

DANCE WITH ME HARRY

By

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CHAPTER 1 A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

Harry slammed into the marble headstone.

He didn't need to look behind him to know what it read.

TOM RIDDLE

Harry looked to his right. Cedric Diggory lay stunned next to him, the wand, which Cedric had drawn moments before, lying just out of his reach.

Suddenly, the mists rising from the cemetery roiled. A gaunt, hooded figure drifted toward the two prone figures.

Harry felt a cold wave of terror as he looked into the hood. All that could be seen were two glaring red eyes, staring down at him.

"Harry, so pleasant of you to join us, at last," said a cold voice from within the hood. "We have gone through much trouble to arrange your appearance. I hope you will enjoy our little chat."

Harry felt his insides freeze. Wave after wave of panic seized him. But he could not move.

"I see you have brought a friend," Voldemort intoned.

Harry, paralyzed by fear, tried to speak but when his mouth moved, nothing came out.

"Harry, I am afraid we set a place for only one, as that was all the invitation called for," Voldemort continued. "I am afraid that one of you will have to go."

Harry grasped at rational thought. He had to get away, but no plans, no ideas came. All he knew was he had to get away, to run away, to hide.

The hooded spectre leaned closer as the mist swirled around its form. "So Harry, who will it be, you or Cedric?"

Harry's mouth was opening and closing soundlessly. He struggled to move. His eyes darted back and forth seeking escape.

"Harry, we do not have all night. Who is it going to be? You, or Cedric?"

Harry felt like he was being swallowed up by blackness. Got to get out, he thought. Got to run.

"HARRY!" Voldemort cried with a cold humor in his now booming voice. "You, or Cedric?!"

Harry felt the terror welling up from deep within his soul. Suddenly the terror was rising through his body, reaching his throat.

"KILL THE SPARE!" Harry screamed.

A green flash split the mist, lighting the night and casting shadows against the grave markers.

And Cedric was no more.

Harry turned in horror to see the open, lifeless eyes of his competitor, his companion, his friend. The magnitude of the scene caused him to seize up.

Suddenly, he seemed to regain the use of his arms and legs. Grabbing the side of the grave stone, he leaped to his feet and turned to run.

But as he looked up to find a route to escape, he found his path blocked. There was Hermione, looking stunned and sobbing. And Ron, with a look of cold fury directed at him. And between them, an angry Cho, tears of fury running down her cheeks.

Cho stood directly in his path, feet set firmly to block his escape. Her eyes narrowed in righteous fury.

"It WAS you!" she said through gritted teeth. "I knew it was you all along. You killed Cedric!"

* * *

Harry sat bolt upright in the bed, one hand reaching for his glasses, the other for his scar. His brow was soaked in perspiration, his body rigid in tension. But the scar did not pain him beyond the stress of the dream. He took several heaving breaths before any rational thought would return.

A dream, he thought. Only a terrible nightmare.

Harry shook his head to regain his composure before looking around to get his bearings.

He was at Number 4 Privet Drive.

Slowly, it came back to him. Less than 24 hours ago, he had left Hogwarts. Less than 24 hours ago, he'd given Fred and George Weasley his thousand-galleon prize from the Triwizard Tournament. Less than 24 hours ago, he had bid Ron a fond farewell. And less than 24 hours ago, Hermione had kissed him on Platform 9 3/4.

Harry's breathing had returned to normal, but he still was shaken by the dream. He turned to the battered alarm clock that had served Dudley through two years of tantrums and now was enjoying a second life in Harry's bedroom, minus the clear plastic face cover and the internal light to let the sleepless know the time of night in the dark. He could just make out in the false dawn coming through his window that it was 5:18 in the morning.

He lay there debating. He could roll over and try to sleep another hour or so, but he knew that this would be useless. Finally, he climbed out of bed and wearily began going through the motions of living a life at Number 4 Privet Drive.

* * *

"Come on, boy, you should have had that done already," Harry's Uncle Vernon grumped from behind the morning paper.

Harry shifted uncomfortably over the stove, rolling the sausages to make sure they were evenly cooked before putting the eggs on. Aunt Petunia was busily toasting more bread for Dudley, who was lavishing spoons of strawberry jam on the toast before him and grumbling about how he'd reached the bottom of the jar.

Harry noticed how his aunt and uncle kept giving him surreptitious glances throughout the morning, as if to discover he'd grown some new appendage since last summer's end. Dudley, however, was being Dudley, supremely unconcerned with anything except his own immediate interests and appetites and, except for jostling Harry out of the way on his journey to the breakfast table earlier, paid Harry no mind.

Finishing the cooking, Harry distributed the breakfast evenly, only to have Dudley spear his sausages before Harry had a chance to return to the table.

"Hey," Harry cried.

"Oh be quiet," Aunt Petunia said harshly. "You're too small to need more than what you've got on your plate."

Harry sank down in his chair in a sulk. He looked venomously at Dudley, who was muttering about the end of the jam. Harry picked at his egg and a slice of dry toast sullenly. When he arrived home, he had noticed that he was now taller than Dudley, but that, where he had grown taller in the past ten months, his cousin had seemed to have grown wider.

He looked up to catch his uncle peering sourly at him over the morning paper. Uncle Vernon hrmphed and tossed the paper aside, rising from the table.

"Well, now, it's off to work," his uncle said. "There's money to be made out there." Uncle Vernon gave Petunia a quick peck on the cheek and squeezed Dudley's shoulder. Dudley failed to register the act as he was still busy attacking the sausage and eggs.

Then uncle Vernon paused to look directly at Harry. "I'll be wanting no funny business out of you this summer. Do you understand me, boy?"

"Yes," Harry said sullenly.

"Yes, what?" Vernon barked, causing Petunia to jump and Dudley to pause momentarily, a forkful of eggs halfway from the plate to his mouth.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," Harry said quietly through clenched teeth.

"That's better," Vernon said and, grabbing his suit coat, strode out the front door.

Harry quickly finished his meager rations, hoping to get away from the table before his aunt came up with a list of chores. But he was too late.

"We are out of jam and are down to a few crusts of bread," Petunia said. "Harry, you will go down to the grocers today and pick up what we need. I will make a list. And make sure you get a receipt. I will not have you stealing the change."

Harry looked at his aunt angrily. "But it's a good four miles to the grocers. Can't this wait until uncle Vernon comes home with the car tonight?"

"You ungrateful, lazy good-for-nothing!" she yelled. "Don't give me any of your lip. You will pick up those groceries. And you better be quick about it if you're expecting any lunch."

Harry got up from the table and mumbled that he would be in his room when she had her shopping list ready.

* * *

Fortunately, it was a beautiful late June day. Harry had sulked about the errand but, in the end, was secretly pleased to be out of the house. He figured that it would take him a little more than an hour each way if he hurried, but today wasn't a day for hurrying. He had to admit that, while he may hate living at Number 4 Privet Drive, the neighborhood was very pleasant and a long walk on this sunny June day had driven thoughts of his nightmare away.

As he turned the first corner on his way to the grocers, he noticed a stocky, balding man in the front yard of one of the houses wrestling with what appeared to be the box spring of a very large bed. The man was struggling and appeared to overbalance, the box spring threatening to tumble right on top of him.

Harry raced down the sidewalk and, with a graceful leap, hurtled the low white picket fence in front of the house. He got there time to grab a corner of the rebellious box spring mattress to keep it from toppling on the man.

"Thanks, mate," the man gasped. "Thought I could handle it. Not as young as I used to be."

Harry smiled at the man and nodded his acknowledgement. He looked to be in his early 60s, with a beefy face. As he eased the box spring down on the steps leading up to the front porch, Harry could see that the man must have been strong, an athlete perhaps, in his youth, but that age was beginning to tell.

The man held out his hand. "Patrick Downey," he said, flashing a smile. "Pat will do. And who

might my savior be?"

Harry grinned modestly. "I'm Harry Potter, sir."

"Oh, boy. No need to call me 'sir.' Not had me audience with the Queen yet. And who might Harry Potter be when he's at home?" Downey said grinning.

"I'm the Vernon and Petunia Dursley's nephew. I live over at Number 4 Privet Drive around the corner," Harry said brightly.

Harry saw Downey's face cloud momentarily, then brighten again. "Well, then, Harry Potter of Number 4 Privet Drive, can you lend a man a hand? I think I can make it worth your time."

Harry blushed a little. "I'd be happy to help you, sir. And just being able to help is enough for me."

"Very well," Downey said. "You take the front end and I'll guide you, and I'll take the back end. You know, they wanted twenty quid to deliver this. Now I know why," he said with a smile.

Wedging the front door open, the two managed to wrestle the box spring into the house and up the stairs to the master bedroom. As they were manhandling the top mattress up the stairs, they heard a woman's voice.

"Pat, what on earth are you doing?"

"Up here, Evvie, darlin'," Downey called down as Harry was pulling the mattress onto the landing.

"Patrick Downey, are you trying to break your neck or give yourself an attack?" the exasperated woman called out.

As Downey made it to the landing and Harry began to maneuver the mattress into the master bedroom to join its mate, Downey called down the stairs again. "Not to worry, mum. I've got a strong young fellow here doing most of the work." He peered around the mattress and winked at Harry with a grin.

Harry chuckled at the conspiratorial look on the man's face.

With the bed in place, Downey led Harry down the stairs into the kitchen. Downey walked up to a pleasantly plump, graying woman of medium height with a concerned smile.

"Pat, you should know better than to haul around heavy things like that at your age. You're not on the docks any more," the woman said, crossing her arms with a mock frown on her face.

"Yes, mum," Downey said contritely.

Mrs. Downey then turned with a warm smile to Harry. "And who might this handsome young man be?"

Harry blushed again. "Ah...Harry Potter, mam," he said shyly.

"He's the Dursley's nephew, from around the block," Downey said. "And Harry, this is my bride of some 35 years, Evvie."

"Oh, hush," Evvie said, smiling in reproof. She turned back to Harry questioningly. "I haven't seen you around the neighborhood, have I. I know I've seen that Dursley boy around with his pack of ... friends," she said archly.

Harry frowned. "Well...I've been away at school since September," he said uncomfortably. His mind was now churning. How could he talk about Hogwarts to Muggles, he thought furiously. Especially to nice people like the Downeys. They might take his evasions as rudeness.

"What school is that, Harry," Downey said mildly.

Harry was beginning to panic. He had made no plans about how he would describe Hogwarts to

people in the Muggle world. "Well...err...its up in the North," he said evasively. "It's sort of a special school."

Evelyn Downey looked carefully at the shy young boy shifting uncomfortably in front of her. She had heard the neighborhood rumors and gossip about the boy who lived with the Dursleys. Some said he had been a delinquent who would be sent away periodically. Some had said he was retarded. But this boy didn't look or act like a delinquent. Perhaps he might be a little slow, she thought, but he didn't seem to show signs of real mental deficiencies. Maybe it was a special school for slow students and he was embarrassed about it.

"Well," she said, firmly cutting off the topic of conversation. "I'll bet you are glad to be on holiday now that the summer's here."

Harry smiled shyly again. "Well, I guess. Although I do miss my friends from school already."

Downey started chuckling. "I'll bet there's one in particular that you miss."

Harry's blush now heightened as he thought about Hermione's kiss the day before. A small smile crept to the corners of his mouth.

"I thought so," Downey said with a note of triumph on his face.

"Oh, Pat. leave the poor boy alone," Evvie said, smiling knowingly.

Downey turned to Harry, assessing him carefully. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a five pound note out of his billfold. "Here you go, Harry. It's not much, considering all the work you did, but I'd be obliged if you take it."

Harry stepped back and put his hand up. "Oh, no, sir. I helped you because you looked like you could use an extra hand. Like a good neighbor should," he said firmly, looking a little taken aback. "I could never take anything just for being a good neighbor."

Downey's gesture died in mid air and he looked more intently at Harry. "But surely, boy, you could use a little money to buy that girl of yours a little present, or take her out on a date?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "Well, sir, she lives on the other side of London and I don't know when I'll be seeing her again," Harry said quietly. "Maybe I'll get the chance to visit friends in August and she'll be there," he said, brightening a little. Then his face fell.

"What's wrong, Harry. Does she have another boyfriend?" Downey said softly.

Harry shuffled shyly, looking down and not noticing how closely the two Downeys were watching him. He gave an inward sigh and realized that maybe he could talk to these people, to work out his feelings, as they would never meet Hermione and Ron.

"Well, she's my best friend...and my other best friend, Ron, likes her too...We're all best friends and I don't want to hurt our friendship together," he said haltingly. "But..."

"But...?" Evvie asked quietly.

"But...ahh...as we were leaving the train station...she...she kissed me," he said, shifting uncomfortably.

"Well, there you are." Evvie said, smiling. "She must like you." Then she looked at Harry and Downey with surprise, and playfully hit Downey on the arm. "Patrick Downey, where are your manners. And where are mine. I swear you are a bad influence on me. It's almost lunch. Harry, you must stay for lunch and I'll make sandwiches. We have what's left of a roast in the refrigerator. Come, Harry, sit down."

Harry looked up, startled. "But...but...I have to get to the grocers and back. My aunt will have a fit."

Evvie looked startled at Harry. "You mean the one off Windemere Square? Why that's miles away."

"Yes, mum," Harry said with a look of resignation.

"Nonsense, Harry," said Downey. "You have lunch and then I'll drive you to the grocers and back. I have to pick up a few things there myself."

Harry gave a small smile. "If it's not too much trouble, okay."

"Well, that's settled," Evvie said. "Let's get you boys fed."

* * *

Harry hadn't realized how hungry he was until he got his first taste of the sandwich Evvie made for him. He ate with such relish that she made him eat another, despite his feeble protests. During lunch, the three chatted about a variety of things. Harry learned that Pat had started out as a dock worker, but, through schooling and native intelligence, he had worked his way up to a high management position for a shipping company. The Downeys had lived on Maisley Drive around the corner from Privet Drive for nearly thirty years, and yet Harry had met never them. But mostly, thanks to Harry's prompting, Pat and Evvie talked about their four sons.

Pat and Evvie's sons had all left home and three of them were now married. The couple had four grandchildren with a fifth on the way. After finishing lunch, Evvie had taken Harry to the living room to look at a seemingly endless number of photos, which Harry didn't seem to mind at all, sighing wistfully at what it might have been like to grow up with a crew of lively and loving brothers. In some ways, he thought, this could be a Muggle version of the Weasleys.

And like the Weasleys, the Downey's house seemed to have an endless supply of rooms that were added on almost haphazardly as the Downey sons had grown. The couple acknowledged that the house was too large for just the two of them, "But it's now so much a part of our lives, so rich with our memories, that I wouldn't think of moving," Evvie said with a sigh.

By the time Pat had taken Harry to the grocers and returned him to Privet Drive, it was nearly two o'clock. Before dropping him off, Pat turned to Harry. "You know, son. I'm retired now and Evvie is always after me to take it easy. But we like to keep the place up. It would be worth a couple fivers if you could come by once a week or so to mow the lawn. And I might have some other jobs around the house and yard for a strong young man like yourself, if you're so inclined."

Harry's eyes widened. He had really enjoyed being around the Downeys and would love working around their beautiful home. And maybe have lunch with them on occasion. "I would love that, Mr. Downey," he said enthusiastically. But then his smile faded. "But I'll have to check with my aunt and uncle. They usually like me to stay in and do chores." But a little bubble of hope rose in his expression. "But I'll ask them if I can. I'd really love to work for you, sir."

Downey smiled. "You do that son. And I bet there's a lot of people around the neighborhood who would like a hand, here and there. We'll look forward to seeing you soon."

* * *

After a great deal of yelling and accusation, Aunt Petunia accepted Harry's explanation for being so late from the grocers. She carefully perused the receipt and counted out the change Harry returned as if each penny was a jewel before she was satisfied he hadn't stolen anything. Then she sent him out to the garden to do some weeding.

That night, he broached the subject of working for people in the neighborhood. Aunt Petunia gabbled on for a few moments about his duty being to work around the house before working for some strangers, but uncle Vernon, with a rustling of his newspaper, simply muttered something about how it was about time that the young whelp started to contribute for his upkeep, and the

matter was settled. Harry was free to do chores for the neighbors.

* * *

The Friday-night atmosphere in the pub was warm and intimate, but smoky, like the thoughts of Pat and Evvie Downey. The two were happy to have Harry come and do odd jobs for them. And he attacked each job with a vigor, even a joy, that they found surprising in a teenager. They had recommended him to several of their friends in the neighborhood, who had agreed to let Harry mow lawns or paint fences or do other chores that wouldn't get done otherwise.

But this morning, when Harry had shown up to do some painting, he had a tired, almost haunted look on his face. He worked as hard as ever, painting their garden shed and doing a meticulous job on the trim. But his smile was forlorn, and he turned down Evvie's offer for a second sandwich. When pressed, all he had mentioned was about having a bad dream and not getting enough sleep. And he was again evasive about his school.

Finally, the Downey's closest friends and neighbors, John and Merelie Nichol, arrived. John was a trim, silver-haired 60-year-old who had been a senior manager for the same shipping firm that Pat had worked. He had worked all over the world before settling into a directorship in London some 10 years ago. He was now semi-retired, going to the office once or twice a week to pour oil on whatever troubled waters had developed in his absence.

Merelie was a petite, vivacious woman who had been a blonde for so many years that friends were shocked a couple years before when, on John's retirement, she her gray hair grow out. "One less thing to worry about," she had said with a tinkling laugh.

The Downeys loved John's tales of the exotic and Merelie's lively sense of adventure, and the Nichols appreciated Pat's gruff honesty and intelligence and Evvie's earthy humor.

But tonight, as the Nichols arrived at the table with their pints, John noticed the Downey's subdued moods.

"What's wrong, Pat," John asked with concern. "That's not the face of the happy pensioner."

Pat swirled the porter in his glass. Without preface, Pat spoke: "What do you think of that Potter boy I sent to you for yard work."

John looked at Pat quizzically. "Well, the boy's the hardest working teenager I ever saw. And a bright lad. I've a good mind to send him down to the docks to see what he could do," he said with a chuckle.

Pat continued to stare into his glass for a long moment. "You know, at first, I thought maybe some of the rumors might be true, that he might be slow, or even a delinquent," Pat said without looking up. "But I've worked with delinquents down at the docks all my life and he doesn't seem the type. And I agree. He is not slow. He's bright as any kid his age I've ever encountered. But there's something about the kid that makes me wonder."

John and Merelie looked at each other and shrugged. "He seemed very nice, but awfully shy," Merelie offered. "I gave him some lunch and caught myself chattering on to him. You know, silly things about the kids and traveling and such. When I realized what I was doing, I looked at him closely, expecting him to be bored to tears. But her was looking at me like he never heard such wonderful conversation in his life."

The two couples paused, pondering Harry. "You know, he does talk about his friends. His girlfriend...what's her name...Hermione, and his best friend Ron and Ron's sister and the practical joker twins," said Evvie. "But he doesn't talk about the school except to say he likes it. And the surest way to shut him up is to ask about the Dursleys."

The Nichols looked pensive. "I think it's some sort of trade school," John said quietly. "I think he may be a little shamed that he's not going to a proper public school or the local comprehensive, especially given how bright he seems."

Pat looked up and gave Paul, the bartender, a wave for two more porters. Then resumed looking thoughtful. Then he looked up directly into John's eyes. "It's not for me to speak ill of someone when I don't know the facts..." and then he paused as Paul brought the pints over.

When Paul left, Pat resumed. "What I was saying is that, well...do you think they beat him?"

"Beat him?" Merelie said in shock.

"Aye," Pat said. "He has the look."

The four were silent for a long time. Finally, John spoke up. "Look, Vernon Dursley is a boor, and an obnoxious one, at that, but that doesn't make him a child abuser."

But Merelie put her arm on her husband. "Tell me, Pat. What did you see?"

Pat sighed and took a sip of his drink. "Look, when I was a wee one, I had a mate named Frankie. He was a good one to have around, but he never took us home with him. He never talked about his folks. And he would get the same haunted look I saw on Harry today. Then, one day Frankie didn't show up at school. After two or three days, my mates and me went to see him. But there was no one there and a copper chased us off the property. Said there was a kid killed in the house and the place was off-limits. It was Frankie. His pa beat him to death in a drunken row. I heard a story that he was sticking up for his mum, and his pa clubbed him with a spanner. It's been a long time since I thought of poor Frankie," Pat let out a long sigh. "But I saw him clear as day when I looked into Harry's eyes this morning."

Merelie suddenly shivered. "You don't think...?"

Evvie, who was gripping her husband's arm tightly, shook her head. "We don't know. That's why we needed to talk tonight. We don't know what to do."

John lowered his head with a frown. "Could it be drugs, d'ya think?"

Pat shook his head. "I don't think so. There was no signs that I could see. And remember, I worked the docks. I've seen it all, from reefers in the warehouses to guys OD'ing on the hard stuff who had to go direct to detox to the PCPers who thought they were God and tried to take dives off the gantry cranes. This look was coming from something Harry was forced to go through, not something he took to get high."

Merelie looked truly alarmed now. John raised his head and began to examine the pub patrons. "Is Atlee here?"

Merelie looked startled. "You mean Clement Ashwell? Don't call him 'Atlee.' You know he hates that."

John spotted Ashwell in the back, kibitzing a game of snooker while his wife socialized with several women at a nearby table. "Clem!" John called out, and waved the man over.

A tall, gangly man with sandy brown hair and a buttoned down shirt ambled over. He reached out his hand to John and smiled warmly. They shook hands and John grabbed a nearby chair. "Sit down, Clem. We've got some important ministry business to discuss."

Clem laughed. "John, has Merelie been beating you again," he said chuckling. Then he turned to the Downeys. "Or is it you, Evvie. Hasn't Pat been supporting you?"

Chuckles ran their course around the table, before Pat's face took on a more serious mien. "Clem, do you know Harry Potter?"

Ashwell looked at Pat thoughtfully. "No, I can't say that I do. Is he from the neighborhood?"

Pat nodded. "He lives with the Dursleys. Over on Privet Drive. He's their nephew."

Ashwell made a sour face. "Nasty business, those Dursleys. Particularly the wife. That dried up old prune is always coming down to the office to complain about something or other she claims she's seen or heard in the neighborhood. Why?"

Pat looked uncomfortable. Finally, he spoke. "Clem, you work in the social services down in town, right? And you're tight with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children?"

Ashwell's features turned dead serious. "And you think someone's been abusing this Potter boy? The Dursleys?"

Pat put his head down and spoke quietly. "Look, Clem. I don't know anything for sure. I haven't seen anything specific or heard anything from the boy. But he's been helping do chores around the house. He's bright and energetic and hardworking all week. Then he comes in this morning like the walking dead, deep rings under his eyes, a real haunted look. He worked hard all morning but, by the time he was done he looked like he wanted to curl up in a ball and cry himself to sleep."

Clem was nodding thoughtfully. "How old is this Potter boy?"

"About fourteen," said Merelie.

"He'll be fifteen in another month," Evvie added.

"No drugs? That's about the age they start."

"No, I doubt that," Pat said. "I took a close look at him this morning when I saw how poorly he was looking. No signs I could see. No dilated pupils...that sort of thing...Plus, he seems to leave the Dursleys to come directly to work in the neighborhood, then disappears back into the Dursley house and never comes out."

Ashwell continued to nodded, listening intently. "What does he do for fun? He may go out after supper to run with his friends."

Evvie spoke up. "I asked him about that. He told me he wasn't allowed out after dark. That he had too many chores around the house. I asked him about what he does for fun. He said he reads. Or studies. And writes to his friends when he gets the chance." She took a deep breath. "And I asked him what he liked to watch on the tele. He said he wasn't allowed to watch, then caught himself, and said that there was nothing on the tele as good as a good book."

The other four at the table turned to stare. "He said that? That he wasn't allowed to watch the tele?" Pat asked in amazement. "What do they do, lock him in the basement?"

Evvie, with a look of sorrow, lowered her head and shrugged.

Ashwell now showed a look of real concern. "Look, the government can't act without a complaint or some evidence of abuse. Did you see any signs of violence? Any bruises? Anything like that?"

"Well, he does have an ugly scar on his forehead," Merelie said.

"He said he got that as an infant in the car crash that killed his parents," Pat said. "Although he seemed to be a little...I don't know...a little evasive about that. To tell the truth, he seems fairly open, if a little shy, about a lot of things, but absolutely closed mouth about the Dursleys."

Merelie chuckled mirthlessly. "Yes, I inadvertently called Petunia Dursley a witch over something he said over lunch, something about her pampering the son and making Harry do all the chores. And Harry quickly said no, she most assuredly was not a witch. He made the oddest face when he said that."

Ashwell continue to ponder. "Like I said, there's nothing official I can do at this point. It isn't even my department. But maybe I can nose around to see what I can find out. Maybe I can get him alone and talk with him."

Pat shrugged. "There's no difficulty in that, mate. Just ring him up and ask him to mow your lawn. He's damn eager to work. Says he enjoys it. I almost believe it, too. I guess he likes the money, too. He's made twenty off me this week. He helped me move some bedding and wouldn't take anything for that, but I gave him ten for the lawn and ten for painting our garden shed. And I couldn't get that quality of work for less than a hundred if I hired someone professional to do it."

John was staring at Pat, open mouthed. "Oh, God. I only gave him a fiver for mowing my lawn. He didn't mention a price beforehand and I assumed he fiver would do. He seemed genuinely grateful to get it, too. But I bet he thinks I'm the real tightfisted one."

Pat looked at John and had the first real laugh he'd had all night. "Once a boss, always a boss, living off the sweat of the working class." But his smile rapidly faded.

He turned back to Ashwell. "Look, let him do the work and then offer to give him lunch. I swear, he eats like he's never seen food before. Not that he doesn't have nice table manners, mind you. But it's like he savors every mouthful, like they don't...feed...him."

Suddenly, everyone at the table turned to look wide-eyed at everyone else.

"No wonder he's so thin, the poor thing," Merelie said, suddenly tearing up.

"Oh, God," said Evvie.

John and Pat looked furious.

"Give me his number," Ashwell said firmly. "I'll ring him up first thing in the morning for work. And I'll have a talk with him over lunch."

