me? Stash me away so that I never bothered your little Pureblood plans? Or was there a deeper conspiracy here?"

"What were Marsden and Hughes after?" Jasper asked. He was running on pure conjecture now, but he, Trammel, and Hermione Weasley had all been through the files; there was definitely more going on than just needing a place to get rid of Harry Potter. "Were they, perhaps, looking for a solution to your Mudblood problem?" Jasper guessed, the idea popping into his mind. "You find a way to leech people's memories, steal who they are, perhaps even steal their magic..."

Winters shook his head. "I have no idea—"

"It's ingenious, actually. And you're not technically guilty of murder—not that you'd be above that, eh Minister?" Jasper waggled his eyebrows behind the thin glasses he wore. "A real first class idea," he complimented.

"If only it worked."

The mental probe stabbed deep this time and Jasper had to close his eyes and shake his head to break free. What Winters lacked in finesse, he certainly made up for in power.

"You see, you can't steal who people are. You may take what they remember, you may even muck with who they think they are, but personality and a soul aren't just about what a person remembers. You can't steal what makes a person who they are; you can't steal their emotions, or their humanity, or even their magic."

Winters swallowed thickly and Jasper probed his own rudimentary Legillimency into the Minister's mind. Guilt, confusion and anger at being lied to prevailed.

The Minister groaned loudly and kicked his foot up, pushing away from the desk and breaking eye-contact.

"What are you going to do to me?" he asked, half-pleading. "Are you going to... kill me?"

Jasper chuckled and shook his head. "There are far worse things than death, Reginald."

Winters probed one last time and Jasper released the block he'd been holding on those "memories" he'd been constructing in his mind.

Together, they watched as Kingsley screamed, his face being shredded by a bludgeoning spell. Blood and tissue flew everywhere, spattering the room in a shower of red. Kingsley fell to the floor, clutching his head and screaming; Harry dove over the top of him, protecting him. Spell fire flashed all around and then Harry was still, but the last light had been red, not green.

The "memory" wasn't completely false; Kingsley had been struggling for a long time to piece together what had really happened in that office. He remembered Harry protecting him. The rest, Jasper had embellished using his imagination.

The next "memory" was of Harry waking in Lucas, strapped to a bed while vague shadows prowled around the edges of a bright light above him. The effect was dizzying and Jasper held onto the edges of the table, breathing hard as Winters tried to force himself away from the vision. But Jasper held on even tighter, forcing the pictures into the man's brain.

"This is where I'm going to take you, Winters. This will be you."

Flash after flash was shared as silvery threads were pulled from the Harry's temple. Painful injections and surgical procedures were performed while Harry was strapped to a cold metal table and screamed.

"Enough!" Winters screamed in agony, arching his back in the chair.

Jasper clutched the table, his head pounding as bile rose in his throat, threatening to spill all over the plush blue rug.

"YOU!"

The Minister's roar came at the same time the door burst open, splintering.

Vaguely, Jasper registered that his disguise was gone—relaxed completely during the battle of minds. That thought came just as a slicing pain shot across his back. He spun in place and dove behind the desk, shooting spells of his own in defense.

Screams and spells shot around the room. It was all going to hell and Jasper grunted in pain. He could feel the blood seeping across his back and knew the cut was bad—perhaps even fatal. Spots danced before his eyes and he blinked them away, ignoring the scuffling on the other side of the desk as he pulled himself along the rug toward the Minister, who was tipped over in his chair. His eyes were wide and he struggled against the binds that held him.

"Don't... You can't..."

Jasper may have failed to get a confession, and everything was falling apart, but he knew he could finish off the problem—or at least part of it—like he'd promised Ginny, before he died. It was the least he could do.

Silently, as he clawed forward, leaving bloody handprints, Jasper Doell recited the names of every witch and wizard he'd killed—or made disappear—all in the name of the Ministry. It made him sick that he couldn't remember every name. There had been too many over the years.

"I can," he finally hissed as he raised his wand, preparing himself to finish his final assignment.

Somewhere he knew there was a special place in hell reserved just for him, because he'd actually believed he was doing the right thing by following orders and taking care of Ministry problems for the greater good. The words that he'd heard so often in the course of his job now made him want to vomit.

"Goodbye, Minister."

Winters' eyes widened and he finally—and completely—understood who he was dealing with. The smallest hint of regret passed in those dull eyes, but Jasper didn't care anymore. It was too little, too late.

"Doell."

A hand closed around his wand, pulling it away from the Minister just as the spell shot out, slicing completely through the leg of a chair with a sickening crunch.

"It's over."

Jasper faintly registered the round face of Neville Longbottom staring down at him before he closed his eyes full and let the darkness take him.