* * *

Harry was absolutely furious.

The day had gotten off to a horrible start. Another nightmare. This time, he was in the criminal docket at the Ministry of Magic. He was being tried for Cedric's murder before jury of all his friends. And Cedric's ghost appeared to testify that Harry had lured him to the cemetery and murdered him with an unforgivable curse. His friends all rose and turned their backs on him as the dementor entered the room to administer the kiss.

He had hoped that helping Mr. Downey paint his garden shed would help him forget the nightmare. But the sanding and scraping didn't provide any real outlet for his emotions. He only began to regain some semblance of control when the actual painting started, particularly doing the detailing work around the trim.

But he didn't have much of an appetite for lunch, and didn't feel much like talking. He felt bad for not being a better guest to as nice a couple as the Downeys and hoped that they didn't think he had left too abruptly afterward.

But the final straw was tonight at dinner. He'd worked for different neighbors all week. Mr. Downey was true to his word in telling friends that Harry was reliable and hardworking. He had enjoyed listening to Mr. and Mrs. Nichol describe her families adventures in places like Hong Kong, Jakarta and Amsterdam after mowing the lawn. Old Mrs. Beaupres was pleasant enough, if a little hard of hearing. He felt bad for Mrs. Calhoun, who complained that her husband always seemed to be too busy or too tired for yard work--or anything else for that matter, as she cryptically put it. And he appreciated all he learned from Mr. Corbin about carpentry as he helped him rebuild the back porch.

And was excited that he had earned forty-two pounds, the most Muggle money he'd ever had in his life. Surely, it was a pittance next to the fortune in his vault at Gringotts. But this was money he had earned by the sweat of his brow and he was proud of it. Proud enough, and foolish enough, to mention it to his uncle Vernon.

"Good," Vernon said with a sneer. "That will just about cover our expenses for having you live here this week."

Without batting an eye, Vernon took it from Harry. All forty-two pounds. Harry had complained, yelled, but Vernon threatened to take the cricket bat to his backside like he did when Harry was very young. So Harry stormed up to his room.

He had sulked for nearly two hours when he heard Dudley raising a row. He snuck down the stairs to see what the commotion was about.

"But it's Bruce Lee! I want to see Bruce Lee on the big tele, not that crappy little one in my room!" Dudley screamed.

Harry shook his head. That crappy little tele in Dudley's room was a top-of-the-line model only slightly smaller than the one in the living room.

Vernon tossed aside his magazine in disgust. "Oh, all right. If that will make you happy, watch the damn show."

Dudley jumped up and turned the set on. In his excitement, he began to make karate chop motions in the air and leveling low karate kicks that strained the seams on his overstuffed trousers. Harry could just see the screen over aunt Petunia's head from his perch on the stairs. He shrugged and was going to return to his room when he saw the opening credits, showing a panoramic view of Hong Kong. He remembered Mr. Nichol talking about being raised in Hong Kong while his father had worked there for a shipping company just after the war. Slowly, without thinking, he lowered himself to sit on the stairs and began to watch.

It was a stupid Muggle movie called *Enter the Dragon*, but Harry was mesmerized. He had never seen anyone move with the grace and power, or explode in furious movement, of this Bruce Lee. He could understand Dudley's fascination with the film. And he could feel the emotion welling up in himself. He began imagining himself leaping elegantly into the air and doing twisting roundhouse kicks, mostly aimed at his uncle's midsection. Dudley also figured strongly in some of his revenge fantasies. And he silently laughed at a scene where Bruce Lee tossed venomous snakes into a control booth at the fortress in the movie, imagining himself doing the same into aunt Petunia's kitchen after carefully instructing the snakes in Parseltongue beforehand.

As the film ended, Harry scrambled up to his bedroom and satisfied himself imagining new and creative ways to use kung-fu on his hated relatives.

* * *

Harry was pleased but not surprised when the Dursleys' telephone rang early the next morning, asking for him. A Mr. Clement Ashwell of Queen Anne Road wanted him to mow the lawn on Mr. Downey's and Mr. Nichol's recommendation. Harry explained that he had another lawn-mowing job at 9:00 for a Miss Embry, who the Downeys referred to as a respectable maiden lady, but that he would be able to be there at about 11:00. That would fill the gap in time before he got to the Steins on Cherry Lane in the afternoon. Harry smiled. He might even get lunch out of it. That way, he wouldn't have to buy his own lunch, as the Dursleys made it clear that if he was too busy to come along on their day trip to the lake, he would not be allowed back into the house until they returned that evening.

The first job only took him about an hour, so he took some extra time to sharpen the blades on the

ancient Miss Embry's almost-as-ancient mower just the way Mr. Downey had taught him. Finally, he made his way to Queen Anne Road.

Mr. Ashwell met him at the door of a modest but very pleasant two-story frame house and showed him the mower and the scope of the job, promising him a tenner. Ashwell told Harry he normally mowed the lawn but that he and his wife were expecting the vicar for lunch and that Harry was invited as well.

When Harry mowed lawns, he found it relaxing just to follow the lines of the lawn as exactly as possible, without thinking of anything else. But he was a little nonplussed about lunch with the vicar. Reverend Strowbridge, on the few occasions the Dursleys attended services, seemed to be a warm, pleasant man. But he was the vicar, and Harry felt uncomfortable about lunching with him. He began to feel guilty about the infrequency of the Dursley's visits to services. And he also felt guilty about how few times he visited the chapel at Hogwarts. And he would hardly be presentable after all the work he had done that morning.

However, when he was done with the lawn, Mr. Ashwell came out and practically dragged him up to the house for lunch.

* * *

The Reverend Anthony Strowbridge, an affable, balding middle-aged man of medium height with a slight paunch, was not resplendent in his vestments. He had even left his collar at the vicarage. As Harry entered the kitchen, he was sitting back in a kitchen chair in a sport shirt and khaki pants, smiling at Denise Ashwell, who was recounting her travails during a recent dental appointment. Clem Ashwell ushered Harry in and presented him to Strowbridge, who smiled fondly at Harry.

"Pleased to meet you, Reverend Strowbridge," Harry said formally.

Strowbridge laughed. "Please, I'm not the Archbishop of Canterbury...at least not yet. In my spare time, which isn't as plentiful as I would like, I'm just Tony."

Harry shuffled uncomfortably, but gave a tentative smile.

Ashwell guided Harry to a small side bathroom to wash up. When he was through, he returned to find his place set at the small but comfortable table, which was laden with ham sandwiches and a variety of salads.

As Mrs. Ashwell began distributing the food, Strowbridge turned to Harry. "I understand that you are Vernon and Petunia Dursleys' nephew and that you live with them over at Privet Drive."

"Yes, sir," Harry said warily.

Strowbridge smiled as he watched Harry closely. "Tell me, Harry," he said in a conspiratorial tone. "What can I do to get them to attend services more regularly?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably and shrugged.

"So how long have you been living with the Dursleys, Harry?" Strowbridge asked.

"Since I was a little past one year old, after my parents died," Harry said, picking over his salad with a guarded look on his face.

"Really," Strowbridge said, his eyebrows arched. "I haven't seen you around much. I like to get to know members of my flock, but you seem to be one who has escaped my attention. I'm glad we finally got the chance to meet," he said with a warm smile.

Harry, who had taken a tentative bite of his sandwich, chewed thoughtfully. He was worried that the reverend might start asking him about Hogwarts and he still wasn't prepared to answer them

convincingly. He let the silence lengthen. Finally, Strowbridge broke the silence.

"I understand you go away to school. Is it a public school?"

Harry winced internally. "Well...no. I mean...well, yes, sort of. It's sort of a special school. They don't teach regular subjects."

"Like a vocational school?" Ashwell asked.

"Sort of..." Harry answered.

"What sort of subjects do you study?" Strowbridge asked quietly.

Harry thought frantically. "Well...stuff like...herbology...you know, plants and stuff. And caring for animals...And po...ah...like herbal remedies and stuff."

"New age stuff," Ashwell muttered quietly.

"So you are training to be a farmer?" Strowbridge said with a smile.

Harry shrugged again. "I guess."

Strowbridge leaned toward Harry. "What's the name of this school?"

Harry, not knowing what else to say, blurted out "Hogwarts."

Ashwell and Strowbridge chuckled. "An appropriate name for a school teaching animal husbandry, I suppose," Strowbridge said.

"It's the name of a flower," Harry said. "But it's misspelled. It's spelled H-O-G-W-A-R-T-S, not -W-O-R-T-S like the flower. My best friend Ron's two older brothers like to joke that Hogwarts is an institution of fine learning, if you don't need to know how to spell," he said with a quiet chuckle at the double pun.

Strowbridge and the Ashwells smiled. Harry chuckled inwardly that they wouldn't get the reference to being able to 'spell.'

"And does it look after your spiritual needs?" Strowbridge asked with an expectant smile.

Harry nodded, chewing on a bite of sandwich that he no longer could taste. Swallowing his food, he spoke. "Yes, it has a chapel.

"Who leads the services?"

Harry figured this was a safe enough question. "Reverend Micah Meacham, sir."

Strowbridge leaned back, his eyebrows arching again. "Interesting. There was a Reverend Micah Meacham who was martyred up in Scotland while defending his flock during the Civil War. Very interesting to be named for such an obscure, but valiant man."

The four resumed their lunch. After several minutes, Strowbridge again turned to Harry. "How do you like the Dursleys, Harry?" he asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. "They're OK, I guess."

"But pretty strict?"

Again, Harry shrugged. "A little," he said noncommittally.

"Do you have your own room?" Strowbridge asked.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"I always see young Dudley larking about with his friends," Strowbridge continued. "Why don't I see you running around, getting into mischief."

Harry wasn't sure how to answer this. "I...I guess I've got chores and stuff."

"Harry, do you have friends in the neighborhood," Strowbridge continued.

Harry once again shrugged. "I guess. Mr. and Mrs. Downey are nice. And I like to listen to the stories Mr. and Mrs. Nichol tell. They're nice."

"I mean friends your own age, Harry," Strowbridge said softly.

"Not really," Harry said equally softly. "All my friends are from school and they all live all over the place. None of them live near here."

"It must be pretty lonely, with no one of your own age to talk to all summer long. Why don't you come out to play or just hang around with the other kids in the area?" Strowbridge prodded.

Harry shifted in his seat, wondering how soon he could politely leave. "Well, I've got all these people I promised to do work for and I when I'm not doing that, I've got chores at home and stuff, and I have to study for the next term. Plus, I write my friends from school all the time," he said, mentally kicking himself for not writing Ron and Hermione yet.

"Harry, what do you do for fun?" Strowbridge asked.

Harry was at a loss. "Well I like sports at school, and there's all sorts of things to do there, and we can go into town one weekend a month, and we love practical jokes, especially with my best friend Ron's twin brothers who are real jokesters, and..."

"No, Harry. I mean here in Little Whinging."

Harry pondered. "Well, I like to meet new people, like the people I mow lawns for and stuff...and I got to see a real good movie on the tele last night," he said desperately.

"Harry," Strowbridge said intently. "Do you get into mischief much?"

Harry turned to Strowbridge, wide-eyed. "Oh, no, sir," he said vehemently.

Strowbridge suddenly laughed. "Sure you do. All boys your age like to get into a little mischief now and then. I daresay I did when I was your age. What are you, fourteen, fifteen?"

"I'll be fifteen on July 31," Harry said.

"So surely you get into trouble now and again. Things that your aunt and uncle wouldn't approve of."

Harry thought quickly how to answer this question. "Well, I overcooked the bacon for breakfast yesterday. They didn't like that."

Strowbridge and Ashwell gave Harry a quizzical look. "So you cook breakfast for the family? Is that one of your chores?"

"I guess," Harry said.

"What are your other chores?" Strowbridge asked.

"I don't know. All sorts of things. Mow the lawn, weed the garden, do the wash and wash the dishes, scrub the floors, all sorts of stuff," he said with a frown. "My uncle wants me to paint the house this summer."

Ashwell was beginning to get an angry look, but Strowbridge checked him with a glance. "What happens when you don't do your chores?"

Harry looked puzzled. "I do my chores," he said firmly.

"Well, what happens when you do them poorly, or do them wrong?" Strowbridge asked.

Harry grimaced. "My aunt or uncle get mad and yell...but I am careful and that doesn't really happen," he said with a sudden rush.

"Do you like living with the Dursleys," Strowbridge asked softly.

Harry shrugged. "They're all right, I guess." Then he made a show of looking at the clock. "Oh, I promised the Steins I would be there as early as possible, and it's almost 1:30. I'm sorry, but I have to get going."

Harry rose and thanked Denise Ashwell and then Clem Ashwell. He then turned to Strowbridge to shake hands. The reverend held tightly onto Harry's hand and looked him directly in the eyes. "Listen, Harry. If anything ever happens, or you need someone to talk to, you come to the vicarage and ask for me directly. No matter what time of day or night."

"Yes, sir," Harry said and started to pull away. But Strowbridge held his hand.

"One other thing, Harry," he said. "The parish sponsors dances for people your age twice a month. The next one is the Friday after next, starting at 7:00. I'll expect to see you there. And you can tell your aunt and uncle that."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. Strowbridge let go of the handshake and Harry left rather more quickly than would have been usual.

Strowbridge turned to the Ashwells. "What do you think?"

Clem Ashwell had a clouded look. "I don't know if they are beating him, but he is being mistreated, abused in one way or another."

Strowbridge nodded, a very serious look on his face. "Talk to the people in the neighborhood you trust. I want as many people as possible keeping an eye on that boy. If anything out of the ordinary happens, let me know. I may go pay a visit to the Dursley home to get a look myself. But I want to be careful. I don't want to precipitate a crisis. He's too vulnerable and right now there's little social services or the NSPCC can do legally without direct evidence of abuse or a statement by the boy. And I think he's either too scared to say anything or too naive to know there's help available."

Strowbridge started to rise, but settled back again in thought. "Your boys are, what, eight and ten?"

Ashwell nodded. "Sean will be eight this month, and David turned ten in March."

"That's too young," Strowbridge said. "There's got to be some neighborhood children his age that we can match him up with, to be his friend and sounding board. Think about it, will you Clem, Denise. We'll talk again soon."

With that, the self-appointed head of the newly formed Muggle Society to Protect Harry Potter rose and took his leave.

CHAPTER 2 Sara

Sara Geddes wiped the condensation from the bathroom mirror. Fresh from her morning shower, she made a face at her reflection. She didn't like her hair. It was too short and it just wasn't blond enough. She hoped the summer sun would take care of that before she had to take matters into her own hands. She adjusted the towel around her, pushing up her breasts. She was convinced that one was larger than the other. And, despite her morning jogging, she still thought her bum was too big.

Taking a closer look at her face, she checked for lines, any lines. Laugh lines, crow's feet, frown lines. She wondered whether her eyebrows were too thick. 'Two caterpillars coming together to mate,' she had heard one boy she knew describe another girl's brows at school. No one would say that about her, she vowed. She made a moue at the mirror, then smacked her lips to try to give them a little more natural color. Looking at her freshly brushed teeth, she wondered whether they should be whiter. Maybe brushing with peroxide, like her friend Daisy, would help.

Sara Geddes could easily count a dozen things she absolutely hated about her appearance. Which made Sara Geddes and very normal, very pretty young 17-year-old woman.

She sighed and went into her room to get dressed. There was nothing to dress for. Her boyfriend was away in France for the summer. 'Why couldn't he go on a regular holiday, the beach at Brighton, or something like that,' she thought. Then she might be able to sneak away for a weekend to see him.

Instead, she would have to sit around the house while some pimply faced boy mowed the lawn. Her father was at work and her mum had the other car on some sort of charity work and her two best friends were working. So she was stranded. Sara shook her head. Just some old blouse, a pair of walking shorts and her old tennis shoes would be good enough for her 'guest.'

Promptly at 10:00, there was a knock at the door. Sara sauntered over and opened it.

"Ah...Mrs. Geddes," Harry stammered, looking at her in confusion.

Sara looked at him, a little disconcerted. He was a pleasantly looking boy, with a shock of black hair that seemed to be in mid insurrection. He was as tall as she was, and, from behind his old-fashioned glasses, he looked to have very nice, green eyes. And not a pimple in sight.

She recovered first. "No," she said sternly. "Not Mrs. Geddes. I would have thought that would be plainly evident. I am Sara Geddes, if you please."

"Of course," Harry said with a small, embarrassed smile. He mentally kicked himself for being such a clod.

"And you must be Harry," she said archly. "Here to mow the lawn."

Harry nodded.

"Well, the mower is in the garden shed. Come along and I'll show you."

Sara opened the front door wide to admit him, surprising Harry. Normally, people would simply walk out and lead him around to the back. Without a thought, he wiped his feet on the entry matt and went in.

The houses on Carton Drive were bigger than those on Privet or Queen Anne Road. But this house was more than just bigger. It was elegant. On passing through the entrance way, Sara led him through a large drawing room of Wedgewood blue with white plaster moulding. The furniture looked very expensive, yet comfortable, and the parquet wood floors were covered by a scattering of oriental rugs. The room was dominated by a large marble fireplace, above which hung a formal

portrait of a handsome sandy-blond man of early middle age, a lovely woman with light blond hair and porcelain skin and a young girl, apparently Sara, with a slightly haughty, yet mischievous look on her face.

Sara led him into a hallway. Harry noticed through an open door a wood paneled library which looked to contain thousands of books, from leather-bound tomes of great age to more recent volumes on history and current affairs. Harry chuckled quietly.

"Is something funny, Harry," Sara said with a raised eyebrow.

Harry blushed a little. "I'm sorry. I saw the library and thought of how a friend of mine would be in heaven in there."

"Oh, a bookworm, is he?" Sara said.

"Oh, yes," he said with a smile. "Oh, but it's a she...I mean she's a girl," he stammered.

Sara turned and gave Harry a little smile. "Ah-ha," she murmured.

Sara led Harry through a large, modern kitchen. He could see through another kitchen door a large, formal dining room that would easily accommodate twenty people.

As Sara was leading Harry out to the back porch she glanced back at him. "And this girl would be your girlfriend, I suppose."

Harry didn't know how to respond. It was now more than a week since her had seen Hermione at the train station, but he still kept going back to the kiss she gave him. He didn't know what to think about it, but the kiss made him feel warm and happy even in his darkest moods.

"I don't know," he said. "I guess she's my girlfriend, maybe. But I think my other best friend likes her, too. It's complicated."

"All great love stories are complicated," Sara said melodramatically. "It's what makes them great."

Harry gave her a puzzled look as she led him to the shed. She was beginning to sound like Professor Trelawney, his divination teacher. Harry shook his head at the thought. "They may be great to other people, but they sure are confusing to the ones involved," he said flatly.

She turned as she opened the shed and gave Harry a quizzical, speculative look. "Well," she said after a brief pause. "Here's the mower and whatever other tools you will need. There's petrol in the tin over in the corner. Now, as I understand it, it's ten pounds for the backyard and five pounds for the front, plus five pounds for any additional weeding and general necessary yard work. Am I correct?"

"Yes, Miss Geddes," Harry said compliantly.

"Oh, please," she said rolling her eyes. "How old are you?"

"I'll be fifteen in a month."

"Well I turned seventeen in February, so I'm hardly a dowager yet. Call me Sara," she said.

Harry smiled. This was the first time she spoke like a real, friendly teenaged girl. "OK. Sara."

"Good," she said, and left to go back in the house.

* * *

Sara got up for the third time to put yet another magazine in the magazine holder in the downstairs sitting room. She was suffering from the worst disease a teenager could suffer: boredom. Her thoughts kept returning to Harry. He was a nice-looking boy, although a little shy. Clearly, he was no match for Trevor, her boyfriend, but then Trevor was nineteen and in university. He was so sexy,

with muscles from years of being on the rowing team.

But Sara thought Harry might be an interesting boy to get to know. Not romantically, obviously. He's much too young, she thought. But he had potential.

Suddenly, she got an inspiration. He's involved in a three-sided romance, she thought. And he probably has no idea of how to handle it. Well, she thought, with a new determination. 'I shall be the one to show him the way to a woman's heart,' she thought triumphantly. Thus, without realizing it, Harry had gained a muse.

* * *

Harry struggled at first trying to figure out how to work the electronic weed cutter Sara had showed him. He finally figured out how to feed out the nylon line so it cut the weeds and he managed to enjoy the ease in which he could edge the lawn. He thought about doing it using garden shears to edge old Mrs. Beaupres' lawn and rolled his eyes. He could barely sleep that night for the fatigue. When he was done, Mrs. Beaupres thanked him profusely, saying her lawn had never looked so nice. But Harry didn't know if he wanted to do that good a job for her next time. He chuckled to himself as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Oh, well, the back yard done, the front yard to come.

He turned to collect his tools to bring them to the front yard, but he saw Sara on the terrace deck, waving to him. "Harry. All done back here?"

He nodded. "I'll be done with the front in an hour, maybe less," he called to her across the yard.

"Never mind that for now. Come on up and rest a while. I have some iced tea," she called.

He nodded. He liked how so many of his neighbors were nice to him. Several had given him lunch, or something cool to drink. And today was especially hot and humid, and an iced tea would do him just fine. He gratefully mounted the stairs up to the deck.

He gave Sara a shy smile as he sat down. He was used to sitting down with the man or lady of the house to chat idly over a lemonade or a sandwich. But he wasn't used to sitting down with such a pretty girl who was nearly his own age. Well, he thought, a couple minutes rest would do him well and he would just mind his manners.

Sara had brought a pitcher of iced tea and two glasses out. She filled the two glasses and sat down languidly. "So, Harry," she said with an interested look. "I hear you go away to school."

Harry took his glass and sipped it, not meeting her look. He nodded noncommittally, worried that she would press him for details the way Rev. Strowbridge had.

She looked at him with curiosity. "Do girls go there, too? Or is it an all boys school?"

Harry smiled. "Oh, yes. There's about as many girls as boys there."

Sara nodded. "So...you have a girlfriend? This bookworm of yours?"

Harry suddenly blushed. Even though he already was pink from the sun and his exertions, Sara noticed his embarrassment and smiled to herself. "Oh, don't worry if she hasn't come around yet. You're a nice looking young boy. I'm sure there's a lot of girls who would want to go out with you."

Harry shifted uncomfortably.

"Have you gone out on a date?" she asked.

Harry was still uncomfortable. "Yeah...I took a girl to the Yule Ball this year..." he said tentatively.

Sara arched her eyes and continued smiling. "Tell me about her."

Harry shrugged. "Her name is Parvati. She's from India, but I think her family's been in England since...since...oh, maybe a hundred years or so."

"Is she pretty?"

Harry nodded quickly. "Oh, she's probably the prettiest girl in Gryff...in our House. Maybe the whole school. She got long, black hair that she always keeps in a braid and she's got a beautiful face...she's not dark like a couple of the other Indian students in the school, but like a nice tan...I don't know."

Sara smiled fondly. "...and you've got a huge crush on her, this Parvati the bookworm," she ventured.

Harry looked up. "Oh, no. Parvati's anything but a bookworm," he said with a chuckle. "She wears all this makeup and is always talking about boys and makeup and clothes and all that sort of thing. We went to the ball together sort of as a last minute thing. I arranged to go with her and my best friend, Ron, to go with her twin sister Padma."

Sara tilted her head and looked at him intently. "Did you try to talk to her, at least. Maybe she has more to talk about than that if she knew how interested you were in her," Sara said quietly.

Harry hung his head. "No...I guess I was kind of a jerk. And Ron was just as bad. We were kind of surprised how pretty our best friend looked when she showed up."

Sara gave him a puzzled look and then smiled in recognition. "So it's this *other* girl who's the bookworm that you and your mate are crushing on. But she already has a boyfriend. Is that it?"

Harry gave a resigned shrug. "I don't know. She came to the ball with this guy. He's a transfer student from Bulgaria. He's this big sports star, but he's a little thick. And kind of ugly. But he was a seventh year, and we were only fourth years. And he's famous. So girls seem to like him, I guess."

"What's this girl's name?"

"Hermione," Harry said reverently.

"So you like this Hermione, but so does Ron. And so does this Bulgarian guy. This is getting interesting." she said with an intent stare.

Harry squirmed uncomfortably. "Look, I've got some more work to do and I better get started..." he said as he made to get up.

But Sara grabbed his arm. "Oh, don't go running off yet. I'm bored to tears here alone and you ended up a lot more interesting to talk to than the typical pimply faced boy who usually comes to do yard work around here. Have another glass and relax. Maybe we can figure out a way for you to win the heart of your lady love."

Harry sat back down, still uncomfortable, but now intrigued. He realized that he didn't know much about girls and the way they thought or acted. Hermione was the only girl he really knew well, and he desperately wanted her to like him. But he didn't know how to talk to her about something like that. Maybe Sara could help. She was a lot older and more experienced, he figured. Maybe she would know how to reach Hermione.

"So what does this Hermione look like?"

Harry got a faraway look in his eyes. "Well...she's got a real pretty face. And she's got this long wavy hair. Oh, it's like a light brown. And it tends to get all bushy unless she tries to do something with it...like at the Yule Ball. And she's got these light brown eyes. Lately, when she looks at me..." He unconsciously sighed.

Sara smiled. "I know, Harry. I understand. So what is she like?"

Harry smiled. "Well, she's the smartest wit...smartest student in the school. She's always dragging Ron and me up to the library to study or research something or other. Ron complains that she's too

bossy, but she's just trying to help us with our studies. And she's very brave and loyal. We've gotten into...well, we've gotten into some scrapes together and she's always there to help us get by. She's always by our side, no matter what."

Sara nodded. "And what about your friend Ron? And her Bulgarian boyfriend?"

"Viktor isn't her boyfriend," he said, starting to get upset. "I mean...he did invite her to his castle in Bulgaria this summer. But I don't know if she wants to go. I mean, he's not her type at all. He can't even pronounce her name. He calls her Herm-o-ninny or something like that," he said with his head down.

"And Ron?"

Harry shifted again, sorting out his feelings. "Look, Ron is my best friend. But I think he really likes her, too," he said dejectedly. "If she likes him, that would be okay, I guess. I mean, I would be sad and a little jealous. But I wouldn't want to lose him as my best friend. He was mad at me when I was named a champion at...well, we had this tournament among three schools--that's why Viktor was at school this past year--and I was one of the representatives for my school. And Ron got mad because only seventh years were supposed to participate, but I got chosen and he was...I guess he was jealous or something." Harry took a deep breath.

"So, what happened with Ron?" she asked softly.

Harry shrugged. "Well, he said I cheated to get into the tournament...that I get everything...but I didn't. I really didn't," Harry said, his face a mask of sorrow.

Sara was startled. She thought she would kill a boring morning having a friendly talk with this nice young boy. But she realized he was baring his soul. Maybe he didn't have anyone else to talk to. Her demeanor suddenly changed and took on a more serious, understanding tone. "Harry, sometimes people get a little jealous. But that doesn't mean they can't still be good friends. You just said that if Ron won Hermione's heart, you would be a little jealous. But does that mean you would stop being Ron's friend?"

Harry shook his head sadly. "No."

"So he's still your best friend? Despite your disagreement?"

Harry nodded.

"So try not to worry about it. He might feel the same way about you if you won Hermione's heart. He'd be put out, but if he's a true friend, he'll get over it. You're young. And heartaches fade over time."

Harry frowned. "But don't you see. He thinks I get everything. If I got Hermione, he'd really be upset."

Sara looked at him intently. "So you'd rather walk away from the woman you love than take a chance on this Ron's friendship. Do you really think your friendship is that shallow that you can't trust him to like you if you're happy?"

Harry heaved a big sigh. "I don't know. We've been best mates for four years. He's the first real friend I ever had and the only one I can talk to about stuff. But I don't want to lose his friendship. I think I'd rather do anything than take that risk."

Sara grabbed his arm. "Nonsense. Harry, ring up Ron and talk to him. Tell him that you like Hermione. And tell him that it's okay with you if he likes her, as well. And tell him it's okay if she ends up as his girlfriend. That way, he'll know where he stands with you. And it will give him time to think about your friendship, as well as his feelings about this Hermione. Okay?"

Harry lowered his head and gave a small nod. "I guess..."

Sara leaned back and sighed with a small smile. "Ohh...are there many cute guys at this school of yours...ones that are more my age?"

Harry looked at her and was about to speak when a stricken look crossed his face. Suddenly, all the horrors, the sorrow, the nightmares began to overwhelm. All the things he couldn't talk about with Ron, with Hermione, with anyone except Dumbledore, came crashing forward in his brain.

Sara's eyes got wide. "Harry, what's the matter?"

Harry's eyes began to brim over. "There was...there was one...but he was killed. And it's my fault," he choked out.

Sara's eyes were now like saucers. "What?? What happened?"

Harry put his face in his hands. "I don't...I can't..."

"Harry," she said in an urgent whisper. "What happened. Maybe it would be better if you talked about it. You didn't kill this boy, did you?"

Harry shook his head. "No. But it was my fault. It's all my fault..." He began to weep.

Sara was worried now. She was used to chatting idly with friends. But she felt out of her depth now. She had only read about or seen on the tele situations where people were in this kind of agony about such serious situations. But she knew that one thing most of the so-called experts in the magazines and on the tele agreed on was that talking about a problem was the first step in dealing with it.

"Harry. Talk to me. Tell me what happened. I will help, I promise you."

Harry wept into his hands for several minutes before he finally looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes. "They wanted me...but Cedric was just there. So they killed him...If I hadn't agreed to let him share the cup, he'd be alive," he sobbed.

Sara had grabbed Harry's shoulders and looked him in the eyes. "Who killed Cedric? Gamblers? Mobsters? The IRA? Who, Harry?"

Harry was swaying a little as he thought. "I don't know...sort of like a gang...or a cult...Volde...ah...Tom Riddle. He killed my parents and now he wanted me. But...but...when they caught up with me...Cedric was with me. And...they...they didn't have...any use for Cedric, so they just killed him...like he didn't matter...like he wasn't even a real person. But he was the best person I knew at Hog...at school. He was handsome and smart and generous...and he helped me and I helped him during the tournament. He didn't have to, but he did. That's why I refused to take the championship by myself. So we shared the Tri...the championship cup. And they killed him for it. And they almost killed me. But...I got away. And I brought Cedric's body back. But he wouldn't have been there except for me. It was my fault. I should have been the one to die. Not him. And Cho..." He paused, unable to continue

Sara leaned back in her chair, stunned, overwhelmed. What had this boy, who was weeping openly in front of her, gone through? What kind of hell had he seen?

Finally, she caught her breath and thought about what he had said. "And Cho...?" she whispered.

Harry's chest was heaving. "I...had a crush on Cho...asked her to the Ball...but she went with Cedric...Then Cedric was killed..she says she doesn't blame me...I don't know...I just don't know...the nightmares...she's always accusing me...she says she knows...it's all my fault."

Sara got up from her chair without even realizing it and stepped over to put her arms around Harry. "It's all right, Harry. It's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong. Listen to me. You're the victim here. Not the villain. Stop blaming yourself."

Harry continued to cry on her shoulder as she stroked his back soothingly. When he finally managed to get himself under control, he gently pushed her away, his face burning.

"I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to tell you...You're nice to listen...But...I don't know." he hung his head in shame.

Sara pulled her chair over so she could hold both his hands. "Harry. This Riddle guy. Have they caught him yet? Are they close?"

Harry shook his head. "They say he died back around the time he killed my parents. They don't believe he's back. They don't believe me," he muttered.

Sara reached up and stroked his hair, noticing the scar on his forehead again. She shook her head. "Harry. If you ever need someone to talk to, ring me up. I'm not the best at this sort of thing, but I'm always willing to listen."

Harry slowly raised his head to look in her eyes. She was shocked at how green they were.

"Thank you, Sara," he said in the smallest of voices. "Thank you."

CHAPTER 3 "I'm Not A Dursley"

Dear Ron,

How is it going? I'm safely here on No. 4 Privet Drive. The Dursleys are as bad as ever. Dudley is as fat as ever, and my Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon still treat me like a slave when they aren't ignoring me.

One good thing is that I'm getting out of the house now. I'm mowing lawns and helping the neighbors with other stuff. It's fun to meet all these nice people I never knew even though they live nearby.

I met this nice girl named Sara. She's older, but very pretty. And she's nice to talk to. She's not a girlfriend or anything. She's got a boyfriend already--his name is Trevor!!! Can you believe it! Beautiful Sara dating Trevor the Toad! Ha Ha Ha! I told her all about you and Hermione. She was very interested.

I've been thinking about you and Hermione a lot. I wonder if you like Hermione. You know, like a girl. I sort of like her like a girl. A lot. I hope you don't mind. I guess if she likes you like a boyfriend, that's okay with me. But I like her, too. I hope you don't get mad. We are best mates and I don't want to make you upset or anything. Let me know how you feel. Okay?

Harry

** * **

Harry sighed. He had thought about what he would say to Ron all afternoon. He didn't know if he was doing the right thing. He didn't want Ron to be mad at him. He would do anything not of jeopardize their friendship. But he couldn't stop thinking about Hermione. And about that kiss she gave him on the platform.

He looked back at the letter. In the area where he mentioned Hermione, the parchment was almost translucent, he'd erased it so often to reword it to make it as honest, but nonthreatening as possible. But he had to tell Ron. He believed Sara was right. He and Ron had been best mates for so long that he had to trust Ron with his feelings. If he couldn't trust his friendship with Ron over something this important to him, then he couldn't trust any friendship. He tied the letter to Hedwig's leg after giving her an owl treat and sent her on her way.

He immediately wondered if he was doing the right thing. He tried to get to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. Almost immediately, he regretted sending the letter. He would continue to worry for a long time.

** * **

"And just what are you doing, young Master Harry," Mr. Nichol said with a smile.

Harry flushed. He had just finished mowing and raking Mr. Nichol's back lawn and was behind the garden shed, doing some of the karate kicks he had studied in the booklet from Dudley's karate school he had sneaked out of his cousin's room earlier in the week.

Dudley had been enrolled in a karate class as soon as the summer began. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon hoped that this might be a good way to control Dudley's weight. Dudley was enthusiastic, seeing himself as the next Bruce Lee. But his enthusiasm waned after only three classes, while Harry's only seemed to increase. So he had 'borrowed' Dudley's karate school booklet and started practicing the movements in the booklet whenever he could find a little space and some privacy outside.

Harry found a kind of release from the strenuous movements. He imagined all sorts of scenarios, usually involving Voldemort or his uncle, and occasionally Malfoy, as his victims. He disliked his cousin Dudley, but could no longer find it in himself to imagine beating the fat, forlorn boy.

But now he was embarrassed by being 'caught' at his practice by Mr. Nichol. "I'm sorry, Mr. Nichol. I just finished the lawn and still had a little energy to exercise a little," he stammered.

"Another Bruce Lee, then, are we," Nichol said with a chuckle. "I saw that his film was on the tele a few days ago and braced myself for all the young hooligans in the neighborhood to start karate chopping picket fences up and down the block as a result," he said, shaking his head with a smile.

Harry nodded, still embarrassed. "I saw that film, too."

Nichol's smile softened. "I thought so. I could tell by what you were trying back here. You've got some athletic ability, it seems, but you're doing a lot of it wrong. And I think you you've missed the boat completely on what martial arts are all about."

Harry looked up, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Nichol laughed. "Look, son. You're trying to be Bruce Lee, with all those high kicks and spins. You're copying movie magic moves. But for all your efforts, you're flailing around with no power behind what your doing. And you're trying some fairly difficult and inaccurate moves, rather than the truly strong but simple moves."

Harry stared at Nichol. He was tall, but not overly so, and slim. But he was graying and must be close to sixty. Harry wondered what Nichol knew about karate and kung-fu.

Nichol caught Harry's skeptical expression and chuckled. "Harry, from the time I was eight until I was sixteen, my father was an expediter for Gulf & Pacific Shipping in Hong Kong. We lived up in the hills, but my father's job was down by the docks. And, believe me, it's a lot rougher down by the docks than up in the hills."

"So you know about this stuff?" Harry asked shyly.

Nichol smiled. "When you're an adventurous kid like I was, you tended to stray into areas where you shouldn't. And I got bloodied up a few times as a result, before my father sent me to train in self-defense. He knew people who knew what was what, and I ended up being trained by a true master, not one of these local boys with just enough money to afford a few robes and a sign above their studios. If you really want to learn karate, I can give you a little guidance."

And true to his word, Nichol sat down and explained, and then wrote out, an exercise program to develop strength, agility, speed and stamina. But when Harry asked about what kind of moves he should be trying, Nichol shook his head. "Sorry, Harry. First, you have to master your body and discipline your mind. Work on these exercises and your running and, in a few weeks, I'll give you some pointers on moves," he said chuckling. "That's your first lesson. Patience."

Nichol leaned back on the lawn chair and put his hands behind his neck. "You know, when the time comes to show you how to move, I can show you a few things, but I'm not as young as I used to be. But I've got a nephew who lives not far from here who has been training at a real dojo for years. He's a couple years older than you, but I bet you'd get on well together. Why don't I ring him up and the two of you can get together over a couple sodas down at Langans fountain tonight. His girl is out of town and I bet he'd enjoy the company."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I don't think I can. My aunt and uncle don't want me out at night," she said in a rush.

Nichol smiled. "Don't worry about that. I'll just ring up Vernon and tell him to let you out for one night. Hey, it's Friday. I've seen you working all week around the neighborhood, even in the rain.

It's about time you got out and enjoyed yourself a little," he said, smiling.

Harry didn't know what to say. He began to panic. "But...but...I can't," he said pleadingly.

Nichol gave Harry a concerned look. "Why not. Don't be shy, boy. Peter's a lot of fun. And you must be making a fortune, with all the work you're doing around here. It's about time you got out and spent some of it," he said with a grin that covered his concern at Harry's sudden panic.

"But...I have to help chip in to my aunt and uncle...I don't have..." he stammered.

Nichol's brow clouded. "They make you pay some of your earnings to the house. Well, I suppose that helps encourage a sense of responsibility. How much to they take?"

Harry was turning red in anger and embarrassment, his head down.

Nichol frowned. "Harry. How much do they make you turn over?"

"All of it," he whispered.

Nichol leaned back in shock. "What!?! All the work you've been doing and you haven't go a cent to show for it!?!"

Harry shook his head sadly, now close to despair.

"Are they putting the money away for you? No allowance? Nothing? They can't be taking everything."

Harry shook his head. "They're taking it all. All of it," he said, his face burning in shame.

Nichol was on his feet, outraged. "But why? Why do you even bother if you get nothing for all your toil?"

"Because I like the people I work for," he muttered in a barely audible tone.

"You don't even hold anything back. You don't give them everything, do you!?!" Nichol shouted.

Harry was shocked by Nichol's tone and the suggestion that he lie. He jumped up, panic and anger showing on his face. "I'm not a liar! I'm not a cheat! Not even to them! And they can't turn me into one," he yelled, his a crimson mask of humiliation and outrage. "I'm a Potter!!!" he screamed. "I'm not a Dursley!!! I'm a Potter!!!"

He suddenly turned and ran from the Nichol back yard without even collecting his payment.

John Nichol sunk back down into his lawn chair, horrified and furious.

* * *

Nichol was still furious, and Merelie was near tears, when they arrived at the pub that night. They quickly located the Downeys and sat down with sullen looks.

"Well, someone throw a spanner into the works down at the docks, John. You look like a general strike as just been called," Pat said with a speculative grin.

John shook his head angrily. "That would be a blessing. At least I'd know how to handle that."

Evvie looked back and forth between John and Merelie and her faced paled. "Oh, no. You're not sick, are you? John? Merelie? Are the kids okay?"

John shook his head. "We're all fine. It's that young Potter boy that's got me upset," he said.

"Young Harry?" Pat said in shock. "What did he do? He seems like such a good kid."

John raised his eyes, startled. "Oh, no. It's not what he's done. It's what the Dursleys are doing to him."

Evvie gasped. "What?" she asked, fearing the worst.

John was now working up to a full outrage. "That f...that bloody aunt and uncle of his are taking every penny he earns for themselves. All his bloody work and sweat are going right into fat Dursley's pocket, the son of a bitch!"

Steve and Penny Robinson, who were at the next table, turned to stare at Nichol, whose had raised his voice.

Penny reached over to John. "Are you talking about the Potter boy? The one who mows our lawn?"

Nichol nodded curtly. "All that work and nothing to show for it."

Penny gasped. "They're sending him out to work and taking everything? They can't be that hard up for money, can they?" she said with a surprised look.

Clem and Denise Ashwell, who had heard the commotion, came over. "What's all this?" Clem asked.

John felt like getting up and announcing it to the whole pub. "That fat bastard Dursley is stealing every penny young Potter has been earning these past couple weeks. I knew he didn't have any friends in the neighborhood, so I tried to set him up with my nephew Peter. But he said he couldn't go. He didn't have a penny to spend. That fat son of a bitch," Nichol fumed.

Two tables down, Jeanne Seabury, the new president of the Garden Club Harry's Aunt Petunia belonged to, heard the whole conversation. She knew Petunia all too well and hated the snooping, back-biting bitch. Jeanne's sense of outrage gave way to an evil glint in her eye. 'Oh, Petunia. We've got you now,' she thought.

* * *

Petunia Dursley was dusting the living room with the tele blaring in the background just to keep her company. It was Saturday, and Vernon was out buying various and sundry items for the house after dropping off Dudley at his karate class despite the boy's protestations that they were boring. And her misbegotten nephew Harry was out mowing lawns and doubtless gathering up every spot of dirt he could find to track into the house. Suddenly, the doorbell rang.

Petunia went to the door and was shocked to find Jeanne Seabury, Angela Mathers and Deanna Crone, the board members from her garden club. They were all smiling and each was carrying what looked like casserole dishes.

"Petunia, darrrling," Jeanne said with exaggerated friendliness. "Please let us in. We are here for you in your hour of need."

Petunia gawped a couple times, but stepped aside to let her 'friends,' all of whom she despised, in. "Whaa...? Ahem, to what do I owe this lovely visit," she said in confusion.

Her visitors had gone to the kitchen to drop off their gifts. Jeanne returned and grasped Petunia's shoulders, giving her an air kiss. "Oh, Petunia. We're so worried about you."

Angela and Deanna looked at Petunia with sympathetic eyes that barely concealed the venom behind them.

"I...I don't understand," Petunia said with a crooked smile.

Her three visitors took seats in the living room. "Petunia, dear," Deanna said soothingly. "We know that times can be difficult every once in a while. And we know how strong and proud you are. But you should have come to us."

Petunia was thoroughly confused. "But...I don't know what you're talking about."

Angela chimed in. "Oh, brave, brave Petunia. We understand. But don't worry. It will be just be between us girls. Now tell us. How bad is it? Is Vernon still working? Has the business suffered setbacks. You can tell us."

Petunia was beginning to panic. "I still don't know what you're talking about."

Jeanne now took the floor. "I think it is so noble of your young nephew to go out each day and work so hard to pitch in and help you out of your financial straits. We heard that he gives you every penny he makes to help you make ends meet. And I've already sent out messages to all the members of the garden club to pass an emergency resolution to waive your club dues until you're back on your feet. And don't worry about the dishes we brought. I'm sure those casseroles will feed you for at least a week. You can return the dishes when you can."

A look of absolute horror crossed Petunia's face. "What are you talking about!" she shrieked. "What financial straits?! What...?!!"

"Oh, I'm sorry dear. We didn't mean to upset you. It's just that young Harry let slip that he was giving you every penny he earned. So naturally we assumed..." Angela said, leaving the pregnant point hang in the air.

"That filthy little..." Petunia was on her feet screaming. "Get out!!! Get out all of you!!! And take your bloody casseroles with you!!!"

Jeanne, Angela and Deanna rose as one. "Well," Jeanne said in a huff. "We're only trying to help!" she announced, her nose stuck high in the air. "Ladies?"

And the three marched into the kitchen to retrieve their baking and marched, nearly lock step, out the door.

Petunia was beside herself. Just wait until that worthless spawn of the devil comes home, she thought as she burst into tears.

* * *

Vernon Dursley had dropped the complaining Dudley off at his karate classes and was now making the rounds of the local shops. He had already stopped at the butchers, purchasing a roast and some chops, and picked up a loaf of his beloved date-nut bread at Tannen's Bakery down the block. After depositing his items in a cooler in the boot of his company car, he drove toward Dudley's karate school.

As he parked, he noticed the liquor shop and decided it would be good time to stock up the home bar. As he was waiting to pay for his purchases, he heard a familiar, and long-dreaded, voice.

"Well, if it ain't fat little Vernon Dursley."

Vernon turned to meet the stare of Steve Robinson, the man who, as a school boy at Smeltings, had been a rugby player who terrorized any student he thought was dishonest or a sneak. And Vernon Dursley was his favorite target.

Vernon's eyes got large as he remembered his worst days at Smeltings. "Now...see here, Robinson, you can't go talking to a man like that..." he stammered.

Robinson, who was as wide as Vernon but muscular, and nearly a head taller, walked up to within inches of Dursley and looked down into his eyes, just like he did at Smeltings. "No I can't, you fat little shyte. But I see no man here. Instead, I see a fat little sneak who is buying his gin and bitters with money I paid his nephew for *his* work and *his* sweat."

Vernon Dursley nearly wet himself in fear. "What...?"

"You heard me, you little turd. I heard all about it. About you stealing young Potter's hard-earned

money. Just like when you were back at Smeltings, when you and your little crowd would extort money from younger, weaker kids to pay for your sweets. But little did I think you'd do it to your own flesh and blood. What's next you fat bugger. Selling your son to the white slavers?'

"I...I..." Vernon stammered.

Suddenly, Penny Robinson grabbed her husband and pulled him away, giving Vernon a venomous look. "No use getting in trouble over scum like that," she hissed and led Steve out of the store.

Vernon felt a warm trickle down his leg. He had wet himself after all.

* * *

It had been a lovely Saturday for Harry. He had mowed three lawns and had a wonderful roast beef sandwich at the Steins for lunch. And as he passed by the Geddes' place, Sara came out and waved him to stop. They had a friendly chat. He reassured her that he was feeling much better about himself since talking to her two days before but confided his worries over his letter to Ron. She told him she expected to see him at the church youth dance in another week and that she would introduce him to several of the young people from the neighborhood, including a couple girls his age who, she hinted, might be pretty enough for his tastes.

So Harry was in a good mood. Which is why he didn't expect the punch from Vernon Dursley as he walked in the back door.

"You sodding whelp," Vernon screamed as Harry hit the floor from a solid blow to the midsection. "That'll teach you to talk about our private business to strangers."

Vernon grabbed him by the collar and dragged Harry, who was bent into a fetal position and gasping for breath, past a hysterically crying Petunia. "Little bastard," she kept screaming.

Vernon continued to drag Harry's body down the hallway until he came to the cupboard underneath the stairs. Vernon opened the cupboard and slammed Harry inside so hard that Harry's forehead hit the wall, opening up a cut above his left eye. "If I had a gun, I'd shoot you like a rabid dog, you little bastard," Vernon screamed. Harry mercifully passed out.

* * *

Rev. Strowbridge was a little put out that he didn't see Harry at services on Sunday. He always kept an eye out for his special people, like Jenna Cartwright, the young teen mother who was struggling to cope with single parenthood at such a young age, and little Paulie Charnoff, who Strowbridge helped to kick a drug habit. But Strowbridge knew that not every troubled young person he helped would be a regular at services. He was just happy that so many were there over the years.

But Strowbridge became a little more concerned on Monday and Tuesday, when his little network of Harry watchers reported that Harry wasn't showing up to work around the neighborhood, as promised. Harry hadn't been very communicative during their little chat, but Strowbridge thought that this might be a sign of shyness, rather than a truly troubled youth. Plus, the people in the neighborhood all seemed to think of Harry as punctual, courteous and hard-working, looking at him as something of a neighborhood mascot rather than a teenager prone to trouble.

What concerned him even more was his cursory investigations, along with Clem Ashwell's, into Harry's background and school. Strowbridge had made a couple telephone calls to friends and, within a day, received an unexpected visit from a cleric from the Archbishop's staff. He was politely but firmly told not to pursue inquiries about Hogwarts, but instructed to call a private number in the Archbishop's office immediately, before anything else unless Harry's life was at stake, should anything untoward happen to Harry.

Clem Ashwell received the same warning and request from an 'official' from the Department of

Education and Skills. "He was no more DES than I am the Queen," Clem said. "More like MI-5 or Scotland Yard, if you ask me."

In both cases, the officials swore that Harry was not under any kind of suspicion or cloud, but was being protected from harm. Strowbridge was extremely curious, but agreed to follow his instructions. But now Harry was among the missing and Strowbridge was determined to check on the disappearance.

* * *

It was Wednesday and Petunia was depressed. Harry was still locked in the cupboard. Vernon left specific instructions not to let him out under any circumstances. Petunia only let him out once on Monday afternoon when Harry, in a weak voice, threatened to pee out the vent on to her carpets unless he was allowed to go to the bathroom.

But Petunia was worried. She hated the boy as much as Vernon did, but she worried that he might die on them and then they would be in a world of trouble. Vernon had mentioned possibly driving the boy to some remote location hundreds of miles away and abandoning him, then reporting his as a runaway, but Petunia didn't know if that would work. So she was unprepared when the doorbell rang. She decided to pretend no one was home until she saw Rev. Strowbridge peek through the blinds and notice her sitting there.

She rose and went to the door. "Ah, Petunia Dursley," Strowbridge said with a smile. "I've come to see about my little friend and your nephew, Harry Potter. I had heard he was ill and I came to see if there was anything I could do."

Petunia was going to stand in the doorway to block him, but Strowbridge, with years of experience in such moves, swept by her without blinking an eye. "Where is young Harry, anyway?"

Petunia stood, opened-mouthed and terrified. "He's...he's run away. We don't know where he is."

Strowbridge, who had already sat down in the living room, looked up at Petunia with concern. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. He seemed like such a nice boy. Did you notify the authorities?"

Petunia's eyes darted around as she tried to think what to say. Strowbridge, seeing this, narrowed his eyes. Suddenly he knew. But he hoped against the worst.

"Uhhh...he hasn't been gone all that long..." she said in a rush. "I don't know...he's just our nephew...Are we allowed to file a report?" she said, near tears.

Strowbridge rose, a notebook in his hands. "Petunia, are you sure you don't know where Harry is?" he said in a firm tone.

Petunia was in a full-blown panic. "No...of course not. He always was unreliable...I'm sure he'll turn up...Look, I'm very busy...."

Strowbridge was striding past her now. "Where's his room. Maybe there are clues there."

"Ah...upstairs..." she stammered.

Strowbridge walked down the hallway and took the stairs two at a time. He was shocked at the contrast between the two boys' rooms. Dudley's was overflowing with clothes, gadgets, toys and magazines. Harry's, on the other hand, was nearly bare, with only a few old clothes, neatly kept but tattered, in his closet.

Strowbridge turned and almost ran in to Petunia. "Mrs. Dursley. Where is Harry?" he said firmly.

Petunia's eyes were now tearing up. "I don't know...You have no right..."

But Strowbridge ignored her and began to search throughout the house. As he went down the stairs, Harry woke up from his daze.

* * *

Where am I?

Oh, the cupboard.

It's dark. And my head hurts. And I feel sick to my stomach. But nothing comes up. My throat hurts.

Where am I?

Oh, yes.

He hit me. He hit me in the stomach. Then why does my head hurt?

I've got to get out. But I don't have the energy to move.

My wand. I can unlock the cupboard and get out.

Accio wand.

Nothing.

Maybe it can't hear me.

My head still hurts.

Mum. Dad. You helped rescue me from Voldemort. Please come and get me now. Please?

Nothing.

I know they loved me. I knew all along and now I know for sure. My dad died defending me. And my mum gave her life so I could live.

For their sacrifice, they now get to see their son die in the cupboard under the stairs.

Alohamora!

Nothing. I need my wand.

Why does my head hurt so much?

Professor Dumbledore, why am I here?

So I can lead a normal life. So that I will be away from all those who would flatter and pamper and spoil me. So I can die in the cupboard under the stairs.