\* \* \*

A dull hospital room wasn't what he expected to see when he woke up and Jasper swore. He hated being in hospital.

"Keep up that talk and all the pretty little nurses who keep flocking in here to take care of you might just change their minds."

"Trammel... now is the appropriate time to tell you that you have a shite sense of humor," Jasper rasped out, staring at the ceiling. His back throbbed painfully, shooting stinging sensations down his legs. But he could move them, at least.

Trammel's laugh was gravelly and brought back a lot of memories.

"Maybe it's your disposition that needs changing."

Slowly, Jasper rolled his head to the left and blinked at Trammel, who was slouched in a chair, his feet resting on the rails of Jasper's bed.

"Tell me what happened," Jasper said before giving Trammel's feet a push, satisfied when he squawked in protest.

"You got hit with a—"

"Not to me, you bastard," Jasper sighed. His head swam with dizziness and he clutched the scratchy blankets in his hands to keep from passing out. "To... everyone else."

Trammel chuckled and leaned forward so that Jasper could hear him better. "Just like we thought—someone opened their gob and the plan was compromised. We managed to hold our own in the MLE when Kingsley explained what was going on. But Williamson and Stinson had already made it out of the Department. The Burrow was compromised..."

Jasper's eyes flew open and he groaned. "How many dead?"

"Only one," Trammel said, wincing. "One of ours—Rudy Collins."

"The kid?" Jasper's throat went thick at the thought. He'd seemed so young and so... full of life.

"Yeah. Williamson got in a lucky shot and Collins just wasn't able to defend it."

"Who else?"

"Some injuries," Trammel grunted, "nothing major. Potter saved them all—again."

Jasper blinked at Trammel's amazed grimace and a slow smile spread over his face. "Yeah?"

"Held a blooming solid shield over himself, Ginny, and Arthur. It was enough to distract them and we won."

Jasper sighed, almost wishing he could have been there. Instead, he'd seen his battle fade before his eyes.

"Winters?"

Trammel shook his head. "No need to worry about him anymore."

Jasper glared and narrowed his eyes. "But I didn't..."

"He did it himself," Trammel shook his head. "Something you said, or did, got to him."

"It worked," Jasper blinked up at the ceiling. "It bloody well worked. I mean, I didn't mean for him to... never thought he'd have the stones, actually. But... it worked."

"You sound surprised," Trammel chuckled. But the laugh was dry and filled with exhaustion.

Jasper went to shrug his shoulder and groaned in pain. "Wasn't sure what to expect," he grunted out. "How long do I have to be in here?"

"Why?" Trammel said. Jasper could hear the grin in his voice. "You got somewhere else to be?"

Jasper sighed and slowly lifted his hand to rub his whiskery face. "No, I guess not."

"What're you going to do now?"

"No clue," he admitted. He certainly couldn't go back to what he was doing before; the thought sickened him.

"I could use some help in the Aurors," Trammel offered, half-heartedly at best.

"You don't want me there," Jasper smirked. "I'd just corrupt all your ickle trainees."

"You're a damned good Auror, Doell," Trammel complimented. "I'd like to see you at Hogwarts, or maybe the Academy."

Jasper groaned. "Please not Hogwarts," he begged, glaring at Trammel, who looked highly amused. "I can't handle that again."

"You could help me by tracking down Aubrey Thiemann," Trammel suggested. "And maybe Rhys Hughes."

That idea had much more merit than spending the rest of his days trapped in a classroom at a moldy old castle. "I don't do well around children, Trammel, you know that."

"You succeeded with Weasley."

Jasper chuckled. "All I did was sharpen her focus," he dismissed.

Trammel was quiet for a minute before leaning forward, into Jasper's line of sight. "Did you know... about Potter?"

"What they'd done to him?" Jasper asked.

"Yeah. You seemed particularly... focused on getting Weasley to be an Auror."

Jasper turned his head and stared back up at the magnolia ceiling. "I knew something wasn't right. People were starting to go missing here and there. The French were searching all over for Robert Fournier. You keep your ears open and you hear things."

He could tell by the heavy silence that Trammel wanted more information, but was content to let Jasper keep some of his secrets.

"Who was Fournier?"

"Political dissident," Jasper sighed. "Had this radical idea about Witches and Wizards living in the open with Muggles—not hiding their magic. In the end, they killed him for it."

Trammel grunted and rose out of his chair. "Kingsley's back in office."

"Good," Jasper nodded, feeling the end of the conversation coming.

"Potter and Weasley send their well-wishes. Said don't take too long to get better, you're going to be a guest at a wedding soon."

The smile that spread over Jasper's face was the first one that felt genuine in a very long time.