Where are you now, Professor Dumbledore?

Hermione?

If only you were here. I know you would make it all better. Just having you near makes it all worth while. Just one of your hugs will make the pain go away. You're the only one I can count on, no matter what.

Is that you?

Moving around in here is so painful. But I have to get to you, Hermione. I know it's you out there. If I could only get to the loose slat in the cupboard door.

My fingers aren't working right. There, that's the one. Now, push it up so you can see. I know it's Hermione. She's come to make it better. Push up the slat.

No! My fingers! The slat fell. Now they'll hear and come and send Hermione away and she won't come and take care of me.

The cupboard door opened and Harry fell out.

He looked up.

"Hermione?" he croaked out.

Then everything went black.

* * *

Just after Strowbridge passed the cupboard under the stairs, he heard the click of the louver slat falling back into place and quickly turned around. He saw the cupboard and, to Petunia's horror, opened it. Harry tumbled out. He looked up groggily. "Hermione?" was all he managed to croak out. Petunia screamed and fainted.

* * *

Strowbridge had carried Harry out and into his car. As he promised, his first cell call was to the archbishop's office as he sped toward a local clinic. The person in the archbishop's office advised Strowbridge to stay with Harry and that someone would be there with a couple hours to take over. And the person on the other end of the line, when advised of the circumstances, told Strowbridge not to call child services until the archbishop's representative arrived and could be consulted.

The doctor at the clinic was adamant about writing up a child abuse report, but advised Strowbridge that Harry's only serious medical problems were a mild concussion and dehydration. Strowbridge was relieved that it was a hurt but breathing Harry that had found, not the body he had expected.

When he entered the corner of the unit where the boy was being treated, Harry managed to raise his head. "Thanks, Reverend. I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused."

Strowbridge was shocked to hear Harry say that. But then, he always was. He shook his head and took Harry's hand and sighed. More than half of the abused children he had seen in his time as a priest had been quick to apologize for the trouble. It never ceased to amaze, or sadden him.

"Harry, it's not your fault," he said soothingly. "What happened?"

Harry looked up at Strowbridge. "I don't know," he said weakly.

Strowbridge nodded. "Don't worry. It will come back to you. The sooner, the better."

Harry looked up at Strowbridge with a tired and puzzled expression. "I remember what happened," he said hoarsely. "I just don't know why."

Strowbridge returned Harry's puzzled look. "What did happen?"

The nurse came in briefly to give Harry another small cup of fluid and to check the intravenous tubes hooked to Harry's arms.

When she left, Harry looked up at Strowbridge. "I don't know why...I had a nice day on Saturday...mowed lawns for the Steins, Jacobys and Tutttles...talked to Sara...Sara Geddes...she's pretty," Harry said and gave a hoarse cough. "Then came home. Uncle Vernon hit me in the stomach as soon as I came in the door. Threw me in the cupboard. Woke up there. What day is it?"

Strowbridge was choking back tears. "It's Wednesday, Harry," he whispered.

Harry closed his eyes in sorrow and anger. "I'm not going back. Never going back..."

"You won't have to, son," Strowbridge said, grasping Harry's hand firmly in reassurance.

"Don't care what Dumbledore says. Never going back," Harry said quietly as he leaned back and closed his eyes.

* * *

It was getting on toward three in the afternoon when a strange procession walked into the clinic. On one side was a tall and burly cleric. On the other was a tall and burly man in a black suit and sunglasses. And in the middle was an elderly man with long white hair and a long white beard, wearing a green checkered three-piece suit, a floral ascot and work boots.

The man in the dark sunglasses showed his identity card to the receptionist. "Harry Potter," he said in a flat voice. The receptionist waved them back to one of the doors to the emergency units.

Harry was sitting up now, looking more alive. His throat was still sore, but his head had stopped throbbing and he was no longer nauseous or dizzy. He was chatting with Strowbridge and disappointed that he wouldn't be able to attend the parish youth dance when the three mysterious figures entered.

Strowbridge blinked. "Seth?"

The cleric nodded. "How are you doing, Tony?" he asked with a sad smile.

Harry's eyes were wide. "Professor Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a sad smile. "Harry. I'm so sorry. I never knew things were so bad or I would never have sent you back here."

Harry nodded, his eyes filling. "Oh...professor...just when I was beginning to enjoy the mug...the neighborhood, they did this to me," he said, tears running down his face.

Strowbridge looked up sharply at Dumbledore. "You sent him back to those people?" he said in an angry voice.

For the first time, Harry saw Dumbledore looked shamed. "I never knew it was this bad. They were his only relatives and I thought it was the only place he would be safe."

Strowbridge was now angry. "Instead, they almost killed him," he said contemptuously.

Suddenly, Seth grabbed Strowbridge's arm and pulled him away. "Tony, we've got to talk."

Strowbridge gave Dumbledore one last angry look and turned to follow Rev. Seth Plessy, the Archbishop's representative on magical affairs.

* * *

When they were alone, Seth sat Strowbridge down. "Tony, what do you know about this boy...Harry?"

Tony was still angry. "I know that he's one of the nicest teenagers I've ever met, but those who do know him well didn't bother to check to see if he was well cared for, or if he lived or died."

Seth gave Tony a placating look. "Believe me, there's an awful lot of people who care about Harry. Including the old man out there. They just didn't expect this."

Strowbridge rubbed his hand across his face, trying to calm himself and relieve some of the tension he was feeling. "I wish I know what in heaven's name was going on. You say people care about him, but all I see is an abused and battered boy who's done nothing but work hard and be pleasant to everyone who's come in contact with him. A couple of my people told me they were worried about him. So I set up a warning signal to watch out for him. Sixteen people in the neighborhood volunteered to try to keep track of him. Sixteen! And when he started to fail to show up for little jobs he'd promised to do for them, I started getting calls left and right from people, not to complain about him, but because they were out of their minds with worry for him. Who is this boy, anyway?"

Seth looked at Tony intently. "Tony. What do you know about Harry? About his abilities? About Hogwarts?"

Strowbridge looked up with a start. "What abilities?"

Seth stirred uncomfortably. "What do you know about Hogwarts?" he asked quietly.

Strowbridge shrugged. "It's the school Harry goes to. Some sort of agricultural trade school, from what he told me. I couldn't find it in any educational registries I looked in. I get the impression it's up north, maybe Scotland. Why?"

Seth looked down and thought for a long time. Finally, he looked up at Strowbridge. "Tony. We go back a long time. I know you are one of the most honorable people I've ever met, in or out of the Church. So I don't ask this lightly. Can I trust you not to breathe a word of this to anyone?"

Strowbridge was taken aback. "Seth. You know me better than that. Of course you can trust me."

"Even if what I tell you sounds crazy? Or I sound like a loon?"

Strowbridge gave him a wan smile. "I remember you back in the seminary. I can't imagine anything you could tell me that would surprise me."

Seth took a deep breath. "Harry's a wizard. Not a metaphorical one. A real one. Like witches and wizards. Hocus-pocus. Magic. Except it's no slight of hand. He's the real thing."

Strowbridge stared. "What?"

Seth sighed. "There's a whole community of people out there. A whole civilization of magical people out there. They live side-by-side with us. But they have special powers. And they stay underground, apart from the rest of us. And Harry's one of them. And one of the most important, from what I understand."

Strowbridge shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense. How could there be a whole community that none of us know about?"

Seth shrugged. "There's all sorts of ways they do it. The school Harry goes to, Hogwarts. It's an old abandoned ruin of a castle away from any of the main thoroughfares in the middle of an impenetrable forest up in Scotland. It's owned by the National Trust and completely off limits to the general public. Or, at least, that's what everybody thinks. And that's what everybody sees when they fly over. But it's some sort of magical shielding. It's actually a beautiful, fully functioning school in the most beautiful castle in the Isles. I know. I've been there. It's a school...a sort of wizarding university where they learn about magic and about how to keep a low profile."

Strowbridge's head was spinning. "But...how many of them are out there?"

Seth shrugged. "No one seems to know. I've seen estimates ranging anywhere from 100,000 to 750,000 in the U.K. alone."

"How can that be?"

Seth bent forward, his elbows on his knees. "I don't know how they do it. There's supposed to be a community of about 8,000 living right in the heart of London in some place called Diagon...Diagon Alley. I'm not sure exactly where, because they have all this magical shielding. It probably looks like some abandoned railway line or some unexploded bomb area because that's the way they want it to appear to us...Muggles."

Strowbridge blinked. "Muggles?"

Seth nodded, a small smile forming. "That's what they call us, the nonmagical community."

Strowbridge shook his head. "If this is such a deep dark secret, why are you telling me?"

Seth's smile disappeared. "Because there's a war going on among the wizards. And Harry is in the middle of it."

"What?!"

Seth nodded. "There's some sort of wizarding Hitler out there, trying to take over. And it's spilled over into the nonmagical world a couple times. There was a big one about fourteen years ago, where some thirteen people were killed by a wizard. The authorities let on that it was a gas main explosion, but it was a wizard's spell that killed those poor people."

"But what does Harry have to do with all this?" Strowbridge asked pleadingly.

Seth tried to figure the best way to answer this. "Well, it seems that this wizarding Hitler killed Harry's parents when he was an infant and then tried to kill Harry. But somehow, Harry had some sort of special magic that turned the killing stroke around and nearly killed the tyrant. So he's become something of a symbol to the wizarding world to resist this Hitler. That's why he has so many people looking out for him. This dark wizard, Voldemort is his name, has risen again, according to some, including the boy, who says he witnessed this rise. And now he is trying to come after Harry again. He wants either to kill or capture him to demoralize the wizarding world and allow him to unleash some sort of reign of terror. And there are people at 10 Downing Street who are aware of what is going on and are worried. That's why MI-5 is here. You know, Mr. Sunglasses out there. That's Sean Donovan, one of the few people in the government who know more about the wizarding world than I do."

Strowbridge was quiet a long time. Finally, he looked up at Seth. "So I ask you again. If this is such a deep, dark secret, why are you telling me?"

It was Seth's turn to be quiet for a long time. "Because Harry isn't safe in the wizarding world right now. The only place he's safe at the moment is in Little Whinging. And probably, the only place he'll be safe now is with you and Mae at the vicarage."

CHAPTER 4 "There Will Be Other Dances"

Harry leaned back against the pillows in the emergency ward of the clinic. It was now past five in the afternoon. He had been drinking juices and other fluids sporadically throughout the afternoon and had a soft meal of soup and custard. His throat was still sore, but he found talking coming a little easier. The doctor and a couple nurses had been more than attentive and he appreciated their efforts, particularly in shooing away Dumbledore, Donovan the copper, as Harry thought of his, and Seth the priest, to give Harry time to rest. And the bed was just as comfortable as his bed in Hogwarts and miles ahead of the daybed he was forced to sleep on at the Dursleys.

The one person he wouldn't mind seeing, though, was Reverend Tony. He had a hard time forgiving Dumbledore for sending him back to the Dursleys although, truth be told, not even Harry had expected this. But somehow Strowbridge had known and knew to come get him. Harry thought about his conversation with Strowbridge at lunch at the Ashwell's place and realized there were people looking out for him, after all. And Strowbridge had been the leader of this group. And Harry wanted Reverend Tony to know he appreciated it.

But Harry was also worried. How could he keep his secret with all these people running around, people like Donovan the copper and Reverend Plessy, Reverend Tony and the doctor and nurses. Surely Dumbledore had taken precautions. But there would be an investigation and charges and all sorts of trouble.

And Harry worried what would become of him. He knew he would never go back to the Dursleys, no matter what. If Dumbledore told him he had to, Harry was determined to find his way to Gringotts, take some of his money out and go underground, living in Muggle London on the streets if necessary.

But, more likely, he would be sent to stay at Hogwarts. Or, in the best of cases, sent to the Burrow to live with Ron and his family. But he had already heard Dumbledore discuss with Donovan that staying with school mates' families was not an option at the present time. Harry just hoped he had his strength back before they made a final decision. If he had to bolt, he wanted to be physically able to survive on the streets until he got his bearings.

Harry sighed and closed his eyes, appreciating the comfort of the hospital bed while he had it.

* * *

Sean Donovan had begged off the group to go outside to make a cell phone call where there was less static and line interference from all the medical equipment and machines. Actually, his primary purpose in going outside was to have a quick smoke and clear his head.

Donovan was a big, burly man in his late thirties. He had been raised just north of London on the road to Oxford and, while not exactly attending such a lofty institution, was well schooled and made a name for himself on the rugby and football pitches at university. He caught the eye of a recruiter for MI-5 and, after several general security assignments, was named as part of the team investigating what everyone outside the department knew was a gas line explosion, possibly sabotaged by radical elements of one or another group with a grudge.

But Sean Donovan, after a couple hours on the scene, knew better. He quietly passed on his suspicions to an older investigator, even though he knew the man would think him crazy and probably kill his career just as it was getting started. Surprisingly, the older investigator not only did not think him crazy, but quietly passed his name on to a highly classified department working directly for an internal security branch out of 10 Downing Street. Because while everybody outside the department knew that it was a gas line explosion that killed Peter Pettigrew and 13 others, a

small group in MI-5 knew that it was magic that did the deed. And they understood that Donovan knew because of what he was: a squib who could function in the Muggle world and whose knowledge of the wizarding world was invaluable to the government.

Donovan took a deep drag on his cigarette before snapping open the cell phone. He hand dialed from memory the phone number at 10 Downing Street that he dare not put on his speed dialer. He squeezed his fingers on the bridge of his nose under his dark glasses, a favorite Muggle law enforcement affectation of his, as the phone rang. It was picked up on the fifth ring, much to Donovan's annoyance.

"Stan? Donovan here. The boy's going to be all right....No, not Riddle. The kid's guardians. They locked him in a closet for nigh on four days...The Headmaster says school is a no-go and his friends' places are out. Plessy from the church has an idea...yeah, that Plessy. How many Plessys do you know?...Yeah, the vicar can take him in...but we're going to need some cash to the Archbishop's office as a sweetener. They'll kick in half, but Plessy says the church wants us to help this time...No, the vicar already knows...his wife, too. Plessy's already spilled it...Yeah, I know, but this kid's important...I don't care. Use the slush fund, if you have to...I tell you, this kid's the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower and Buckingham bloody Palace all wrapped into one in his world and he has to be protected or all hell will break lose in both our worlds. You got that? Good. We need a decision by morning....Yes, tomorrow morning...Ring up Plessy or Pearson at the Archbishop's as soon as you get the nod...Oh, and if you don't get the nod, I'm turning you into a vole....Right....Call me at this number. I'll be up all night, if need be....Okay. Later."

Donovan took a last drag on the butt and flicked it out into the gutter and returned to the hospital.

* * *

Dumbledore sat down beside Harry's bed and watched him sleep. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and hands over his face. How could he have been so foolish. McGonagall had warned him from the start that the Dursleys were Muggles of the worst sort, but he had ignored her. He believed that it would be better to keep Harry out of the limelight as he grew up rather than allow him to become an arrogant, self-centered sod, living off his notoriety.

Dumbledore shook his head. How foolish to let such whimsical notions send poor Harry through whatever hell he'd been living in for the past fourteen years.

And Dumbledore began to have new doubts. What other silly, romantic notions had he been putting into play in his battle with Voldemort that may come back to haunt him. Maybe Snape and Moody were right. Send out teams to assassinate Death Eaters. Turn the whole battle into a war of attrition, counting on Voldemort's meager forces to crack. Maybe there was no room for the niceties of the law in a battle against such a foe. But the elderly Headmaster shook his head again. That would be like the wizarding world 150 years ago, where might made right and the ministry was an entity of terror, rather than the harmless den of cowards and fools that it had become.

Dumbledore sighed.

"Are you all right, Professor?" Harry croaked, having awakened from his nap.

Dumbledore looked up. "Alas, Harry, it is I who should be asking you such a question. As long as you are well, I am pleased."

Harry gave a wan smile. "I'm going to be okay. Only I'm probably going to miss the church dance on Friday. I was really looking forward to that."

Dumbledore gave a forced smile. "There will be other dances, Harry."

Harry's eyes were now a little clearer as he fully awakened from his sleep. He cleared his throat a couple times. "Will there, professor? Will there?" he asked in mild reproof. "What's going to

happen to me now? I'm not going back there, you know," he said in a quietly determined voice

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, Harry. You'll never have to go back there again, I promise you. If I hadn't been such an old fool, you would never have been there in the first place."

Harry nodded. "Maybe I should have told you more about the Dursleys, although it was never this bad."

Dumbledore couldn't reply.

"So what's going to happen to me now? Back to Hogwarts? Or the Burrow with the Weasleys?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "There's no place in the wizarding world where I would feel comfortable leaving you, son."

"Hermione's parents are Muggles..."

Dumbledore shook his head again. "Too many in our world know of your friendship with Miss Granger. There may be watchers around the Grangers. It's too risky."

Harry bristled. "Is Hermione in danger?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "The Grangers are taking an extended holiday abroad. Not to Bulgaria, I might add," he said with a vague smile. "No one will bother Hermione or her parents. Rest assured of that."

Harry breathed a little easier. "So where will I end up? Some orphanage, I suppose, under an assumed name?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry closely. "We are working on a plan as we speak. Perhaps it would be best for you to stay here in Little Whinging with someone other than the Dursleys. Perhaps you will get to go to one of those church dances yet."

* * *

Dumbledore had been called away by Plessy, so Donovan the copper stopped by his bed. "So, Harry. You feeling better?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I guess."

Donovan finally removed his sunglasses. He had piercing blue eyes to go with his close-cropped brown hair. "So what's it like, getting hit with a *Cruciatus* Curse?"

Harry's jaw dropped. "You're an auror?"

Donovan shook his head. "No. I was raised in the wizarding world with a wizard father and a Muggle mother. Unfortunately, my magical powers never developed. I am what, in less than polite circles, is called a squib. It caused something of a strain on my parent's marriage and unfortunately, they are no longer together. So I was raised a Muggle, even though I am familiar with the wizarding world."

"I work for a branch of MI-5, the national security service. I'm one of the few in the Muggle world who know the wizarding world. It's a knowledge that is a rare commodity, indeed."

Harry was still in shock. "But...so...you know about me?"

Donovan nodded. "From your headmaster, yes. And about as much as I can glean from the Daily Prophet, although their level of reporting is even lower than the *Sun's*...and there's no Page Two girls...or should I say witches...to liven up the rag."

Harry snorted in mirth. "You can say that again. So maybe you know what's going to happen to me. And the Dursleys."

Donovan raised his eyebrows. "Can't say for sure about you at the moment. There are plans afoot, but nothing firm." Donovan took a deep breath. "As for the Dursleys, well, your aunt and uncle are being kept in a government holding facility. Their guards have been informed that they are being held for observation after an incident of child abuse and that there are fears that Vernon and Petunia have had a psychotic episode. So any ramblings they might have about your being a wizard will be taken with a grain of salt."

Donovan closed his eyes in sorrow. "Your cousin's been farmed out with a foster family. He made something of a scene, but he is with people used to emotionally disturbed youngsters. Unfortunately, after the expected initial hysteria, he began screaming about his tele and his computer more than his mum and dad. You have to wonder what that family...oh, sorry Harry," he said, looking at Harry with sympathy.

"Unfortunately, it wouldn't do any of us any good if there was a full investigation and criminal charges against them. So they'll sit in custody for a week or so and then be offered a deal. If they wish criminal charges to be shoved under the rug and if ever want to see their son again, they will quietly decamp from this area and never be seen or heard from again. It appears that word is already out in town about you and them, so their staying here would not be in anyone's interest. And I'm sure that your uncle's employer will have something to say to Vernon on his release. Even directors are expected to conform to a basic code of decent conduct outside of the office."

"So I'll never have to see them again?"

Donovan shook his head. "Never again. I can arrange a meeting with your cousin, if you'd like."

Harry shook his head. "That's all right. He and I never got on and he's probably having fits right now. It's best that we leave him be."

Donovan nodded. "It's a shame what some people are capable of."

Harry and his new copper friend sat in companionable silence for quite a while.

* * *

Seth Plessy snapped his cell phone shut and looked at Tony Strowbridge and his wife Mae. "Well, the deal had been struck. Basil Wright has rung up the rest of the Parish Council and they've jumped at the idea. They love the idea of being part of the Archbishop's test program to have the vicarage take in a neglected child. Of course the ten thousand for church repairs and the five thousand annuity in case the program is extended was a nice touch. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Tony Strowbridge turned to his wife and she nodded enthusiastically. "We're sure."

* * *

All Tony Strowbridge's adolescent hope, dreams and fantasies about romance and marriage never prepared him for the depth and richness of the love he found when he married Mae. She was sparkling and vivacious, pretty and fun to be with. He counted his blessings when she disdained all her other suitors in favor of a newly minted Anglican priest with few prospects. And Tony and Mae were delighted when, after two years of marriage, she found she was pregnant.

But the payback for having such a wonderful wife happened several months into Mae's pregnancy. A simple misdiagnosis and a lost set of test results that would have disclosed Mae's pregnancy as ectopic resulted in a miscarriage and an infection that cost Mae her ability to conceive again.

The couple were heartbroken. So, now secure in their parish in Little Whinging, they threw themselves into the care and help of troubled children in the parish. Now, after 16 years in the parish, they found that they had a sweet natured but troubled teenaged boy to take care of, if only for a couple months. Mae cried tears of joy. She now had, if only briefly, a son of her own to care

for. Even if, as Seth also confided to her, he was a wizard.

* * *

It was Thursday morning and Harry was now feeling much better and was ready to leave. But he still didn't know where he would be going. He knew Dumbledore wanted him to stay in Little Whinging. But there was nowhere to go in town where he could be a wizard in hiding except for 4 Privet Drive. No one else knew. And Harry was frightened that his fate would be taken completely out of his hands. He looked down at his hands as he flexed his fingers. He would run rather than be put into another impossible position. He wasn't street-wise, but he had become very good at being guarded, and guarding himself against outsiders. So he figured he could survive.

"Well, now. How are we feeling this morning?" came a hearty voice from around the curtain surrounding his bed in the ward. Harry looked up with a smile. It was Reverend Tony.

"Still here, although somewhat worse for the wear," Harry said with a chuckle, his voice now nearly back to normal. Then he noticed Strowbridge wasn't alone. Dumbledore, Donovan and Plessy were there, as well. And there was also a woman of early middle age who looked vaguely familiar, but Harry couldn't place her.

Harry turned back to Strowbridge, who was in his collar and suit, as was Plessy. And Donovan was still in his black suit, although minus the sunglasses, which were poking out of the breast pocket of his jacket. And now Dumbledore was wearing an identical outfit, down to his own pair of sunglasses poking out of his suit jacket. The woman, at least, was not in costume. She was wearing tan slacks and a long-sleeved off-white blouse. Her thick brown hair, which was showing the occasional gray strand, was tied back in a ponytail. And she wore no makeup that Harry could see, but her warm smile made such extraneous enhancements unnecessary.

Harry stifled a chuckle and set his face. Apparently, his fate had been decided and he now began to brace himself for the news.

Strowbridge sat in the chair next to Harry's bed. He smiled softly. "As you can see, I brought reinforcements," he said with a small chuckle. "The most important of these is Mae, my wife," he said with a smile. Mae's smile broadened. Tony turned to his wife. "Mae, let me present Harry Potter."

Mae nodded to Harry and suddenly stepped forward and gave him a hug. Harry took a deep breath and then responded, closing his eyes. She made him feel welcome and wanted, just like Ron's mum, Molly. "Pleased to meet you, mam," his murmured. When Mae released him, Harry took a deep breath and opened his eyes, remembering he had a larger audience.

But Harry continued to stare at Mae with a wistful smile as Tony, who first cleared his throat to recapture Harry's attention, continued. "Well, we've been holding high meetings of state between the five of us and have come up with a proposition for you. How would you like to come live at the vicarage with me and my wife Mae for the rest of the summer?"

Harry's eyes widened and he took a quick look at Dumbledore, who nodded benignly. Donovan also nodded and Plessy merely smiled a knowing smile. "I'd like that, Reverend," he said tentatively. "But I wouldn't want to trouble you," he said, shooting another pleading glance at Dumbledore.

Tony shook his head. "No trouble at all. Mae and I talked it over last night and we decided that there's nothing we'd love more than to have you stay with us. We've never been able to have children of our own and it would be wonderful to have such a nice young man around the house. And such a special one."

Harry was feeling a little panic. He didn't know how or why, but he desperately wanted to go with these nice people. But he was a wizard. They were Muggles. He wasn't supposed to share his secret.

He looked back and forth between Donovan and Dumbledore, who knew what he was. "Is it okay?" he said anxiously.

Strowbridge placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry. I know. Seth...Reverend Plessy explained about Hogwarts and the wizarding world to Mae and me. And Albus and Sean thought this would be the best for all concerned."

Harry looked up at Plessy. "You know, too?"

Plessy nodded. "There is a small group in the church who know. After all, we can't simply ignore the souls of a whole segment of society, now, can we?"

Harry's mind was in a whirl. He hadn't realized the authorities had known the wizarding world. He granted to himself that this knowledge was not widespread. But here he had three Muggles, or two Muggles and a squib in the Muggle world, who knew. He shook his head.

Plessy nodded.

"Harry? Do you think you'd like to give the vicarage...to give Mae and me a try?"

Harry looked around at the five adults, who looked at him expectantly. He turned to Strowbridge with a smile, then turned again to Mae. "I'd like that, sir. Mam. I'd like that very much."

* * *

The Dursleys were still being held by the authorities when Harry returned for the last time to No. 4 Privet Drive to claim his few belongings. He had been uncomfortable with the idea of moving in with the Strowbridge's until Tony, as he now insisted on being called outside of his pastoral duties, confessed that he understood, as much as he could, Harry's situation and would not interfere with his studies or anything else of a wizarding nature that Harry had to undertake.

Harry smiled. "There's nothing weird. I've got a lot of studying to do, but I guess the only thing you'd notice that's different about me is that I communicate with my classmates by owl."

Tony turned and gave Harry a puzzled look. "What do you mean, owl?"