Somewhere out there, beyond these dull hospital walls, life was happening. And Jasper Doell had helped, even if just a tiny bit, in nudging it forward.

"Damn," he sighed. "I have to find a date."

Trammel laughed. "I'm sure they'll be lining up for you, Doell." The sound of the door opening was followed by Trammel's parting words. "Think about what I offered."

"I'm not teaching at Hogwarts," Jasper protested, scowling. "I hate teenagers."

The door closed and Jasper was left alone with his thoughts. Slowly, he flexed his toes, counting each one separately to make sure they all responded. They were hesitant, but did send feeling back up his legs, through his throbbing back, and into his mind.

At least that seemed to be in order. The rest of his life, though... Yeah, not so much.

He'd never really had a place to live since his father had died while he was in Auror training. The old house was there, but no one had lived in it in forever. France probably wasn't the safest option anymore; Jasper's past was bound to catch up with him there.

Maybe he could start over in a completely new place. The idea was abandoned before it was even half-conceived though. Jasper was simply too lazy to even think about that right now.

The Auror Academy idea was beginning to grow on him, though. At least he'd have more flexibility than he would at Hogwarts.

Jasper shook his head, willing away the oppressive thoughts of Hogwarts. He'd loved his time there as a student, but it felt... so long ago, that he really couldn't connect with that life any longer.

He sighed, thinking of how tired he actually felt. It was... disconcerting. Or maybe it was just the pain medication wearing off that made him feel older than Trammel looked.

Jasper wasn't old. He scowled at the idea. There was plenty of life in him yet. And he'd prove it. He was going to get up off of this bed and walk himself out of this hospital, begin tracking down Thiemann and Hughes, and even find himself a date for a wedding.

Another pain shot through his back just as the door swung open and a shapely nurse—an attractive brunette—came in carrying a tray of potion bottles.

Maybe he'd start his plan tomorrow. Tomorrow sounded good.

# Epilogue: Your Arms Feel Like Home

*May 2002*

The sun coming up over the water made it shimmer like orange gems and Joe blinked at the brightness of it. He still loved sunrises; it wasn't something he'd probably ever outgrow. Ginny claimed that he was insane for wanting to be up that early to watch the sun, when he could easily see it all day long, and watch it go down each night again.

But something about seeing that brilliant red turn to orange, and then to yellow... it was like coming back to life again. Stepping into the warmth of an early morning sunrise was a complete metaphor for his life. It seemed entirely appropriate to try and witness as many sunrises as he could, after all that he'd been through. There were many nights in the past he'd laid down when he wasn't convinced he'd see another one.

But now there had been so many sunrises—too many to count—and it made him completely and unexplainable happy to see the first rays of light shining in whatever room they happened to be in that morning.

Traveling with Ginny was amazing. Months spent wandering around Europe and then America, even a few weeks spent in South America, had been wonderful for them.

They walked down charming French country lanes, swam in the sea off the coast of Spain, visited Sam, Max, and Pearl in New Orleans for a few days, and even took surfing lessons in California.

Every place they went, Joe found himself watching the sunrise, wondering when he'd stumble on a place that truly felt like home to him. He was starting to think that perhaps there wasn't one place out there he was completely comfortable and at home.

Joe had surprised Ginny by arranging for them to go to the Burrow for Christmas morning—the place he'd come closest to feeling fully at home, sitting next to Ron and Hermione, laughing at George's antics with his newborn son, and just having the best holiday he could imagine.

But it was only two evenings ago when he'd finally, fully realized what home actually was.

It wasn't some place he needed to unpack his suitcase, or some place he could walk around in his underwear if he wanted.

Home was the moment Ginny took his hand and placed it low on her belly, whispering that they had created something so miraculous that it still took his breath away just thinking about it.

He was a father.

The words rattled around in his head, forcing Joe to turn from where he was standing on the balcony of their hotel room and find Ginny in the bed. She was wrapped in the sheet, her glorious red hair looking like a cascade of fire around her head as she slept, snoring every once in a while.

His eyes traced her form, remembering all the places she loved to be kissed, and the spot just

behind her knees that was so ticklish he wasn't supposed to ever touch there, even though he disobeyed often by tracing the crease with the tip of a finger, or his toe, or even his tongue.

She rolled toward him, her eyes still closed, and the sheet pulled tighter across her middle.

Joe's vision blurred and he imagined that he could even see their child there, even though it was only a few weeks along at this point. Ginny showed no signs of being pregnant at all; not even morning sickness.

Home.

It definitely wasn't a place, like he'd always assumed it was.

Home was Ginny, and their child, and the love that they had together.

It had come unexpectedly, walking into a bar in New Orleans when he'd nearly given up hope of ever feeling anything. Home was warm and wiggly, with a wicked temper.