Harry's eyes lit up. "I'll show you," he said with enthusiasm. He ran upstairs again and opened the window to his room. He looked around the yard and suddenly Hedwig appeared from a nearby tree, giving Harry a quizzical look. He turned to the old card table that served as his desk and grabbed an owl treat for the puzzled bird. "It's going to be all right now, girl. We're going to a new place where I'll be safe. We'll both be safe."

Hedwig flexed its wings and nuzzled Harry's hand affectionately. It was then that Harry thought to check Hedwig for a return message from Ron. There was none. Harry's face fell. He began berating himself for ever telling Ron about his feelings for Hermione. Somehow, he knew Ron had taken it poorly and decided to end their friendship.

"Hedwig? Ron didn't write?" he said in disappointment. Hedwig gave Harry a haughty look, as if to say that had there been a message, he would already be holding it.

Hedwig had dutifully entered her cage and Harry brought her down after one last look under the floorboards and in his closet to make sure he was leaving nothing behind. He found Dudley's karate guides and dutifully returned them to his cousin's room. He wanted nothing from this house but to be gone.

Tony was thoroughly charmed by Hedwig. "She really can deliver messages?" Tony asked.

Hedwig gave Tony a wide-eyed look, but Harry soothed her. "It's all right, girl. He doesn't understand." He turned to Tony with a smile. "Hedwig is a very special, very magical creature. She can find anyone, anywhere. The whole world, wizarding and Muggle--I mean, nonmagical--is

looking for my godfather for a crime he didn't commit. But I can send him messages whenever I need to, thanks to Hedwig." The snowy owl preened her feathers proudly at the praise.

"Your godfather? I thought you had no any other relatives."

Harry suddenly hung his head. "Sirius isn't a blood relative. He was my father's best friend. And my parents gave him...well, the means to protect them when they went underground to hide from Voldemort," he said blankly. "You know about Voldemort?"

Tony nodded. "The wizarding Hitler."

Harry nodded. "I guess you could call him that. Well, Voldemort knew Sirius was my parents' best friend, so Sirius passed this protection on to another good friend, Peter Pettigrew. But Pettigrew betrayed my parents and they were murdered. And Voldemort almost killed me. But his curse rebounded and almost destroyed him. But Sirius tracked Pettigrew down. When he found him, Pettigrew threw a massive curse, killing fourteen people--all Muggles...uh, nonmagical people."

Tony looked at Harry. "Is the word Muggle a bad word, Harry? Like wog or nigger?"

Harry shrugged. "No. It's just the word we use to describe nonmagical folk."

"Then go ahead and use it," Tony said mildly.

Harry nodded. "Well, all these people were killed by Pettigrew. But since Sirius was the only one left after Pettigrew disappeared, everyone assumed he had done the killing. So the Muggle police agreed to allow the wizarding authorities to put Sirius in Azkaban...that's the wizard world's prison. But Sirius escaped and has been on the run ever since."

Tony frowned. "This was a couple years ago, right?"

Harry nodded.

"His name is Sirius Black?"

Harry nodded again.

Tony sighed. "I know he's your godfather and I'm sure you love him, but I remember the news about him. He's well known in the Muggle world," Tony said solemnly. "He's supposed to be armed and dangerous."

Harry turned quickly to look at Tony. "He's innocent!" he said forcefully. "I know. I met Pettigrew. He admitted it. My godfather and one of my professors who was also a good friend of my parents would have killed him, but I stopped them. And because of that, Pettigrew got away. And because of that, Cedric and I were kidnapped and Cedric was murdered to bring Voldemort back to power. I should have let them kill him," Harry cried as the words tumbled out through his tears.

Tony pulled over to the side of the road, even though they were only a couple blocks from the vicarage. He looked at Harry in confusion but recognized the pain he was in. And he knew that his first duty was to ease this pain, even though he wasn't sure exactly what was behind this story. Explanations would come later. "Harry. You saved this man's life. You didn't know what he would do later. Don't beat yourself up about showing perhaps the ultimate act of Christian charity: saving the life of the man you believe responsible for killing your parents."

Harry nodded, now breathing heavily. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get upset."

Tony reached over and squeezed Harry's shoulder. "Don't apologize for showing your true feelings. Especially about something like this."

Harry nodded, still hanging his head.

"Harry, are you going to be all right?" Tony said softly.

Harry took a deep breath, recomposing his features. "I didn't mean to cry."

Tony turned back forward, putting the car in gear. "There's nothing wrong with an occasionally tear," he said mildly. "Tears are cathartic."

Tony paused and watched Harry as he massaged the boy's shoulder, reassuringly. He waited patiently as Harry regained his composure. When he was sure that the wave had crested, Tony gave a deep sigh. "I remember once when I was young, how much better I felt after having a good cry when I lost a good friend," he said quietly.

Harry looked at Tony with a concerned expression. "Was he family? Or a good friend?"

Tony shook his head. "He was more than that. He was my goldfish, Goldie," he said with a straight face.

Harry burst out in giggles.

Tony turned and gave Harry a mock severe look. "It's not funny. I was four years old. How was I supposed to know that you weren't supposed to pet a goldfish?"

Harry began laughing out loud, and Tony finally joined him. "Oh...tis a cruel one, you are, Harry Potter."

* * *

When Tony and Harry arrived at the vicarage, Harry was surprised to see several workmen in overalls swarming all over the outside of the house. They seemed to have meters in their hands with short antennae attached. It was only when he got close that he saw those antennae were unusually thick and made out of wood.

A large black man in overalls walked over to Harry and shook his hand. "Harry Potter, we meet at last, mon," the man said with the oddest accent he had ever heard. It sounded like a mixture of British, French Creole and a little bit a Jamaica thrown in.

"Uh...how do you do?" he stammered.

The man beamed. "Well, well, well. I've been hearing about you since you showed up at Hogwarts. I'm Cyrus Jordan, Lee's pa-pa," he said with a broad smile.

Harry's face broke out in a grin. "Wow! It's great to meet you, too, Mr. Jordan! Your son is one of the funniest people I ever met in my life. He is so cool!"

Cyrus leaned his head back and laughed heartily. "Well, that boy is a handful. But I'll tell him you say hey. 'Course I can't tell him where I've seen you, but he'll be happy anyway."

Harry introduced Cyrus to Tony. Strowbridge was very interested in what the workmen were doing.

"We're what are called aurors," Cyrus said with a smile. "I make sure they all look the part of nonmagical folk. But they're putting up wards...protections against magical intrusion," he explained.

He turned to Harry. "No need to worry. Only the four of us, plus Dumbledore, know you are here. And the other three here have lost family members to You-Know-Who, so I don't think there's much chance of betrayal. The plan is for you to stay here until we pick you up on August 31 to pick up your supplies. Then you stay with your friends at the Leaky Cauldron until the Hogwarts Express come by. So don't go owling your friends that you're here. Just tell them you've been moved to a safe house for the summer. They'll understand when you meet up with them in September. Even if You-Know-Who figures out you were with them Dursleys, he'll find them gone soon as can be. Then he'll figure out you moved but never suspect you're with good people who used to be strangers just a few blocks away."

Harry and Cyrus shared a laugh together.

"Oh, and Harry. One more thing. There are special wards on the house and the immediate property around the house. They will allow you to do magic, if you like, even though you aren't of age yet. It was Dumbledore's idea. It's basically a shield from ministry monitoring. They won't shield unforgivable curses and they have to be activated whenever you want to do magic. And the shield only lasts for an hour, so keep your eye on the time. The spell is simple: *Incipere tegere*. But don't think you can use that spell outside the vicarage. It's not a general spell. It's just a ward activator. Okay?"

Harry nodded, smiling.

"Well, good meeting you, mon," Cyrus said with a smile.

Harry smiled broadly. "It was great meeting you, sir. And remember to say hi to Lee."

"Oh, and Harry. Make sure you win the Quidditch Cup this year. Once a Gryffindor, always a Gryffindor!"

They heard a rude noise from a nearby auror.

Cyrus walked back to work shaking his head. "Hufflepuffs," he muttered, rolling his eyes.

CHAPTER 5 The Vicarage

Mae Strowbridge came running out of the house shortly after Cyrus turned the corner around the house. "Harry! What a pleasure to welcome you to our home," she gushed wrapping him in a huge hug.

Now that he was meeting her standing up, he realized she was almost his height, which was now about five-foot seven, and beginning to show a slight plumpness. She was now wearing jeans and a madras plaid blouse, and her hair was still tied back into a loose ponytail.

"Harry, Tony has told me so much about you. How sweet and brave you are. But I didn't notice how thin you are," she said, grabbing his arm in an appraising grip. "Well, we'll do something about that this summer, won't we," she said, turning to Tony with a twinkle in her eye, meeting his grin.

The church and the vicarage were in the old section of Little Whinging. The vicarage was a large, three-story stone affair. Mae led Harry in through the front door. Once through the entryway, he turned and beheld a very large drawing room, dominated by a large stone fireplace. Harry chuckled to himself. 'This would put the one in the Leaky Cauldron to shame,' he thought.

"A little overwhelming, isn't it," Mae chuckled. "It was designed for parish gatherings and meetings. It will easily seat 24 if we bring out the folding chairs. And the formal dining room serves 20 if we put all the leaves in the table. Fortunately, there's a nice intimate little table in the kitchen that seats four, and that's where we usually take our meals. And Tony keeps all his gadgets in a sitting room off the drawing room. That's where we keep the real tele. We have another one in the study, if there's something special you want to watch. But don't let Tony catch you looking any of those risqué shows. He doesn't approve," she said with a laugh. "He can be such a stick at times," she said smiling in a conspiratorial whisper.

Harry nodded, a little goggle eyed. "This is as nice as the Geddes' house. But it seems more...like a home."

Mae beamed.

Suddenly, Harry started. "Oh, my luggage. And Hedwig!"

Mae's eyes widened. "Who's Hedwig?"

Harry looked down. "She's my owl. But don't worry. She's very clean. My aunt wouldn't have her if she wasn't."

Mae was a little nonplussed. "You have an owl?" she said with a puzzled smile.

Harry nodded shyly. "I told the Reverend...ahhh...Tony. She's kind of magical. Well, she's very magical. She's probably the only magical thing you'll notice. I don't do anything different from anyone else. Really. Except that I send messages to my friends by owl. And they use their owls to send me messages. But they're all well behaved. They never bother anyone. Well, except maybe my friend Ron's owl, Pig..."

Suddenly, Harry's face fell. He remembered that Ron didn't respond to his last message confessing his feelings for Hermione. Maybe Ron wouldn't be sending any owls this summer. Or ever again.

"Harry?" Mae asked quietly. "What's the matter?"

Harry looked down at his feet. "Nothing," he muttered.

"Don't tell me nothing, Harry," she said firmly. "I can tell you're upset about something. Who is Ron? And what's the problem with him?"

Harry wasn't used to people asking him a lot of questions. He had been raised to keep his mouth shut and it had carried over to Hogwarts, where he figured it was always best to keep a close counsel.

"He's a friend of mine. But he didn't answer my last letter. Maybe he was busy."

Mae looked at the boy. This was more than just an unanswered letter. "Harry? That's not the whole story, is it?" she asked gently.

Harry pursed his lips. He had told Sara Geddes about Hermione and Cedric, and she was a total stranger. But Mae and Tony had invited him into their home. They volunteered to take care of him when he thought he couldn't count on anyone else in his life. It would be wrong to lie. Even worse. It would be rude, he thought.

He took a deep breath. "Ron is my best friend. And we both have another best friend. Her name is Hermione. And I kind of like her, you know, like a girl. But I think Ron likes her, too. I told Ron I liked her but that if he liked her, too, it would be okay. But I think he's mad at me. Sometimes he gets upset or mad at stuff like that. And I really don't want him to be mad at me." He took another deep breath, but said no more.

Mae looked at him closely. "Hermione was the name you called our when Tony found you at the Dursleys...Before you passed out."

Harry looked up, startled. "What...?"

Mae closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "He didn't mention that to you," she said, looking at him closely. "You don't remember?"

Harry shook his head. "I remember waking up in the cupboard. I was sore and my head hurt and I felt like throwing up. And it was dark. I called out a couple times, but my uncle said he would kill me if I tried to get out. So I slept. And after a while, I just thought about my parents and Hermione. They let me out a couple times to go to the bathroom. But only after I told them...well, they didn't want me have an accident and ruin the rug outside the cupboard."

Mae looked at him appalled. "But...couldn't you do something magical? You know, disappear or blow the door off or something?"

Harry hung his head. "I don't know how to apparate...at least not yet. I did it a couple times when I was a kid by accident when I was scared. But I'm not supposed to do magic outside of school. I don't know. I guess I was so afraid of getting into trouble that I didn't do anything and...well, by the time I probably realized how serious everything was getting, I was probably too weak to do anything."

Mae blinked in amazement. "You can do things like that? Or wizards...they can just appear and disappear? Or blow up things?"

Harry shrugged. "Mostly, you need your wand to do magic. The wand focuses your magical energy. It's really hard to do wandless magic. I can do a little, but there's still a lot I have to learn. That's why I need to study. The Dursleys tried to keep me from studying. They didn't approve."

Mae closed her eyes and nodded. "But you can do all that with your wand?"

Harry lowered his head and thought. "Is not like I can use my power like a real weapon. There are some curses that can harm people. Like a stunning curse. It can knock you out like a severe blow to the body. But mostly, it just renders you immobile for a while, depending on how strong your magic is."

"Do you have strong powers?" Mae asked.

Harry shrugged and nodded. "I think I've got pretty good power. In our Defense Against the Dark Arts class, I got to practice against a wall and my curse chipped the paint. And when I used against the ground, it kicked up an awful lot of dirt. My friend Ron's power is pretty strong. My girlfriend--uh, I mean Hermione is pretty strong, along with a couple others in my class. There's this one guy, Neville, who always messes things up, but his power was pretty strong when he concentrated, along with this other girl, Parvati, who I took to the Yule Ball last year. And we have classes with these jerks from another house, called Slytherin. There's this guy we all really hate, Draco Malfoy, who has pretty strong powers, along with this fat girl, Millicent, and this real stuck up one, Blaise."

Mae gave him an inquiring look. "What's wrong with these other kids from Slyth...?"

"Slytherin. Well, they're real ambitious and they cheat a lot. And Draco is the worst. He's real rich and stuck up and always saying nasty things to us. Like he calls Hermione mudblood because her parents are Muggles...nonmagical folks. I wasn't familiar with the term, but the way my friends reacted, it was like calling someone a nigger or kike or something. Like some of the nasty names my aunt and uncle used about people they didn't like."

Mae raised her eyebrows. "Do all wizards hate nonmagical people?"

Harry's eyes arched in surprise. "Oh, no!" he said forcefully. "My mum's parents were nonmagical, but nobody ever said anything against me like that. Some felt sorry that I had to be raised by Muggles, but mostly because they knew how nasty they were. It's just some of the Slytherins who are like that."

Harry paused in thought. "Actually, Millicent isn't too bad. She's not that fat either. She just...tall and kind of heavy and not very pretty. But I guess she's nice enough, for a Slytherin."

Mae nodded. "So you can hurt people with magic if you use it wrongly? Or if you have strong powers?"

Harry sighed. "There is a death curse. But we don't learn it, although I saw it used against a friend of mine," he said, his face clouding. "It's an unforgivable curse. If you use it, you go to jail or are given...well, like the death penalty."

Mae gasped again. "You can kill people with magic?"

Harry nodded darkly. "Yeah. But you can also stab someone to death with your wand, too. It's just one more way to die," he said, hanging his head in sorrow.

A chill went up Mae's spine. "You've seen one of your friends die? Is your world so violent?"

Harry looked up, blinking his sad eyes. "No. It's just Voldemort."

Mae looked at him with concern. "The wizarding Hitler."

Harry chuckled without humor. "Yeah. That's what the reverend called him. He killed Cedric and tried to kill me. Somehow, I stopped him and got away with Cedric's body," he said in a voice welling up with emotion. "But he wouldn't be there except for me. When he...well, the thing that brought me to Voldemort swept him up, too. And Voldemort killed him lie stepping on a bug."

Mae gasped, and heard a sharp intake of breath from the hallway. Harry turned and saw Tony, staring at him, wide-eyed in shock. "You mean they killed your friend in front of you. And tried to kill you?" Tony said.

Harry jumped up and grabbed his trunk out of Tony's hands. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," he said in a panic. "I don't like to talk about it. Or think about it. I'm really sorry." He looked around anxiously. "I don't know where to go. I..."

Tony stepped up to Harry. "Put your trunk down, Harry," he said softly. Harry looked back at Mae, who nodded and stood up. Harry obeyed.

Tony suddenly wrapped his arms around Harry. "It's all right. You're safe here. And don't worry about us. We've want to share your pain, your burdens."

Harry leaned against Tony. "I...I don't want to be a burden. I'm...okay."

Tony pushed Harry out to arms length. "Look at me, Harry. Look at me."

Harry blinked a couple times, fighting tears, and looked up at Tony.

Tony saw the pain and vulnerability in Harry's eyes. "Listen to me. Mae and I have heard terrible things through the years. Being a priest isn't just preaching sermons and presiding at services. It's holding someone's hand as he or she prepares to meet their maker. It's listening to people who have gone through horrible experiences beyond imagining. It's being there when no one else is. And it's sharing the burden of those who have no longer have the strength to bear it alone."

Mae had come up behind Harry to hold him as well. Harry suddenly let go. The tears flowed silently. He hated having to depend on others. But he did feel the Strowbridges' warmth. Their love. He slowly relaxed. "I...I...just don't know...I..."

"Shhhh," Mae hushed him.

Harry breathed heavily. "I'm okay, I think," he said, blinking away his tears.

The couple slowly released him. He simply sat down. "I'm...just not used to talking."

Mae looked at him with concern. "Not even to your friends?" she asked.

Harry gave an uncertain shrug. "I...well, I'm the 'Boy Who Lived.' I'm supposed to be strong. They've gotten into all sorts of danger and trouble with me. Because of me. So I have to be strong for them."

Tony lowered his head. "If they are really friends, they'll understand."

Harry's head sank. "Ron would only get mad. And Hermione would get all upset and...I don't know."

Tony reached out and grabbed Harry's shoulder. "You've got to learn to trust your friends, the people who love you."

Harry nodded absently. "I'll try."

* * *

Harry looked wide-eyed around at his bedroom. The vicarage had six bedrooms. Tony and Mae used the master bedroom up on the first floor and Harry was given one of the two other spare bedrooms on the floor. Tony had converted the third spare bedroom into a second library, prompting Harry to smile at how Hermione would love a house with a sitting room full of books and a spare library next to her bedroom. But then, he thought, she probably already had that if he knew her.

Harry's bedroom was large and bright, with a full-sized bed with a heavy wood headboard and toeboard. The dresser and night stands were of oak as was the trim on the white plaster walls. And the room itself was large, with a blue and gold oriental rug on the floor.

"Pretty rich stuff, isn't it?" Mae said with a chuckle. "One of our predecessors was a pretty effective fund raiser. I'm glad someone will finally get to enjoy it on a regular basis," she said with a warm smile. "I think I'll let you get used to it now. We'll be having lunch in about an hour. I'll just call up to you," she said, leaving him alone.

Harry flopped down in the bed, reveling in its luxury. This was even nicer than his bed in Hogwarts, even if it didn't have a canopy. He turned to Hedwig, who was still preening after Mae had gushed over her. "Well, girl. Pretty nice, huh?"

Hedwig fluffed her feathers and gave Harry a haughty look, as if this was the least she deserved. Harry chuckled. Suddenly, his face clouded. 'I've got to write Ron.'

* * *

Dear Ron,

How are things going. I hope you're not mad at me over my last letter. I like Hermione, but if she wants to be your girlfriend, that's okay. You're a great friend and I hope you still like me.

Things are a little different now. Dumbledore thought I'd be safer in a different place this summer. I'm not with the Dursleys anymore. I can't tell you where I am. But it's really nice and the people I am with are really wonderful. I think I'm going to like it here a lot.

That's all for now. Write me soon. Please.

Your friend,

Harry

* * *

Harry's weekend passed in a blur. Mae had to keep shooing him outside whenever he started cleaning or doing some other chore he thought needed doing. She did let him help in the kitchen, as much to see how good a cook he was as anything else. She shook her head that, while he had good basic skills, he had a lot to learn. She even took him to the markets to show him how to shop and what to shop for.

Mae was surprised how enthusiastic he was to learn about everyday things she took for granted. He had little sense of money or budgeting. And he seemed uncomfortable in spending money or, in this case, the Strowbridge's money, on himself. She had to urge him to buy clothes that fit him when they went out on Saturday morning. He squirmed a little at using the fitting rooms of the local department store, despite Mae's promising him that no one would peek in at him. And she gushed at introducing him to members of the parish who she encountered.

But Harry's most awkward moment was when he encountered Sara and her parents on the street with Mae. Sara gave a yelp and ran up to him and hugged him.

"Oh, Harry. we all heard what happened. Are you all right?" she asked him urgently.

Harry blushed furiously. "I'm okay. Thanks," he managed to choke out.

"We missed you at the dance last night," she said sympathetically. "We were all so worried about you."

He continued to shuffle shyly as Sara put her arm around his waist and led him to her parents for introductions.

Mae chuckled as they left the Geddes family to their shopping. "That Sara is a pretty one, isn't she," she said with a glint in her eye.

Harry nodded solemnly, still flushed from Sara's friendly manner. "She's a lot older than me, though," he managed.

Mae chuckled again. "I don't know, Harry. You seem to have a way with women."

Harry really began to blush and was grateful to get back to the vicarage

Tony was more than pleased when Harry volunteered to help around the church after lunch on Saturday. There were a million little tasks that needed doing but there never seemed to be enough time, money or volunteers to get them done. But even Tony was a little taken aback when Harry kept returning for more after accomplishing his previous assignment.

"Are you sure you feel up to it?" he kept asking.

Harry finally gave out at around 4:00 in the afternoon. Tony noticed Harry moving listlessly as he checked the pews for hidden gum or other foreign substances. "Harry. Enough. Time to go wash up for supper," Tony said with a concerned smile."

Harry looked up from his knees, his eyes showing fatigue. "I still have all these rows to do," he said with more resolution in his voice than showed on his face.

Tony smiled and shook his head. "I'm sure the gum and whatever will wait until some other day for you. Out with you."

At services the next day, Harry was stunned by the reception he received from the neighbors he had worked for over the past few weeks. Several of the women gave him hugs and old Mrs. Beupres gave him a wet and teary kiss. And several of the men, including Mr. Downey and Mr. Nichol, shook his hand or patted him on the back, promising him more work when he felt up to it.

Harry was relieved on Tuesday when, after one final check by the doctor, he got the go-ahead to resume his work around the neighborhood.

* * *

Dear Hermione,

How are you doing? I hope you are having fun this summer? Are you going to Bulgaria to visit Viktor? I hope you are enjoying yourself. And not reading too many books. Ha ha ha.

Professor Dumbledore decided that it would be safer if I moved out of the Dursley's and stayed at another place for the summer. I'm sorry that I can't tell you where. But don't worry. It is wonderful here. I am living with a married couple and they are very nice. And I'm working around the neighborhood and meeting all sorts of nice people. And I'm having lots of fun.

I hope you and our parents are well.

Harry paused over the letter for a long time. Finally, he took a deep breath and signed it.

Love,

Harry

He quickly attached it to Hedwig's leg and sent her on her way before he had the chance to scratch out the 'Love,' part of the letter. He sighed and hoped that Ron would send him a letter soon. He hoped Ron wasn't mad and hoped they were still friends. He closed his eyes and sank his head on his crossed arm on the desk in his room.

* * *

Harry sat in his room. He looked around, still marveling at his good fortune. Tony and Mae Strowbridge had done so much to make him feel at home. Mae scolded him fondly and shooed him outside when he tried to do all the chores that the Dursleys took for granted. "Harry," she said in exasperation. "Camilla comes in twice a week to help clean. What would she do with herself if you did it all?"

But somehow, Harry felt that it all was an illusion. That somehow, reality would jump up and bite him and he would be back in the Dursleys' cupboard next time he woke up.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Harry called, surprised at the ease he had become accustomed to the notion of privacy in someone else's home.

Tony stepped in and sat down on the bed next to the desk where Harry was seated. "How are you adjusting, son?" Tony asked softly.

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He didn't know how to answer. He was doing wonderfully well. He was well fed and sheltered comfortably. And Tony and Mae had been so loving and caring, without attempting to smother him. He felt like he was in a Muggle version of paradise. And he didn't trust it to last.

Harry looked up at Tony. "I'm doing really good. You and Mae are very nice," he said with a tentative smile.

Tony nodded and smiled. "And we love having you here. I was just wondering, though. You do seem a little quiet. You seemed so excited and animated that first night you came here. Now you seem to be quiet, spending a lot of time in your room up here when you're not out working in the neighborhood."

Harry lowered his head. "Well, I've been doing a lot of thinking, and writing to my friends, and..." Suddenly, Harry looked up at Tony, blushing furiously and then quickly looked away. "No...I'm not...I mean...I'm running, instead...and taking showers...and..."

Tony gave Harry a puzzled look. A sudden recognition passed over his face and he choked trying to keep from laughing. "Harry," he said through barely concealed chuckles. "That's not what I'm talking about," he said, his shoulders now heaving. He paused to recompose himself and took a deep breath. "Don't worry about it. You're not going to hell for a few innocent fantasies. If you were, there wouldn't be enough room to sit down for all the sweaty teenaged boys crowding the place," he said with a smile. "Just as long as you understand that girls...woman, are more than just...well, objects. They are people, too," he said with a now indulgent smile.

Harry squirmed in his chair. "I...would never think of Hermione like that...well, I like her a lot and wonder what it would be like...you know, to be married and all that."

Tony reached out and squeezed Harry's shoulder. "You're really crushing on this girl, aren't you?"

Harry looked away. "I guess."

Tony sighed. "Well, you said she kissed you when you left her at the train, right?"

Harry nodded and sighed.

"Well, I'm sure she likes you, too. Maybe she's sitting at her desk right now thinking of you."

Harry looked up, his eyes wide. "I don't know. Maybe."