Their lives had been far short of the fairy tale that they might have once dreamed of, but Joe could see glimpses of that life every now and again. He felt closer to Ginny than he ever imagined he could be to one person. In her, Joe had found a reflection of himself that he could really grasp; she showed him who he was supposed to be, a person who he was starting to genuinely enjoy being.

And right now, staring at his wife as she slept, growing their child inside her, Joe felt a small part of him start to heal. Ginny had given him the gift of life—in so many more ways than one.

"You've got that look again." Her voice, thick with sleep, startled him from his musings and he smiled, leaning against the door.

"What look?" he asked, knowing she could read every bit of him like a book. She'd always been able to do that.

She shook her head slowly and yawned, stretching out along the length of the bed. "The one that says you've been thinking too long."

Joe didn't answer her, but walked forward until he could climb in next to her, wrapping his arms around her sleep-warm body and kissing along her soft shoulder. "Maybe I have."

"You know that's not good for you," she said, kissing his nose and then his lips softly.

"I know," he sighed, allowing himself to sink into the bed and completely relax. Ginny wove their fingers together, and they both stared at them.

"Do I get a clue? Or do we have to do the mind reading thing?" Ginny teased a few minutes later.

"I was just thinking about home," Joe shrugged. "And how I've never really known it, you know."

She nodded and gave his fingers a squeeze.

"But... I think I may have really found it," he admitted, more than a bit of awe in his voice.

Ginny sat up, propping on her elbow, and looked down at him, "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he said, a slow smile stretching his face.

"Here?" she asked, looking out the balcony to the brilliant blue sea.

He shook his head slowly and stared at her, memorizing every part of her features that he'd forgotten being away from her for the long minutes he'd watched the sun. "No," he said, leaning down to kiss her. "Here."

Ginny's arms wrapped around him and she sighed into the kiss, a warm, content sound that made Joe's whole body tingle. He nudged her backwards until he was gently pressing her down.

"And here," he said, kissing her neck, his lips trailing along her skin. "Here."

His hand found her belly, fingers splaying over the flatness of it. "And here," he murmured, leaning over her just a bit.

Ginny giggled. "You've been drinking, haven't you?"

Joe laughed along with her and shook his head. "It's incredibly sappy."

"Remember that morning in New Orleans, where we both sounded like greeting cards?" She grinned at him and Joe groaned, lying back on his pillow.

"I'm a bloody girl," he protested, making Ginny laugh as he whipped his glasses off and closed his eyes.

"No, you're not," she said, straddling his stomach and raising his hand to her face, where she kissed his palm. "It's okay to be sappy sometimes."

He blinked blurrily up at her. "Can we go home?" he asked.

Ginny stared at him for a minute. "I thought I was home."

"You are," he shrugged. "But I want this baby to have a family—a big, obnoxious family that knows everything they're not supposed to know about him, and... and can always be there for him."

Ginny smiled down at him and he slid his glasses back on, worried when her eyes looked red and teary. He thought she understood what he was saying. It wasn't just for the baby he wanted all of that, but it felt weak to admit that, as a grown man, he wanted people in his life like that.

"We can go home," she nodded, leaning down to kiss him. "I'd like to go home."

\* \* \*

Ginny sighed as Joe steered the broom they were riding on over the trees. The sun was just starting to rise over the horizon, lighting up the whole world in a blazing way that made Ginny catch her breath.

"I can see it," Joe said softly, right next to her ear. His hand drifted down to her belly, palming it again and Ginny nuzzled back into him.

There, outlined in the bright morning sun, was the crooked form of the Burrow. Floors and towers jutted out impossibly from it, haphazardly added over the years and supported only by magic.

"Can we..." He trailed off and Ginny looked over her shoulder into his green eyes, which never left the house. "Can we build one just like it?" he asked, sounding so much like an awed twelve year old boy that it stole Ginny's breath.

"If that's what you want," she nodded. She agreed with him that she wanted a home just like the Burrow; if not in randomness, in love.

She closed her eyes just for a second as they hovered, slowly inching closer and closer. A hazy, wonderfully bright picture of a family came into view. The father was pushing a smiling, dark haired child on a tree swing while the mother laughed and pretended to grab onto his bare toes, coaxing giggles out of him.

Even if it was only in her mind, Ginny knew it was something they could, finally, achieve together.

"I wonder if Hermione had the baby yet," Joe mused as he urged the broom just a bit faster.

"I'm sure we would have heard."

"Yeah," he nodded, looking back at the Burrow.

"Joe..."

"Yeah?"

Ginny looked over her shoulder until his green eyes found hers. "Welcome home."