Tony continued to smile. "Actually, that's not why I came up to talk. Like I said, you were so excited when you came here. But you seem to have gotten very quiet. I was wondering whether anything was bothering you."

Harry looked down, his face a mask of concentration. "Well...I really like it here. But it seems that when I like something, something else happens. And the grownups seem always to think it's for my own good."

Tony blinked in puzzlement. "Well, I don't know. I'm just a kid. So grownups like the Dursleys and Professor Dumbledore always made these decisions. And the Goblet of Fire. And the Ministry of Magic and stuff. They kept making these decisions about me and I followed their decisions and I keep getting into trouble and almost getting killed and stuff. So I don't trust much what they say and

what's going on. I'm just a kid, but I think sometimes the adults make these decisions that don't make sense. But they keep telling me it's for my own good or that it's all part of a larger plan and stuff. I just don't get it, sometimes. And I'm afraid of what's coming up next. That every time something seems to be going my way, somebody else has a plan or something that will cause me to get hurt or killed or something."

Tony gave Harry a shocked look. "What do you mean?"

Harry sighed. "Well, my parents were killed when I was little, so Professor Dumbledore decided I should live with my aunt and uncle. He told me that he did it because I had to learn to live as a normal child without everybody paying attention to me because I survived a death curse and defeated the Dark Lord. But when I got to Hogwarts, I found out that I didn't grown up learning to be a normal child. No one else had to live in a cupboard or get beaten for things they had nothing to do with or had no control over," he said with a wracking sigh.

Tony looked at Harry with an intense stare. "Dumbledore is a fool. I've talked to him. He's an idealist who does things with good intentions and thinks that good intentions are enough. But maybe he doesn't see the tragic results of good intentions coupled with neglect. I've seen them up close. Like keeping a family together is a good idea, but not when the lives and safety of a spouse or child is at risk. Or the feeling that an individual should make his own decisions about his fate, regardless of whether that person is capable of making a rational decision. Harry, good intentions are never 'just enough.' you have to follow up on those good intentions."

Harry took a deep breath. "It's not just that. Hogwarts was the best thing that ever happened to me. I got to meet nice people and make friends for the first time. But I also became a target. I found out that Voldemort was after me. And that my friends were at risk just for being my friends."

"And my name got drawn from the Goblet of Fire. It wasn't supposed to be in the goblet, but my name got drawn anyway. And I did well. I won. But that's because it was all part of a plot to get me. I couldn't even enjoy winning the TriWizard Tournament, or share the victory with my friend, Cedric. Instead, he got killed and Voldemort was able to rise again and everyone looks at me like it was my fault."

Tony stared at the boy. "It's not your fault..."

Harry jerked his head up. "Isn't it? The grownups set me up and because I chose to share my victory with Cedric, who helped me during the tournament, he died. And even if it's not my fault, does it matter if everyone thinks it's my fault?"

Tony blinked and tried to find something to say. But Harry cut him off.

"And what about here in Little Whinging? I started to meet some really nice people. And I started to earn money helping these nice people. It was wonderful. Then my uncle took all the money I earned and then almost killed me. Just when I started to enjoying a summer for the first time in my life, it was taken away and I was almost killed."

Harry took a deep breath. "So now I'm here. You and Mae are so nice. And living in the vicarage here is like a dream come true. But I feel like I've got to be on my guard all the time because something might happen. It always does."

Tony's head was hanging. He cautiously cleared his throat. "Harry. You can't explain why all this has happened to you. And I can't guarantee that bad things won't happen to you again. But you aren't going to resolve your concerns by dwelling on them. You are a teenager. You should be out there enjoying yourself like every other teenager. Not that you shouldn't be on guard against whatever fate may throw your way. But don't let it rule your life."

Harry looked up at Tony with hope in his eyes.

Tony gave a wintry smile. "And as for grownups, you'll find that we don't always have all the answers. We learn things from experience, from the mistakes we make along the line. But that doesn't mean we've made all the mistakes and learned all the lessons. I've met middle-aged people, even elderly people, who have less experience, less maturity than you've shown. So my advice is to listen to adults. But when their advice or instructions seem not to make any sense, seek out others to talk about it. Come to me. Or to Mae. I don't guarantee that I'll have all the answers. Or that all my answers will be correct. But I will be here to listen. I will be here to help if I can."

Harry gave Tony a quiet smile. "Okay."

"Anything else on your mind?"

Harry blushed and shifted uncomfortably. "Well...I...uhhhh..."

Tony smiled indulgently again and waited.

Harry hung his head. "Well...I really want to go to the parish dance next week..."

Tony's eyebrows raised. "And...?"

Harry shifted again. "Well...does Mae know how to dance? I don't know how to dance and I need to learn before next Friday. I don't want to feel stupid."

Tony burst into laughter. "Yes, Mae is a good dancer. A lot better than I am. Maybe we can convince her to give you a few lessons. Although most of the dances they do are kind of free-form. You know, just moving to the rhythm of the music. But I think you've got a great idea, there. Most of the girls love to dance and would really like a boy who really knows how."

Harry was blushing furiously, his head still down. "I don't know anything about dancing...or music. But I'd like to meet some people who I could be friends with. And I'd like to be able to dance...with Hermione."

CHAPTER 6 Apparate

Dear Ron,

I still haven't heard from you. I hope you are all right. I also hope you are not mad at me. If you are, I'm really sorry. I'm a jerk. I thought you liked Hermione, but I wasn't sure it was like a girlfriend. Don't be mad. If you want Hermione as a girlfriend, that's fine with me. I just don't want you to be mad at me.

Your friend,

Harry

* * *

The day was a particularly hot and sunny. Harry was not really fair skinned, but he wasn't used to the summer. He had been sunburned a couple times and a child when the Dursleys were forced reluctantly to drag him along to the lake when Arabella Figg was not available to look after him. "Drinking, no doubt," was Aunt Petunia's only comment.

But now the sun was taking its toll on Harry, who was still feeling the fading effects of his concussion. Fortunately, he only had this one lawn to mow during the afternoon. His only blessing was that he had been out in the sun for the past week and a half and had some color already.

He had finally finished the back lawn of the Geddes' home when Sara came running to fetch him. "Harry, you look like death warmed over. Come on inside and cool off. You can meet my mum."

Harry blinked the sweat out of his eyes and took a deep breath. "I guess I'm more out of shape than I thought," he said with a weary grin.

He dutifully followed Sara up to the back deck. But Sara didn't stop. "Come on, Harry. It's cool inside."

Harry hesitated. He was dirty and sweaty and his trousers were covered with grass clippings. Suddenly, a youthful looking older woman appeared in the door. "Well young man. Are you coming in or must we share this air conditioning with the entire neighborhood," she said with a smile.

Harry smiled shyly and entered.

He had been in the Geddes' house the first time he had mowed their lawn, when Sara had greeted him at the front door and led him through the house rather than taking him around the house to the back. But he continued to be impressed by the decor.

He shivered as the cool air hit his sweaty clothes and skin. "Here now," Mrs. Geddes said with a smile. "Take off that wet shirt and towel off," she said, handing him a thick bath towel. "We can't have you catching your death in the middle of summer, now, can we?" She turned. "Sara? Get one of daddy's tee-shirts for Harry."

She held her hand out. "I'm Vivian Geddes, Sara's mother."

"Yes, mam. We met while we were shopping. Pleased to meet you. I'm Harry. Harry Potter." Harry was flustered. He was concerned about tracking dirt and grass clippings into the large and spotless modern kitchen. He turned with questioning eyes.

She smiled warmly. "Oh yes. Of course. Oh, come now, young man. Take off that soaking shirt and towel off. It's not like I haven't seen a bare chest before. You'd think that Sara's Trevor didn't own any shirts when he is over here," she said, chuckling.

"Mummy!" Sara cried as she brought in a fresh, white tee-shirt.

Vivian Geddes rolled her eyes and laughed, and Harry smirked. He had taken to Vivian Geddes already. She looked like the woman in the formal portrait in the drawing room, except her hair was now shorter and her skin showed a healthy tan. She was not quite as tall as Sara, but just a slim and shapely, even though she was on the far side of forty.

"And what are you laughing at, Mr. Potter," Sara said with a pout.

Harry blushed and hung his head, but couldn't keep from smiling.

"Well, I'm waiting," Sara said, barely able to suppress her own smile. "And get that wet shirt off."

Harry continued to blush but dutifully removed his shirt, giving another shiver. He toweled off and took the proffered tee-shirt.

Sara took his shirt. "I'm still waiting," she said with an impatient pout.

Harry blushed even deeper. "Well...one of my roommates has a pet toad...named Trevor."

Sara blushed and shrieked as Vivian exploded in laughter. "Oh, that's precious," she exclaimed.

"Trevor the toad. What a wonderful image. I've heard of kissing a frog who became a prince. This sounds like the reverse."

"Mummy!!" Sara exclaimed in annoyance and exasperation.

Vivian rolled her eyes. "Oh, Sara. He's such a stick. And I'm sure that the next thought he has will be his first," she said with a laugh. "Give me a boy with some gumption...like Harry here. Learning to work for a living."

Sara was beginning to get annoyed. "Trevor's got gumption. And he'll do well when he joins his father's brokerage firm."

Vivian smiled. "I'm sure he'll do well. But he'll never be as exciting as your father. He could have settled for being somebody's son. But he refused. And look where we are now. And look at all the adventures we've had."

Sara sulked. "Oh, who cares."

Vivian turned back to her guest. "Gawd, Harry. Whose shirt was this. It's so big it's been shifting around your neck. You look to have three or four different tan lines there," Vivian said.

Harry's smile faded. "It was my cousin Dudley's. He was a little heavy."

Vivian's smile faded a little, as well. "The Dursley boy. Didn't know the family. I'm sorry."

Harry settled down into a high stool at the stainless steel island counter running the length of the kitchen. "No problem. I'm staying with the Strowbridges now. They're wonderful," he said with a small smile.

Vivian and Sara both looked at him speculatively. "Are you all right now? We all heard about what happened," Vivian said. "They didn't give you that scar, did they?"

Harry felt a little self-conscious. "No. I got that when my parents died when I was one year old."

Vivian tilted her head in sympathy. Suddenly, she turned. "Sara, get this young man something to drink."

Sara's eyes flared, then softened as she turned to Harry. "Lemonade?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, please."

"So. Are you feeling all right now?" Vivian continued.

Harry nodded. "Yes

* * *

Dear Harry,

I received your owl. I am concerned that you were forced to leave your relatives' house this summer. I hope that everything is all right and that you are safe.

Guess what? My parents have been invited to give a series of lectures in America! They will be giving talks as part of a larger group sponsored by the American and Canadian dental associations on a variety of issues, including dentistry under the National Health Service, family dentistry in Britain and their experience as a married couple in the same profession.

We will be traveling throughout Canada, to Montreal, Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver, then to San Francisco, Denver, Chicago and New York. I've never been to America and this will be like having the grand tour! I'm so excited. We won't be back until the end of August, so Professor McGonagall arranged that I order my schoolbooks by owl. I'll miss picking up some good summer reading from Flourish & Blotts. Oh, well, I'll probably be too busy sightseeing in Canada and the States to do more than our homework and some revising for the O.W.L.s. I hope you are studying hard. The O.W.L.s will be here before you know it.

Professor McGonagall says it has been arranged for me to be picked up on August 31 along with you and Ron and the rest of the Weasleys and then we will spend the night at the Leaky Cauldron and get to the train station first thing in the morning.

I hope all is well with you and that you aren't too bored in your new home. And I hope the people you are staying with are nicer than those terrible Dursleys.

I miss you like anything.

Love, Hermione

Harry sighed as he clutched the letter to his chest. 'She misses me,' he thought with excitement. And she wrote 'love.' He lay back in his bed, his eyes closed and a huge smile on his face, shivering with delight. He couldn't wait until September.

* * *

Over the course of the next week, Harry lost a little of his self-consciousness about mowing lawns or doing yard work shirtless. He had squirmed a little as Vivian Geddes applied a healthy dollop of sun block that first day. But the gentle breeze did feel nice against his bare skin. And he didn't feel nearly as clammy going from job to job in a sweat-soaked tee-shirt any more.

And he found that he felt less self-conscious working barechested than in an oversized cast-off tee-shirt from Dudley after refusing to wear the fresh new ones the Strowbridges had bought him. He had even succumbed to Mae's advice to wear cutoff jeans, despite worries about how his skinny legs would appear. He had to chuckle that Dudley's old voluminous, huge-waisted jeans that he had to wear cinched tightly with a belt were actually considered 'cool' by one or two of the young people who passed by while he was working. However, he refused to wear them low to show the tops of his boxers, as one fashion-conscious teenaged girl insisted.

He was once again mowing the front yard of the Geddes's place when he heard a voice call out to him.

"Hi, there," a voice sounded. "Are you Harry?"

Harry paused and looked up. A skinny girl with braces on her teeth and light brown hair was smiling at him. Next to her was a plump girl with short, curly dark brown hair with golden streaks

who was looking at him with speculative eyes. Both were wearing tank tops and jean shorts, the plump girl's shorts riding up a little higher.

Harry switched the mower into idle and ran his hand through his hair, brushing away some of the sweat. He nodded. "I'm Harry," he said with a shy smile.

"I'm Patty. Patty Rourke. And this is Beth Simon."

"Hi, Harry," Beth said.

Harry smiled a little more warmly. "Hi, Patty, Beth." Both girls seemed to be about his age. Neither were particularly pretty and Patty seemed to show signs of a little acne. But they both seemed pleasant and friendly.

"I...uhh...Sara told us about you," Patty said, suddenly blushing. "Uhhh, well, she told Beth's sister anyway. I mean, she said you might be here today and, well, we thought we'd stop by to say hi."

Beth suddenly nudged Patty. "Oh, and, well...we were wondering if you were going to the dance tomorrow?"

Harry smiled and tilted his head. "Sure."

"Cool!" she said, showing a metallic smile.

Harry pulled the towel from the loop in his belt and towed off some of the sweat from his face and hair. "I've never been to a regular dance before. I went to a formal last Christmas, but not a regular dance. What do you wear?"

Patty's eyes went wide. "Whatever," she said. "Like jeans and a shirt or something. You know, whatever."

"Sneakers are okay," Beth spoke up, blushing. "Or whatever."

"Okay," Harry said with a wry smile, chuckling inwardly.

"Okay," Patty said. "Ummm, we've gotta go. See you there."

Harry smiled again at both of them. "Nice meeting you both, Patty. Beth." Harry put the mower in gear as the two girls, giggling, waved and walked off.

* * *

The last job of the day was done. And it was the easiest. Just weeding and trimming Mrs. Schaeffer's vegetable garden. She'd had a mild stroke and Harry, at Tony's suggestion, volunteered to help her keep up her garden. He refused any payment, but was grateful for a small bag of ripe tomatoes. He had gushed over the quality and taste as he patiently listened to Mrs. Schaeffer haltingly talk about how her own mother had gotten her started vegetable gardening during the war when she was young and how she had grown to love it.

So Harry was enjoying another of Mrs. Schaeffer's tomatoes on his walk home when he stopped abruptly and looked to his right. A man working on the roof had just slipped on a loose slate shingle. Harry dropped the bag of tomatoes on the sidewalk and...reached and grabbed the man by the collar, flattening out and lying on his stomach, spread-eagle to keep from slipping on the shingles or letting the man pull him off if he went over the side.

The man scrambled to find purchase as one foot dangled over the two story drop. The man managed to angle his body so as to lift his dangling leg into the gutter. He managed to find his footing and slowly turned over onto his back, breathing heavily.

"Thanks, mate," he said catching his breath as the adrenaline rush passed and he was able to relax. "Another second or two and I'd have been over." He closed his eyes and took a few more deep

breaths. "Not to worry, though. The ground would have broken my fall," he said chuckling a little on the loud side.

Harry slowly let go of the man and raised himself into a kneeling position. He looked around in confusion. 'How had he gotten up here?' he thought "Ummm...are you all right?" he said a little breathlessly.

The man turned with a smile. "Right as rain, thanks to you. Could have broken my neck. More likely an ankle or arm, but you never know." Suddenly, his smile faded. "Where the bloody hell did you come from?"

Harry stuttered while he tried to come up with an explanation not just for the man but for himself. "I...uhhh...was passing by and...well...I like to help out in the neighborhood, so I climbed the ladder to see if I could help...and when I saw you slip I jumped to grab you."

The man gave Harry a dubious look. "Well, sure as hell a good thing you were here. Falling off a roof is a damned stupid thing for a man to do, especially when he's on the dole and working off the books. Bound to be some questions asked. Freddie Shipman," he said, holding out his hand.

"Harry Potter," Harry replied, shaking Freddie's hand. "I live at the vicarage here in Little Whinging."

Freddie laughed. "Well, I'm between jobs, between homes, and between women. Tis a bad place for a man to be, let me tell you."

Harry's eyes widened. "You're homeless?"

Freddie shrugged. "Naw. Staying with a mate a couple towns over. Don't want to wear out my welcome, so I gotta work to help him pay expenses. It ain't fun, but it sure beats living on the streets."

Harry and 'Freddie the Freeloader,' as his new friend called himself, chatted long into the afternoon, mostly about Freddie's vagabond ways. It slowly dawned on Harry how tough and dangerous it would be if he ever was forced to live on his own in the Muggle world. Freddie showed him scars from brawls and muggings when he had been homeless.

Harry shook his head. He vowed he would try never to be put into that position. But he was determined that, if Dumbledore or anyone else tried to force him to return to the Dursleys, he would run instead. He knew that a lot of people had his best interests in mind. But best interests didn't cut it any more. He would listen, but he would no longer give anyone total trust. He would decide his fate, not others, even Dumbledore.

* * *

A flash warning went off in the ministry office for unauthorized magic. The wizard on duty immediately took note of the warning flash. "Little Whinging?" He noted the flash and checked the board. It read: 'Little Whinging--Alert priority. Notify C. Thomas, Senior Auror. Backup: A. Weasley, Ministry.' The wizard scratched his head. He knew Cy Thomas was out of the office. So he figured that this Weasley character would take care of it. He flicked his wand at the floo-o-fone and the box on his desk flashed a bright green flame. "Weasley," he called into the box.

The duty wizard's non-specific floo call went out to both Arthur and Percy. Arthur Weasley was on his way back to his office after a meeting with his minister, so he wasn't there to take the call. But Percy, ever dutiful, was at his desk and answered.

"Weasley. We just got a flash message of unauthorized use of magic in Little Whinging. The primary alert contact is out of the office and you are listed as secondary. You are hereby instructed..." the duty wizard thumbed through a file "...by order 95-AUR-0264, dated 16 May 1995

to report immediately to Little Whinging, Surrey, to investigate and take such action as you deem appropriate. The spell for back up, in case any is needed, is *Equitatus*. Got that, Weasley?"

Percy blinked in confusion. "What?"

The desk wizard made a face. "Look, Weasley. Somebody's been apparating in a restricted zone in Little Whinging. There's a priority tag on this sector. That means someone has to investigate in person. Immediately. No owls. No floo. In person. And since the primary contact is out of the office, and you are listed as secondary contact, the job goes to you. Report to Subbasement Two, room S-205 and they'll give you the nearest appropriate floo station that you can use to get there. Now go."

"Wait!!!" Percy cried.

The desk wizard sighed. "The emergency reinforcement spell is *Equitatus*. The room in Subbasement Two is S-205. Okay?" And the desk wizard's image disappeared from Percy's floo-ophone.

Percy slammed his quill back in its holder. "Why me?" he said as he rose and left his office for the apparating port down the hall.

* * *

The nearest floo station to Little Whinging was behind a fire station the next town over. An auror on duty looked up as Percy appeared in the fireplace. "What in hell?"

Percy stood there in his formal office robes. "Don't ask," he muttered.

The auror hid a chuckle. "And how can I help the ministry today?"

Percy shook his head. "I need some Muggle transportation.

The auror looked at his in-box. Sure enough, an authorization for Muggle transport for ministry business had just appeared. The auror nodded. "Need a car?"

Percy opened his mouth and then shut it quickly with a snap. He looked down. "I've ridden in Muggle vehicles a couple times but I don't know how to drive."

The auror snorted in mirth. "Mo-ped?"

Percy looked embarrassed. "I don't know what that is."

The auror ran his hand over his face to hide his amusement. "Well, that leaves you with a bicycle, a pogo stick or the old shoe-leather express."

Percy's face brightened. "Shoe-leather express sounds good. When does it arrive?"

The auror buried his face in his arms on his desk, heaving with laughter. When he regained his composure, he looked up with tears in his eyes. "Shoe-leather express is a Muggle term. It means you walk."

Percy's face flushed. "Uhhhh...uhhhh, I've ridden bicycles before. I guess I'll take the bicycle."

The auror flicked his wand and a small wire cage opened and an old, woman's bicycle rolled out. "She's all yours," he said, gritting his teeth to keep from exploding in laughter. After a couple deep breaths, he calmed himself enough for a piece of advice. "Lose the robes. Muggles might think you're around the bend."

Percy looked down and realized that the auror was correct. As he walked the bicycle out of the auror station, he thought carefully. He was a representative of the ministry. And he recalled seeing pictures of ministry officials in his father's Muggle magazine archive. He waved his wand and was off.

* * *

Harry had talked for a long time with Freddie the Freeloader, helping where he could. But Freddie had to run out early, so Harry found himself walking back to the vicarage when he stopped in amazement. There, awkwardly navigating the road in a broken down girl's bicycle, dressed in a morning coat, striped pants, patent leather shoes with spats, a brocade vest, wing collar with ascot, and a dove gray top hat, was the assistant deputy minister for international commerce: Percy Weasley.

Harry closed his eyes and screwed up his face for fear he would explode in laughter. When he opened his eyes again, he beheld the same sight, only closer. Percy was laboring mightily and began to wave his hand in recognition. "Harry! Harry! I should have known it was you!"

Harry walked over to lean against a tree to keep from collapsing. "Percy?" he gasped out.

Percy finally pulled up alongside Harry. "Harry. We got a flash message that there was an incident of unauthorized apparating here. I presume it was you."

Harry blinked and nodded in acknowledgement. "I...[cough]...apparated." He took a deep breath and finally was able to control himself. "I didn't mean to," he said taking another deep breath. "A man was falling off a roof and I had to help him. And it just happened."

Percy nodded solemnly. "I see. I understand that these things happen. I shall have to write a report, of course, but I shall make the appropriate recommendations. Is there somewhere where we might go where I can get all the details."

Harry smiled. "You can come with me to the vicarage. I'm sure that Tony and Mae would love to have you. We'll set another place for supper."

Percy looked appalled. "With Muggles? But...I don't know...I'm not familiar with Muggle customs. Won't they...suspect something?"

Harry gave Percy a broad smile. "Percy. They know about me...about us, our world. I live with them"

Percy linked several times. "But you...oh, Merlin. You're in hiding."

Harry suddenly blanched. "Percy. How did you know to come here after me? No one is supposed to know I'm still here."

Percy looked at him with a puzzled expression. "I don't know. I was contacted by someone in the misuse of magic office. They said that the auror who was supposed to come here in case of an incident was away from his desk and I was the secondary contact."

Harry ran his hand through his messy, and now sweaty, hair. "Percy. Don't tell anyone I'm here. No one is supposed to know. Just Cyrus Jordan and Professor Dumbledore."

Percy looked carefully at Harry. "But the report..."

Harry began to look worried. "You better not...best to talk with Cyrus Jordan. He's...like...in charge of me, I guess. He's a senior auror. That should satisfy the reporting requirements."

Percy frowned and looked down, nodding. "Good enough. Irregular, but these are irregular times."

Harry sighed. 'Some security,' he thought. Then he looked up at Percy again. "Nice outfit."

Percy looked up with a start. "Oh, this? It's what the Muggle ministry official wear, isn't it?"

Harry smiled. "Best you come to supper at the vicarage. Reverend Strowbridge is more familiar with Muggle ministry officials than I."

* * *

Dear Mister Potter,

It gives me great pleasure to inform you that you have been selected as prefect of fifth year boys in Gryffindor. You have shown leadership and courage during your first four years at Hogwarts, and the staff believes this honor is well deserved.

We wish to emphasize that with such recognition comes great responsibility. Your position requires more than just the necessity that school rules be enforced. It calls on you to be a mentor and guide to the younger people in your house.

We are aware that fifth year prefects, by longstanding custom, take a special interest in the adjustment and deportment of the new first year students in your house. We are confident that you, and the newly appointed fifth year girls' prefect, Miss Hermione Granger, will see to their well-being.

I have enclosed with this owl a booklet on the major duties and responsibilities of a house prefect as well as a copy of the school rules and bylaws concerning student conduct. We expect you to read these materials carefully during the summer.

However, let me emphasize again that being a prefect is not just enforcing rules, but being a big brother or big sister to those younger students in your charge.

Please stop by the first carriage on the Hogwarts Express on 1 September for a brief prefects' orientation meeting. Afterwards, you would be well advised to stay in the first carriage to get to know your fellow prefects from the other houses.

Sincerely,

Professor Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

P/S We have arranged for your fifth-year texts to be owled to at your new address to ensure you have them available for review during the summer. Further, we have arranged transport to Diagon Alley to collect your supplies and further transport for you and the Weasley children to the Hogwarts Express so there is no repeat of the unpleasantness that preceded your second year at Hogwarts. These are perilous times, and such untoward behavior would not only be inappropriate, but potentially dangerous.

** * **

The parish hall was not very big, Harry thought. Not quite the Great Hall at Hogwarts. He arrived early to help set up the chairs and tables along the side of the hall and to carry out the coolers for the sale of soft drinks and snacks. It all left a reasonable amount of space for maybe 50 dancers. The stag lines could stand in the back and on the left side of the hall.

"Harry, you're here."

He turned around to see Sara and two other girls about Sara's age enter. Sara and one girl, a tall, stocky blond with streaks of purple and a pleasant face, were carrying a cooler. The third girl, a petite brunette with what seemed to be a permanent pout, was manhandling a large cardboard box filled with various snacks. Harry rushed over to help. "You're here early," he said as he took the box from the brunette girl.

Sara smiled. "Some of us older girls like to help out before and after the dances. My mum's on the parish council and Nedra's dad is, too," she said motioning to the brunette. Turning to the girl, she introduced her friends. "Nedra Collins. Deirdre Simon. This is Harry Potter. He's the boy I was telling you about."

Deirdre held out her hand to shake. Nedra simply stared.

Harry smiled at the three. Nedra continued to stare, causing Harry to shift a little uncomfortably. Deirdre nudged Nedra, who returned to setting up the refreshments table. "Don't mind Neddie," Sara whispered. "She's desperate to appear cool, but she's the most sheltered girl I know. She really is sweet."

Harry smiled. Neddie's reaction to his was puzzling. Almost like Ginny Weasley's. But he couldn't figure out why. He shrugged to himself and turned back to Sara. "Anything I can do to help?"

Sara smiled. "As a matter of fact, there is."

Harry looked at her expectantly.

Sara chuckled. "You can enjoy yourself. And dance. There should be a few girls your age here and I just hate to see how they have to sit around while the boys their age just hang out on the other side of the hall, talking football and casting suspicious glances across the way."

Harry blushed and gave a small smile. "I don't really know how to dance," he said with embarrassment.

Sara rolled her eyes. "Look, just move with the beat on the fast songs and grab the girl and sway with the beat on the slow songs. Okay? You told me you were some sort of champion athlete, right? That shouldn't be too hard."

Harry shrunk in embarrassment.

Sara smiled indulgently. "Look, you can really do us a favor by dancing with Deirdre's sister Beth. She and her girlfriend Patty have been chattering away about you all day, according to Deirdre. They'd love for a nice boy to pay them a little attention."

Harry nodded with a smile. "I met them yesterday while I was mowing your front lawn. They seemed nice. Beth seemed real quiet."

Sara nodded knowingly. "Harry, I know you don't know anyone here...except maybe Beth and Patty and me. But remember, the girls, and the boys for that matter, are just like you. They want you to like them as much as you want them to like you."

* * *

Harry was sitting at one of the tables on the right when he heard his name.

"Harry, you're here," Patty squealed as she ran up to the table, with Beth at her heels. Her eyes were glittering in excitement and Beth was flushed as she looked at him with wide eyes. "Can we sit down."

Harry nodded, a broad smile of relief that at least he knew someone at the dance, albeit just in passing.

Moments later, they were joined by a couple about the same age. "Harry!" Patty announced enthusiastically. "This is Jim Jamison and Pam DeMarco."

Harry looked across the table at a gangly boy with a buzz cut on the sides of his head leading up to a bushy mop on top. Pam, on the other hand, was a pretty young brunette wearing narrow-lensed tortoise-shell glasses.

"Hi. I'm Harry Potter," he said, reaching out to shake Jim's hand as he sat down. Jim looked momentarily nonplussed, then reached out and shook Harry's hand. Harry then nodded to Pam with a smile and received a pleasant smile in return.

"We heard all about you," Jim said casually. "You lived with those people who got sent to jail for

trying to kill you."

Harry blinked at the nonchalant bluntness of the statement. "Yeah. But I'm not going back there ever again."

Jim snorted. "Now they got you stuck with the vicar. Talk about bugger-all."

Harry's face clouded and he glared intensely at the boy, who suddenly seemed to shrink. "The Strowbridges are good people. And I won't hear a word against them," he said in a menacing growl.

He noticed Pam shrinking back almost as much as Jim.

"Hey, sorry, right?" Jim said defensively.

Harry let his gaze soften, but felt he now should be on his guard. "Right," he nodded.

Patty looked at Harry closely. "You lived with that Dursley boy, right? Did you hang out with him and his friends?"

Harry turned and shook his head. "No. Never."

There seemed to be a little easing of the tension at the table.

"Where do you go to school? Not at the comprehensive around here?" Pam asked.

Harry shook his head. "No. A public school up in Scotland."

"Not Smeltings like your cousin? Jim goes there," she continued.

Harry shook his head. "What's it like at Smeltings?" he asked to divert the conversation away from Hogwarts.

Jim snorted again. "Boot lickers, nose pickers and arse kickers."

Harry couldn't help but laugh. "Sounds charming."

Jim frowned. "Your cousin was in one of the boot kicker gangs. Bugger. Maybe he won't be back with his folks in jail and all," he said with a scowl.

Harry shrugged. "And what about you ladies? Where do you all go?"

"The local comprehensive," Patty said in a bubbly voice. "We're all going into fifth form this year. I hear the GCSEs are nasty business. But I want to stay on. I love school."

Harry peered around her to Beth. "You, too, Beth?"

Beth smiled. "I hope to," she said shyly.

"Oh, you will," Patty said with a grin. "She's the swot of this crew."

Harry chuckled. "Can't be as bad as...this girl at school."

Patty leaned forward. "Your girlfriend?" she said anxiously.

Harry shrugged. "Sort of..."

Beth frowned.

"But not definitely?" Patty asked urgently.

Harry shook his head and the girls relaxed a little.

Harry turned and looked speculatively at Jim and Pam. "You going on?"

"Yeah. GCSEs, A-levels, Uni, the whole lot of it. Then off to the family business," Jim said.

Pam nodded in agreement. "Me, too."

Suddenly, a young man on the stage announced that it was time to dance and put the first record on.

* * *

Harry actually found he was enjoying himself. He realized that, while he felt awkward trying to dance, the girls at his table were just as awkward. Patty was enthusiastic in her gyrations, but couldn't keep the beat to save her life. Beth simply swayed and watched Harry. And Pam, who he found was not Jim's official girlfriend, seemed to be a decent, if reserved, dancer.

Then the announcer put on a slow record with a 3/3 beat. Harry looked around the table with a speculative grin. Mae had tried to teach him to waltz, and Harry was determined to see if he could actually dance a set series of steps. "Can anyone waltz?" he said uncertainly.

Pam looked up at him with a puzzled expression. "I can," she said to disappointed looks from Patty and Beth.

Harry blushed a little but smiled. "Well, it's the only regular dance I can do. Want to try?"

Pam gave him a speculative look. "Okay, I guess."

Harry brought her out to the dance floor and after some awkwardness, the couple actually started to move with the song.

Suddenly, Pam leaned forward. "Harry. You're supposed to look at the girl when you waltz, not down at your feet."

Harry looked up and blushed. "Well, if I look up I'll get distracted and lose the beat," he said in embarrassment.

Pam, completely misinterpreting his comment, flushed with pleasure. She had never thought of herself as pretty, but this nice looking boy had just seemingly confessed that she was pretty enough to distract him. Unaware that Harry was just commenting on his dancing skills, she gave him her best smile and leaned over and kissed his cheek.

Now it was Harry's turn to blush. He wasn't entirely sure what brought that on, but he liked it.

The next dance was slow as well, and he asked Beth. Harry became a little uncomfortable when she threw her arms around his neck and pressed against him, but found he rather enjoyed the softness and warmth of the slightly overweight girl.

Later, Harry got up to buy the table soft drinks. But before he got there, Sara appeared out of nowhere and pulled him aside. "Harry," she said with a smile. "What are you doing to those poor girls? The three at your table can't take their eyes off of you and several others at the surrounding tables have been watching you all night."

Harry blinked. "What are you talking about?" he said in confusion.

Sara chuckled. "Are you sure you're the same boy who mows our lawn. You're turning into a real heartbreaker."

"I...what?" he said in wide-eyed puzzlement.

Sara rolled her eyes. "You don't know, do you?"

Harry shrugged, blushing furiously.

Sara chuckled. "Well, don't let Mrs. Strowbridge catch you dancing as close as you did with Beth. And I didn't know you could dance the way you did with little Pammy DeMarco," she said, her voice suddenly taking on a more serious tone. "I hope you're not teasing them. Girls that age are very fragile. Especially the ones who aren't so pretty, like Patty and Beth. Just be nice to them, okay?"

Harry was distinctly uncomfortable as he returned to the table with his soft drinks. The girls had left for the moment to go to the ladies' room and Jim was sitting there looking sour.

Harry sat down and turned to the boy. "What's wrong, Jim? Why aren't you dancing."

"Dancing isn't cool," he said in a sulk.

Harry shrugged. "But the girls like it. And who says it's not cool? I'd rather have fun than try to act cool."

Jim pouted. "It's easy for you. You know how to dance. And you know what to say to them."

Harry blinked. "What? I was nervous as anything. But this is a dance. So I'm dancing. It's not so bad. And I just go out there to move to the beat. What's so hard about that?"

Jim shrugged.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Look, you can't be any worse than most of the other guys here. It's not so hard. And it's fun."

At this point the girls returned and Jim eventually asked Pam, then Patty to dance.

By the time the dance ended, Harry was leaning back in his chair, thoroughly enjoying himself for the first time in a long time.

As they left the hall, Patty grabbed one arm and Beth the other. "I had a wonderful time, Harry," Patty gushed. Beth gave Harry's arm a tentative squeeze as if in agreement. "We've got to wait for Beth's sister, who is driving us home."

Harry smiled at the two, and then Jim and Pam. "I'll wait with you. I just have a short walk to the vicarage."

The five chatted amiably, when Harry heard a familiar voice.

"Old Man Dursley should've finished the job on you, Potter," the voice growled.

Harry turned to see the weasel-like face of the nastiest of Dudley Dursley's gang, Piers Polkiss, who was flanked by the rest of Harry's tormenters from his old primary school, Dennis Doppler, Malcolm Biggle and Gordon Gale. He instinctively stepped between his new friends and his old enemies.

He could sense the anxiety of Jim and the girls. He narrowed his eyes as he glared at the ugly group.

"Is it any surprise that he ended up with Fatty, Four-Eyes and Metal Mouth along with little wanker Jimmie Jamison," Polkiss said, menacingly.

Harry's felt the fury rise. "You have a problem with me, take it up with me. But leave my friends alone."

"Ooooo, aren't we touchy," Polkiss sneered. "You planning to shag one of them, or do they need to show you how?"

"If he shags any of them, my money's on Jimmie," Gordon grunted.

Harry suddenly took a couple steps toward the group. "I said, leave my friends alone," Harry said in a cold rage, now within arm's reach of Polkiss.

The four bullies suddenly felt a wave of cold race up their spines. They didn't know what it was, but it felt like being bathed in wave after wave of ice water. And it was coming from Harry. They slowly began to back away. Harry continued to advance on them and looks of panic began to show on Dennis and Malcolm's faces.

"Uhhh, let's get out of here," Gordon said, quietly.

"Uhhh, yeah," Dennis said with a catch in his voice. "Come on, Piers."

But Polkiss was now shivering and staring in fear at Harry, who was practically nose-to-nose with the pimply boy.

"I think you owe my friends an apology," he said coldly.

"Whaaa...what are you doing?" Polkiss stammered.

"My friends are waiting," Harry said, his fury now at a peak.

"Sorry!" Gordon shouted and turned to walk away.

"Yeah," Dennis exclaimed in full-blown panic mode.

Piers continued to stare into Harry's eyes. "It don't...don't mean nothing..." he stammered. He wheeled and began to run, colliding with Malcolm and falling into a cursing heap. The two scrambled to their feet and stumbled away.

Harry turned to face his friends, his green eyes seeming to lighten under the street lamps.

They were staring, open-mouthed at Harry. "How....how did you do that?" Jim stammered.

Harry blinked. "No more," he said flatly. "I'm not going to put up with bullies any more. No more..." he said as he regained his composure.

"Wow," Patty exclaimed, her shocked face suddenly lightening up into a smile. "That was soooo coool!"

Harry finally smiled and gave a vague shrug. "They're cowards at heart," he said mildly. "Don't pay them any mind and don't let them scare you and they'll slink away."

Suddenly, a tearful Beth walked up to Harry and gave him a hug. "I think you're wonderful," she whispered.

'No,' he thought. 'I'm just Harry.'

* * *

Dear Harry,

Sorry for being such a git and not writing.

I told Ginny about your letter and we had a long talk. Or let's just say she screamed at me for about an hour. I guess I haven't been much of a friend.

See, I kind of like Hermione, too. Well, what I'll really like is a girlfriend and Hermione's nice and pretty and I really like her a lot. And it would be nice to have her as a girlfriend, I guess. But if she was your girlfriend, I guess that's okay. But I'd like a girlfriend. You know, someone who'd just like me and me only. You know? A girl of my own.

I guess that doesn't make much sense. Maybe when we see you back in Hogwarts, I can explain it better.

Oh, and I heard from Hermione. She's in America all summer with her parents. Some sort of lecture tour. At least it isn't Bulgaria, if you know what I mean.

By the way, are there any other girls you think might like to go out with me? I heard Lavender broke up with her boyfriend, some dumb sixth year from Hufflepuff. And Parvati isn't seeing anyone, unless she's found someone during the summer. They're both pretty. Parvati probably hates both of us after the Yule Ball, but maybe Lavender will still be available.

What's up with the Dursleys? I thought you were going to be with them all summer. Now you're

someplace else all secret like? Did something happen with them? Or did You-Know-Who find out about them? It sounds pretty scary. I hope you're okay.

I got word from my dad that you won't be able to visit during the summer. Ginny is in a funk, but who cares. I also heard that they're sending aurors to pick us up at the end of summer. You, too. Sounds a bit dicey, if you ask me.

Hey, the Chudley Cannons have won two games in a row! That's the first time they've done that in eight years. Wow! I smell championship!

It's pretty dull around here except for fooling around with Fred and George. They came up with some money from some sucker and are busy planning to open a store after they graduate. By the way, don't ever try their "Chunky Choco Cubes" unless you want to be as wide and you are tall. Believe me, I know. Otherwise, I'm practicing my broomwork. Do you think there's any chance for me to make the team this year?

Percy was over the other day. He's getting weirder by the minute. When your name came up, he got the weirdest look on his face and started telling jokes about Muggle expressions, like 'shoe-leather express.' I don't know what he was talking about, but he and dad all of a sudden got into this big discussion about Muggle clothes and kitchen tools. Percy's getting as bad as dad.

Okay, I'll try to owl you more often. Sorry for being such a prat. Now maybe Ginny will stop yelling at me.

Your best mate,

Ron

CHAPTER 7 Lessons

"Harry, will you stop fidgeting. You aren't a three-year-old."

Sara, who was sitting up straight on the bleacher seat, turned toward Harry. Harry, for his part, was leaning forward, blushing furiously and looking like he wanted to curl in on himself.

At Mr. Nichol's insistence, Harry had taken up running first thing in the morning. He would jog the four blocks to the local comprehensive school and go through a series of stretches and warm-up exercises that Mr. Nichol had taught him. Then he would do a series of wind sprints across the football pitch behind the school. Finally, he would settle into a run. The first week had been torture. He was in reasonable shape, but running several series of wind sprints of 25 yards back and forth across the pitch tore at his muscles and lungs. And the follow-up run around the 400-meter track made his legs feel like they weighed a ton, like he was running underwater.

The second week, things started to get better. The muscle soreness at night had slowly vanished by the beginning of the week. And he now felt confident enough to start timing his runs. Mr. Nichol said he should aim for seven minute 'splits' on his three-mile run. By the end of the second week, he had surpassed this goal. His next goal was 18 minutes for the three miles.

Then, on Monday of his third week of training, he ran into Sara on his way to the school.

He ran into joggers and runners frequently early in the morning. There was the man in his 40s who seemed to saunter more than run. And the young rugby player in his early 20s with the look of furious concentration as he streaked down Maisley Lane toward Queen Anne Road. And the woman in her 30s who always wore a baby blue jogging suit and a matching sweatband to keep her curls out of her face. And the small thin, bearded man with glasses who ran hunched over without swinging his arms because of the small iron bars he carried to provide an additional cardiovascular stimulus.

And on the track around the football pitch, he regularly saw the couple he called the Pigeon sisters, two women who looked to be in their 30s who ran slowly with an awkward gait as they chatted amiably while making their circuits. And the elderly man who took a brisk walk around the outside of the track in the opposite direction, waving at Harry each time he passed.

But he hadn't realized that Sara was a runner. She was jogging in place on the corner of Maisley Lane as some early morning traffic passed. She turned to him in surprise and began laughing.

"You too?" she asked with a smile.

Harry nodded, smiling with pleasure. "Mr. Nichol...do you know him?"

Sara paused, then nodded.

"Mr. Nichol promised to teach me some karate if I got myself into shape. You know, discipline the mind and discipline the body. That stuff."

"I'm just trying to keep a trim figure," she said with a laugh. "Can't have Trevor come back to a lumpy Hausfrau, can I?"

Harry laughed, not quite understanding. "Where do you run?"

Sara gave a small shrug. "Just up to Queen Anne Road and down to here and back. You?"

"Over at the school track," he said.

Sara blinked. "I thought the school was off-limits for the summer."

Harry smiled. "No one's supposed to use it. But everybody does."

Sara's eyes lit up. "So let's go."

* * *

So Harry and Sara had been running together for the past four days. Sara would show up as Harry was doing his warm-ups or wind sprints and then they would jog side-by-side for as long as Sara could last, which was usually about eight circuits--two miles. She would retire to the bleachers until Harry was done. Then they would talk. And the past two days, Sara had brought articles clipped from some of her endless supply of magazines for Harry to read.

But this morning, Harry was really uncomfortable. "That article was so dumb," he complained.

Sara rolled her eyes. "Harry, I told you to stop squirming. I don't care if you think it was dumb. It's what girls like your Hermione think about."

Harry continued to blush. "But...I get the part about an unexpected compliment. You know, like saying a girl looks pretty when she doesn't expect it. But why say it when she's in a bad mood?"

Sara sighed. "Look, it's not when she's in a bad mood. It's when she looks upset, or depressed. She might be feeling blue, or it may be her time of the month...That's when she needs it the most...and will appreciate it the most."

Harry blushed even deeper and squirmed again, not being used to hearing such intimate talk, especially from a girl.

Sara reached over and gave him a gentle swat. "Come on, Harry. You aren't a child any more. Didn't anyone ever teach you the facts of life?"

Harry seemed to collapse even more into himself. "Well, my friend Dean told us about...you know. When we were in second year. At the time, it seemed...scary, sort of."

Sara leaned back against the next bench up. "Well, as long as you've been trained by experts."

Harry was close to running away. "I know the facts of life," he whined.

"Oh, I'm sure," she said, rolling her eyes.

Harry, still looking away, grumbled. "My cousin had a videotape. He had it labeled as an algebra tutorial, but I knew what it was. So one day, when the Dursleys went out shopping and left me locked in my room, I picked the lock and went into my cousin's room and watched it."

Sara burst out laughing. "A dirty movie? You learned what to do from a dirty movie? What was it called? *Educating Harry?*"

Harry was now turning colors not normally found in nature. "*On Golden Blonde*," he muttered.

At this point, Sara began shrieking with laughter.

Harry grabbed his towel and reached for the water bottle Tony and Mae bought him, when Sara reached out and grabbed him, pulling him back down on to the bench again. "I'm sorry, Harry" she said, her smiling face and glittering eyes showing no trace of contrition. "Now sit still and let's talk. Okay?"

Harry, still shamefaced, nodded without looking at her.

"Okay. First of all, those films have nothing to do with love. And nothing to do with your Hermione."

Harry hung his head. "I...just wasn't sure...the details, you know," he stammered.

Sara looked at him, surprised. "You mean, your friends aren't doing it?"

Harry jerked up his head and looked at Sara. "No," he said uncertainly. "I think I would have heard about it if one of my roommates had...except maybe Neville, but he isn't the most romantic...I mean, he's real quiet and...well, not very confident."

"None of the girls, either?"

Harry sighed. "Not Hermione...I don't think...I mean, she went out with this older guy and all, but I think she would have said something...maybe...I mean, we probably would be able to tell. It does kind of change you, doesn't it?"

Sara sighed. "Yes. I guess it does," she said, trying to reassure him. "And none of the other girls? The boy-crazy ones?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, I think Hermione would have said something. I know one, Parvati--she's the one I took to the Yule Ball last year--she punched a guy who was a year ahead of us that she was dating when he got too fresh. Broke his nose and all. Hermione said she and Lavender, her other roommate, were up half the night doing healing charms...uhhh, soaking and wrapping Parvati's knuckles. We all got a laugh out of that."

Sara chuckled softly. "She must be a fun date."

Harry sighed. "I don't know about the older ones. They go out snogging and all, but I haven't heard anything...except maybe this one girl in our year from a different house. But she's got a bad reputation. Like she wants a rich guy. And Pansy, well, people say she's had sex with this real rich jerk whose father is...well, like a gangster or something."

Sara looked down and gave a deep sigh. "Well, maybe it's better that way at your school. I had one girl in my year get pregnant and another come down with a STD. And a lot of heartache for some others." She looked up at Harry. "Listen, if things work out between you and your girl, don't push things, okay?"

Harry looked up, puzzled and apprehensive. "What do you mean?"

Sara looked at him. "I mean don't try to have sex with her right away. I know boys are always after that, but be patient with her. Please? For her sake?"

Harry's eyes went wide. "But...I'd never...but, well...I've thought about that, but I'd never...probably not until we got married or something. I mean, I don't even know how to kiss her yet."

Sara gave an exasperated sigh. "Harry! Didn't you read that other article I gave you?"

Harry blushed furiously again. That was why he was squirming at the beginning of the conversation. It was a stupid article out of a teen magazine for girls about how to kiss. "But...that was about how girls are supposed to kiss. Not boys," he said in a panic.

Sara's exasperation grew. "Well, I'm sorry. I didn't know there was a different technique for when you kissed your friend Ron than when you kissed your girl Hermione."

Harry suddenly made a face. "Ewww, that's disgusting."

Sara's eyes took on a new glint. "Well, I don't see what's wrong. After all, lots of girls practice kissing on each other before going out with boys. I know I did with my best friend Nancy when we were twelve. So I don't see why boys don't do the same."

Harry was caught between a notion that made him queasy and an intriguing one. The intriguing one took precedence. "You kissed a girl?"

"Well, how else were we going to learn how?"

Harry stared in astonishment. "But...you kissed another girl."

Sara shook her head in mild annoyance. "I don't know what it is with boys. Look, we didn't know how you were supposed to kiss a boy. So we tried it out on each other. It didn't make us lesbians. You boys have such bizarre notions. But then you all seem to have your minds in the gutter," she said with a rueful chuckle.

Harry pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I'd never kiss another guy. It's...like...I don't want to kiss guys. I want to kiss Hermione. And maybe hold her hand, and be her boyfriend."

"And you know all about how to kiss her, then?"

Harry looked up and shrugged. "I guess. The article said to tilt your head and, like, take her lips in your lips, like...I don't know," he said in confusion and embarrassment.

"Show me," she commanded.

Harry squirmed some more. Then he turned to her and tilted his head way over to one side and made a funny movement with his lips.

Sara closed her eyes tightly to keep from laughing. "Well, outside of looking like you just sucked on a lemon and broke your neck in the process, you're doing fine," she said with a barely suppressed giggle. "Here. You want me to teach you how to kiss?"

Harry's flush renewed itself and he looked ready to bolt again. But Sara reached out and grabbed his arm. "No, seriously. It doesn't mean anything. It will be like Nancy and I practicing when I was little. No fooling around. I'll just teach you how you should kiss your girlfriend. Okay?"

Harry looked down, beginning to feel the skin beneath his eyes sweat up, causing condensation at the bottom of the lenses of his glasses. "I...guess."

"Harry, look at me."

He looked up into her eyes. They were sparkling blue and full of humor. "I'm not trying to seduce you. I'm just trying to save you a little time and embarrassment with your girl, okay?"

Harry nodded vaguely. "Okay," he whispered.

Sara nodded as Harry watched her with a mixture of fear and anticipation. "Now I'll be Hermione. You are about to kiss her. What do you do?"

Harry closed his eyes and tilted his head a little less radically this time.

"Stop," Sara commanded. "Keep your eyes open. You want to miss her mouth?"

Harry blinked in confusion.

Sara rolled her eyes. "Here, let me show you." She gently grabbed his face in her hands and tilted it slightly to his right. "Now watch me and lean slowly forward."

Harry began to lean forward when Sara suddenly pushed him away. "Stop doing that with your mouth. Just close your mouth and relax your lips. And don't clench your jaw like that."

Harry stopped and looked down. This was getting complicated, he thought. But he tried to obey.

He found his face once again in her hands as she guided him forward. Their lips met and he could feel her lips gently grasp his upper lip. He closed his eyes and luxuriated in the softness and warmth. He slowly and gently moved his lips to taken her bottom lip between his and then let go. He felt like there were fireworks going off in his brain. It was wonderful.

Sara gently disengaged to his soft moan of protest. She smiled softly at him. "That was very nice, Harry," she said quietly. "Now you want to try that again?"

Harry nodded solemnly. He took a deep breath and leaned forward again, this time without Sara

guiding him. The second kiss was as sweet as the first and lasted a little longer. Finally, Sara backed off.

Sara smiled again, this time a slight flush showing on her cheeks. "See? That wasn't so hard, was it," she said with a throaty voice.

Harry couldn't take his eyes off her. More. He wanted more.

Sara sensed his longing and gave him a sad smile. "No more, Harry. I don't think Trevor would approve."

Harry's face fell. He had just had one of the most special experiences of his life and now he knew it was over. He turned slowly away.

Sara reached out and grasped his hand. "That's the end of the hands-on learning, Harry. But that doesn't mean the lesson is over," she said with a smile. "Tell me, does Hermione usually wear earrings?"

Sara went on for the next half hour about places girls usually liked to be kissed, about gentleness and firmness, about listening and whispers, urgency and reassurance, about everything, it seemed, including breathing, tongues and mouthwash, which made Harry blush and giggle.

"Well, at least you have the breath thing down," she said with a chuckle.

Harry joined her laughter. "Well, my aunt warned me that they weren't going to pay a fortune on dentists so I could take care of my teeth or I'd end up looking like toothless old Mrs. Taverner down the block.

When Sara had finished her lecture, she smiled at him and leaned forward to press her forehead against his. "Listen, Harry. If you're lucky, you can probably get some kissing practice in with some of the girls in the neighborhood after dances or on dates. But please promise me something."

Harry nodded, wide-eyed.

"Don't take advantage of any of these girls. Girls like Beth, or even Patty. They are at a very vulnerable age. And Beth, especially, is very sensitive. So please don't do anything to hurt her or disappoint her. Or any girl, for that matter. If you end up with Hermione, don't go flirting or fooling around with other girls. If you are dating someone, be true to them. Just don't lead them on. Okay?"

"Okay," Harry whispered.

As Sara began jogging off in one direction and Harry turned to jog back to the vicarage in the other direction, he smiled. He had a lot to think about. But most of all, now he had two kisses to remember for the summer. Hermione's and Sara's.

* * *

Harry woke with a start and grabbed his glasses and wand in a single movement. He was on his feet scanning the room for the intruder. He heard the flapping behind him and saw it.

"Pig!" he exclaimed softly, as Ron's pygmy owl flapped merrily in the moonlight streaming into his room. Harry sat down on his bed and chuckled softly. It wasn't just another Thursday. It was his birthday. He was fifteen.

"Come here, you," he said with a smile as he tried several times to snatch the tiny bird before finally snagging it like some feathered snitch. Harry's great snowy owl, Hedwig, perched regally on top of her cage, looked on with disdain at her miniature counterpart's antics. She stretched out her wings and fluttered them a couple times, resigned to the fact that her return to slumber would not be soon on this night.

Harry!

Happy Birthday!!!

I sent this early because we still don't know where you are and figured it might take a little longer to get to you than when you were in Surrey. Fred thinks you are in the Caribbean, maybe BWI, lounging on the beach and watching the Muggle girls in their bathing suits. What's a 'string bikini.' Fred won't tell me.

George, on the other hand, thinks you are in the old shack on the other side of the stream from us here at the Burrow. He keeps telling Ginny he saw you one night peeking in her window to catch her in her knickers. She keeps threatening to hex him, but George swears he now sees her glance down at the shack all the time. So if you are there, remember, no peeking. She is my sister!

I haven't heard from Hermione since she left for America. She didn't give me a schedule of where she was going to be except a bunch of Muggle cities in Canada and the States. I hope she's having fun. At least there she should be safe from You-Know-Who...and Viktor Krum, too.

I've been thinking some more about what you were saying about Hermione. I just want you to know that I kind of like her too. But if she likes you as a boyfriend, that's okay. I hope that if she likes me as a boyfriend, that's okay with you. And if she likes some other prat, then we can both hex him into the next dimension.

But like I told you last time, if she likes you, I don't want to get left out. I kind of like Lavender, you know. We've known the Browns forever. Her branch of the Brown clan comes from Devon not too far from us. I remember going to Brown clan gatherings when I was a kid. I don't think I remember her in particular, but the Brown clan are really swell and a lot of fun.

By the way, I hope you are with a wizarding family. I guess you have to be. So there should be no problem countering the shrinking charm I used on your present. In case you can't counter it and can't wait, it's Catching the Snitch by Count Alexei Wronsky, the inventor of the Wronsky Feint! It's real old and very rare. I hope you don't mind that I read it first. A lot of it is about his love life. Blillechhh. He thought he was a real lady killer. Just like Gilderoy Lockhart. But there's all sorts of good stuff on seeker techniques. He was a real pioneer. George and Fred found it for me in a second-hand shop in Hogsmeade. It was very expensive--all right, it was five sickles. But I'm sure it's worth a fortune to anyone interested in Quidditch. Be sure and bring it to Hogwarts. I may want to borrow it...again.

I've been doing a lot of thinking about your situation, moving and all. Did something happen between you and the Dursleys? If it was so dangerous to be there, why did Dumbledore send you there in the first place this summer. I hope that they are all right. But if they did something to you, let me know. I'll kill them. And then Fred and George will kill them again. Not to mention what Ginny will do to them.

By the way, Ginny really likes you. If I end up with Hermione, maybe you'd like to go out with her. I mean, I would expect you to be a gentleman and all, or we'd have to kill you. But It would be neat to have you even more part of our family.

Well, that's all for now. I think this is the longest letter I ever wrote. That shows you how boring it is here. Do you think Professor Binns would notice if I slipped this in to the middle of my summer History of Magic essay, to sort of pad it out a little?

You best mate,

Ron.

Harry lay back on his bed giggling and clutching Ron's letter to his chest. Ron was back as his best friend, even though he liked Hermione, too. He couldn't help but chuckle over Ron's matchmaking

attempts with Ginny. It was pretty transparent, but nice. And Ginny was sweet. But Harry shook his head. Ginny was too young for him...suddenly Harry sat up. She was only seven or eight months younger than he was!

Harry chuckled again. Still, that was too young, he thought.

Suddenly, he heard flapping of immense wings. It was a huge great gray owl that landed with authority on Harry's window sill. He was half again bigger than Hedwig. Even she was impressed.

The owl held out his leg and Harry gingerly removed the message and a sizeable box as he gave it a treat. Pig came swooping down to steal it, but the great gray flapped its wing, knocking Pig tumbling on Harry's bed. Harry tossed Pig its own treat and opened the letter.

Dear 'Arry,

Happy Birthday.

Don't have much time, so I'll keep this short. Didn't have time to cook ya my treacle fudge, so I figgered I'd send ya this local stuff. Careful now. It's got vodka in it, or wodka as they call it 'round here. Oh, I shouldn't'a tole ya that.

Well, I hope ya have a good birthday. Tell 'em Dursleys to give ya a break. I'll see ya in a month, I hope.

Hagrid

Harry opened the brown paper wrapping and found an ornate box filled with chocolates. He bit into one and suddenly his eyes began to water. It was filled with liquid that burned on its way down. 'So this is wodka?' he thought. 'Maybe best to share it with Tony and Mae.'

There were no more owls until the next morning, so Harry slept with happy dreams.

* * *

"Happy birthday, Harry!" Mae exclaimed as he came down the stairs from his shower freshly dressed for supper after a full day of mowing lawns and doing yard work in the neighborhood.

"Surprise!!!" came a chorus of voices.

Harry stared in surprise. There was Patty Rourke, Beth Simon, Pam DeMarco, Jim Jamison, Jack Tallerdy, who was another of Patty and Beth's friends, Peter Boyd, who was Mr. Nichol's nephew who was teaching Harry some karate moves, and Sara and Deirdre Simon, Sara's friend and Beth's older sister.

Harry was too stunned to react. He'd never been able to share his birthday with anyone. He thought that receiving presents by owl was as near to heaven as he could get on his birthday. Now he was surrounded by his new friends to help him enjoy his own special day.

Sara reacted first, walking over to drag him off the stairs and into the drawing room. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Come on, birthday boy. Time to open your presents."

Harry was now doubly stunned to see a small pile of wrapped gifts on the coffee table. "I...I..."

Sara gave him a gentle push into the middle of the room to general congratulations and blushing kisses from the girls.

The presents were not elaborate, or even that imaginative, consisting mostly of tee-shirts, sport shirts, a cap with a funny insignia and a couple karate training books from Peter Boyd with a promise of follow-up training. But they were treasures beyond measure to Harry.

When Tony and Mae served up a birthday cake complete with candles, he felt the tears begin to well up and ran to hug his foster parents, then ran up to his room, promising to return in a moment

with an additional present to share with everyone.

He got there and took a deep breath, wiping away his tears and looking around frantically for something to bring down. He spied Hagrid's 'wodka' chocolates and gave a silent thank you. He scooped up the box and turned to see Pam DeMarco in his doorway.

"Are you okay?" she said quietly.

Harry nodded and noticed she was breathing deeply.

"I thought you looked upset all of a sudden, so I followed you when no one was looking. Patty thinks I was going to the bathroom," she whispered.

"I...I never had a birthday party before," he said shakily.

"Never?" she asked and stepped into his room.

Harry blinked uncertainly at her.

"Well, Happy Birthday, Harry," she whispered in a now-husky voice. Suddenly she stepped up to him and put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Harry started, then remembered Sara's lessons. He looked into her eyes and slowly leaned forward and kissed her back.

As they broke off the kiss, she looked up at him through her glasses as he looked at her through his.

"Wow," she said softly. "Wow."

Harry suddenly realized that his magical textbooks were within view. "Uhhh, I think we better get back," he said in a hoarse whisper, holding her with one arm and holding Hagrid's chocolates in his other hand. He was sure all the chocolate had melted after that kiss.

"Yeahhh, okay," she said, suddenly smiling.

As he slowly walked back down to the party, he smiled. 'The Muggle world is pretty nice,' he thought.

* * *

Dear Harry,

I hope you have a happy birthday. And I hope you are safe and happy. I got you this book, not that you need it. I can't wait to see you in a month.

Love,

Ginny

Harry chuckled. It was a small book on adolescent grooming and etiquette entitled *Elegant Charms for the Charming Wizard* by Lamont Baldrige.

* * *

Harry laughed even harder when he opened his message from Sirius.

Harry,

Happy Birthday, you old sod. I hear you're in hiding, just like your misbegotten canine friend. Hope your digs are better than mine. Would have sent you a nice soup bone, but my animal instincts got the better of me. So I found a copy of this. It always worked for me.

Ever faithful,

Snuffles

Harry opened the package and found another book: *The Elegant Wizard's Key to Witches' Hearts* by Lothario Baldrige, a much more adult, racy, and instructive, version of the book Ginny sent him.

* * *

My Dear Harry,

I hope you are enjoying your birthday. We are all so worried about you. Arthur says you are a safe as a goblin at Gringotts, but I can't help but worry. I hope you like this nice sweater I knitted for you. Maybe we will see you before the summer is over. I dearly hope so.

Hugs and Kisses,

Molly and Arthur Weasley

Harry looked at the sweater and laughed. It was Gryffindor red with a gold Quidditch player in flight knitted across the chest. He couldn't wait to wear it.

* * *

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday, partner!

Business is booming, if you know what we mean. Needless to say, your investment is paying handsome dividends. We've actually got a distributor for several of our products. The Canary Cremes are the big sellers. Same with the Sweet Tweet Toffee. Not so good for the Ton Tongue Toffees. Or for the Hair of the Dog Donuts. We figure it's the name. But we'll keep working.

We figured that you probably wouldn't go for anything to eat from us. Not that we need a guinea pig. We have Ron as our test platform. So we sent you a joke book, instead. Hope you like it.

Gred and Forge

Harry couldn't help but laugh at the two. He turned to the book. *Jazzbow Jake's Jokes, Jests and Japes*. He opened the book to the first page and there was a sudden flash. He blinked. His entire room, and everything in it, including him, was a bright red. He turned the page, and there was another flash. Suddenly, the room was back to its normal color but it was snowing golden glitter. Harry began chuckling, turning the page again. Suddenly, everything was upside down. Harry closed the book and everything was back to normal. He looked carefully. There must be 200 pages in the book. He couldn't wait to try this in the dorm.

* * *

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday.

Thank you very much for inviting me to dinner with your guardians. It was fascinating to learn so much about Muggle dress and lifestyles.

Congratulations upon being made prefect. It is an awesome responsibility, but I am sure it is one you can handle with aplomb.

I have enclosed a small gift in celebration of your birthday. It may help you Re: the subject of our last meeting.

Your friend,

Percival Weasley

P/S You didn't get that book from me.

Harry looked puzzled at the package. He opened the neatly wrapped package to discover a thick textbook. *Wizards University Hornbook, Series 4--Apparation and Disapparation: Its Theory and Practice.*

Harry chuckled. He would not be allowed to know about how to apparate for at least another two years. Percy was violating several wizarding regulations by giving him this. Shocking. Shocking!

* * *

Harry looked around at his gifts. This had been the best birthday...except he hadn't heard from Hermione. His face fell. Did she forget? Was she all right? He sank back onto his bed with a frown and slowly drifted off to sleep.

He was awakened near dawn by Hedwig's squawking. Harry jumped up and grabbed his glasses. He blinked several times. There were two large snowy owls engaging in what looked like a staring contest on his window sill. Hedwig was bristling her feathers and the other one followed suit.

"Hey, girl. Is that any way to greet a visitor?" Harry scolded gently.

The visitor, acting just as haughty as Hedwig at her worst, jumped off the window sill and landed on Harry's bed, holding out her leg.

Harry removed the message and a small package that obviously had been charmed. He quickly opened the message.

Harry,

Thank goodness I was finally able to find an owl! I hope I didn't miss your birthday. Happy Birthday!!!

I am such an idiot! We've been racing all over Canada, then to the States, then back to Canada, and back again. Here I thought my parents' original published schedule would hold. Then there were all these changes. But despite all this, I still expected to be in Vancouver, as scheduled, on July 30 to get your package off. I had made all the arrangements for an owl there. And so, next thing you know, we are in Calgary and I had no idea how to get your presents to you.

Fortunately, I had a guidebook and, after a few phone calls and a long a evasive conversation, was able to order an owl from a Sarcee shaman. Did you know that most of the magical community in Canada consists of First Americans? By the way, that's what they call Indians up here. Not like Parvati, but like Cowboys and Indians. Ha Ha Ha.

It really is fascinating. I've enclosed a book on Native American Magic as one of your presents. Also, that round rock is a moodstone. It's sort of like a sneak-a-scope made by an Assiniboine shaman. The darker it gets, the nearer danger is. It's not as sophisticated as our stuff, but it works.

The grass bracelet is an Ojibway Earth Drawer. It helps you draw strength and power from the Earth and all surrounding living things. It is charmed not to deteriorate and will fit snugly on any wrist. I tried it on and it felt all tingly at first, but it seemed to shrink to fit.

The pendant is a Blackfoot direction finder. If you are lost, you just chant the charm and it leads you to safety. And the bones are sort of a joke. They are MicMac Telling Bones. I got them in Montreal. They are fortune telling devices. They come with a guidebook on how to use them. They are probably as fraudulent as Professor Trelawney, but you may score some extra points in divination if you show them to her. It can't hurt, come O.W.L. time.

I hope you are safe and happy. I am having a wonderful time, seeing things I never thought I'd see and learning the most interesting things. But I think of you a lot and worry. I love traveling but I can't wait to see you all again in a month. I'll have so many stories to tell. I'm sure you will too.

Love,

Hermione

Harry took a deep breath. Kissing Sara was wonderful. Being kissed by Pam was delightful. But it was Hermione he wanted to be with.

* * *

"Think quick!"

Harry grabbed the tennis ball in mid-air and dropped it and grabbed the next, and the next. Then the ping pong balls. Then the hand balls. Then a steady stream of golf balls. Some coming directly at his, some off to the left side or the right. Then they stopped.

John Nichol sat back in the lawn chair. "Petey. You want to take over?"

Peter Boyd was John Nichol's nephew. At 17, he wasn't particularly tall, but he was lean and fit looking, with short sandy hair and an impish grin. "I don't know, Uncle John. He's got me worn out, too," he said with a laugh, surreptitiously grabbing a handful of assorted balls. He casually turned to Harry, who was panting from the workout.

"Think quick, Harry!" Peter barked and tossed three golf balls in Harry's direction. Harry grabbed two, one in each hand and managed to kick the third just before it hit the ground.

"Enough!" Harry exclaimed with a laugh, shaking the sweat out of the fringe of hair drooping in a mass over his forehead. Harry plopped down in between his two friends.

Peter chuckled. "I don't know if Master Xiou would approve. We have special drills and equipment for teaching reaction time and coordination."

Nichol laughed. "When I trained, we didn't have all that fancy equipment. But then, my teacher wasn't teaching a bunch of rich kids to show off for their friends. Most were street kids who paid in chickens or rice. I was one of the few who could afford to pay in cash. And I took my lumps for it," he said chuckling at the distant memory.

Peter did a quick eye roll at Harry, who snickered quietly.

Nichol, who caught Peter's expression, gave him a playful push, knocking him tumbling in laughter. "All right, you two. I suppose you have more important things to do than hang around with an old man like me. Get on with your fun. Langans I suppose."

Harry smiled. He had heard about Langans as the local teen hangout and was curious. Peter had promised to take him tonight and Mae and Tony had agreed that he deserved a night out provided, of course, that he stay out of the pub section of the local meeting place.

Peter promised to pick Harry up at 6:30 in his parents car. Peter, Harry found, had obtained his drivers' license several months before and took every opportunity to drive. "You sure you wouldn't rather walk?" Harry teased.

Peter looked up sharply, as if struck. "Are you kidding?" he exclaimed.

The two boys suddenly laughed at Peter's reaction.

* * *

Tony Strowbridge smiled as Harry took a quick shower upstairs in preparation for a night out. When Harry was with the Dursleys, Tony had wracked his brain for an appropriate companion to be the boy's friend and sounding board. Peter Boyd was an ideal candidate except that he was a couple years older and Tony wasn't sure that the older boy would be interested.

But Peter was a bright boy who had just finished his sixth form at Drayton Academy, an exclusive

public school in London. He was one of those adolescent boys given to fierce enthusiasms and had an engaging personality. But he didn't really maintain many of his local friendships in the neighborhood, and his girlfriend from school lived up in London and was given to traveling with her parents during summers. So Peter was somewhat lost, except for his karate classes. Tony and Mae were delighted when John Nichol managed to match his nephew with Harry during an impromptu backyard karate lesson.

* * *

Peter had been talking about his karate master and Harry was hanging on every word. That was one of the reasons Peter didn't mind the company of the younger boy. Harry liked to talk about his friends at school and the happenings around the neighborhood, but seemed fascinated by Peter accounts of everything from Drayton Academy--his school--to the inner workings of his father's Jaguar XJ6, which Peter was thoroughly familiar with as it seemed to be in the shop more often than on the road. Peter liked Harry because Harry was a listener. And everyone likes a listener.

But after a while, Peter began to pause thoughtfully while chewing on his fish and chips. Harry waited expectantly for the next burst of conversation that was sure to come.

Peter frowned as if in deep thought. "Ah, Harry?"

"Yeah?"

Peter twisted his mouth into a fretful grimace. "Ahhh, you know Sara pretty well, right?"

Harry nodded, giving Peter a puzzled look.

Peter shifted and took another chip. Chewing it carefully and gazing off to the side, he continued: "She's still seeing that guy Trevor?"

Harry nodded, now knowingly. "But he hasn't been around all summer," he said quietly. "I guess that's why she had time to talk to me."

Peter nodded thoughtfully. "She really likes him?"

Harry gave a small shrug. "I guess. Her mum thinks he's an ignorant clod, but Sara seems to like him okay."

Peter grunted in amusement. "He is, you know," he said with a small smile.

Harry shrugged again, with a smile. "I don't know him. But her mum laughed when I told them that one of my roommates has a pet toad named Trevor."

Peter chuckled. "Sounds about right to me," he said with a smile.

"You like her," Harry asked tentatively.

It was Peter's turn to shrug. "She's very pretty," he said, stifling a sigh. "And she's a lot more fun than Marianna."

"What's she like?"

Peter's face took on a wistful look. "Well, she's pretty and all. But she talks a lot. Like, she never listens. And for all she talks, I never really know what she's thinking, or feeling."

Harry frowned in puzzlement. "What do you mean?"

This time, Peter did sigh. "Well, we always would go out to this one place, 'Shorty's', all the time," he said. "It's an okay place, but I took her there because I thought she liked it. Then one day we're going there and she gets all mad, saying she hated the place and why do we always have to go there. She never said anything until she got mad at me about it. And I never cared if we went there or not. She never said anything. That sort of thing happens a lot. She doesn't say anything and then gets

mad."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I guess I understand. Like Hermione I've been talking about. I sort of like her...well, I like her a lot. But I'm a little afraid to talk to her about it. We're like best friends and my other best friend Ron likes her too. But we talk all the time but never know what she's thinking about us. Does she like me? Or Ron? Or are we just pals? Or does she like one or the other and won't tell us because she's afraid of ruining her friendship with the other one? Or does she like someone else? Heck, she went to the Yule Ball with this foreign sports star and we didn't even know it until she showed up with him. For all I know, she's secretly in love with him, or some other guy, and neither Ron or I know. It's depressing."

Peter nodded in sympathy. "Well, you did say she kissed you. Maybe that means something."

Harry sighed. "Maybe..." Then he turned to Peter. "So why don't you ask Sara out? You know each other. You've been neighbors for years. What have you got to lose? If she says no, big deal. You'll still have Marianna."

Peter nodded vaguely. "I guess. And what about you? Didn't you say you and your mate had a pact? If one of you ended up with her, you'd still be friends, right?"

Harry made a face. "But I might lose Hermione as a friend. And if that happens, that might change things. Ron might get upset at me and I might lose him as a friend, as well."

Peter shook his head. "I can't help you there, mate. But I guess you're right. Nothing lost asking Sara. Maybe I will."

* * *

Harry was up on the balls of his feet, all his senses alert as the mist swirled around his feet. All he could see was a few feet in from of him, but he knew who was coming.

Voldemort.

But Harry was ready. Every muscle was taunt. His nerves were pulsating and the adrenaline was flowing. He was frightened, but ready.

'Come and get me, you filthy animal,' he screamed.

The mists parted and the hooded figure appeared, glowing red eyes the only facial feature apparent.

Harry could feel the terror rising, but this time he was prepared. He purposefully slowed his breathing and rocked on his feet, ready to spring into action.

'Time for a lesson, boy,' the figure said menacingly.

The hooded figure quickly raised his wand as Harry leaped into a spinning kick.

'Crucio,' the Dark Lord cried.

Harry awoke moaning in agony and confusion. He reached for his scar but there was nothing there. Then the pain intensified as his right leg seemed to fold under him of its own accord. The pain was coming from his calf. He had a cramp.

Tony dashed into Harry's room, followed closely by Mae. "Harry, what's wrong?!" Tony cried.

Harry was breathing heavily through clenched teeth as he tried to straighten out his leg. "Cramp," he managed to utter.

Mae sat down on Harry's bed and began massaging his leg. "Tony, get a heating pad," she commanded.

Harry fought his calf muscle's impulse to contract again, knowing it would only lead to more pain. He flexed his foot, continuing to try to stretch the muscle out to work through the cramp. Slowly, under this effort and Mae's ministrations, the pain began to fade a little. Tony came in and plugged in the heating pad. The combination of the heat and the massaging finally forced the cramp to ease. But the leg still was sore. And Harry knew it would remain sore through the next day.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Mae gave him a sharp look. "Don't be silly. There's nothing to be sorry for, Harry. We thought you were in trouble."

Harry was now bending and extending his right leg, working the tortured calf muscle. "So did I."

"One of those dreams?" Tony asked softly.

Harry hung his head and shrugged. "It wasn't so bad," he muttered.

"Tell us about it," Tony said firmly.

Harry took a deep breath. It was only his third nightmare in the more than three weeks he'd been living with the Strowbridges. And it was the least intense. But waking in agony didn't help his psyche. He closed his eyes and gave a brief recount of the dream.

After getting reassuring hugs from his foster parents, he stretched out in the bed, shaking his head. 'Karate is fun, but I'll have to find another way to fight Voldemort,' he thought as he drifted back to sleep.

CHAPTER 8 Bullies

"Hi, Harry."

He turned as he exited the vicarage to walk to the parish dance to see Pam DeMarco waiting for him. She gave him a bright smile, and Harry returned it with one of his own. Pam was cute and bright and, now that she was over her initial reticence over Harry being a stranger, was flirtatious and fun. "Hi, Pam," Harry said brightly. "You're going to the dance? You're here awful early. Come to help set up?"

She gave him a kittenish glance. "Not exactly...I was hoping to see you."

Harry smiled coyly. He liked Pam. And he still could feel the kiss she'd given him on his birthday. "I'm glad, I guess."

Pam's smile brightened again. "It's just that I hardly ever see you except at the dances and when you're working in the neighborhood," she said, taking his hand and leading him, past the hedges on the way to the cemetery.

"It's shorter if you take the sidewalk," he said in an anxious but intrigued voice.

Pam squeezed his hand. "But it's quieter over here."

Suddenly, she turned around and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Harry was startled at first, but leaned into the kiss. It was nice, even if Pam wasn't as experienced a kisser as Sara. He gently put his arms around her and kissed her back, and he could feel her give a quick shiver. Harry broke the kiss and reveled in her embrace. It was nice in the Muggle world...

Suddenly, he let her go. "Uhhh...Pam?"

She was looking at him with glittering eyes. "Why don't you ask me out, Harry? We could go out on a date, maybe?"

Harry's eyes fluttered. "Uhhh..I like that. I guess I'd like that a lot...but..."

It was Pam's turn to blink. "But what?"

Harry hung his head, his cheeks reddening. "I don't know...It's just that I sort of already have a girlfriend back at school and...well...it wouldn't be fair to her. Or to you. I mean, I don't want to fall in love with two girls or anything," he managed to stammer out.

Pam stepped back with a small pout on her face. "So you don't really like me," she said flatly.

Harry started. "Of course I like you. You're real pretty. And I'd like you to go on a date or be with you. But I already like this other girl who I'll be seeing in a couple weeks or so. And I won't be able to see you until Christmas and...I don't know. It's awful complicated."

Pam's frown softened. "You really think I'm pretty?"

Harry blinked. "Of course I do. Don't you look in the mirror?" he said, flustered.

Pam flushed with pleasure. "But you don't want to go out with me," she said, her tone shifting rapidly.

Harry shook his head in confusion. "Well...yeah I want to go out with you, but...I don't know. I like Hermione and, well, I like you, and it's not right if I go out with one girl when the other isn't around. It's like lying. And I don't want to do that." By now, Harry's shoulders had sagged in frustration and confusion.

Pam's pout had returned. "I don't see why you have to go back to that school," she whined. "All the way up in Scotland. It sounds dreadful. Why can't you go to Smeltings right around here? Then you could be around and we could...well go on dates. Be a couple."

Harry sighed. "There's a lot of people counting on me back at my school. Plus, I can't afford to go to Smeltings. I get...like a scholarship to go to my school. Oh, Pam. I can't."

Pam walked over to a nearby bench outside the entrance to the cemetery and sat in a sulk. "You could go to my school," she said quietly.

Harry sat down beside her and took her hand. "No, Pam. That wouldn't work out either. Look, I really like you, but I don't think we should be a couple

...even though you're a great kisser and pretty and all..."

Pam looked up at him. "You think so?"

Harry nodded morosely.

Pam turned away and resumed pouting. "Well, if I'm so pretty and a good kisser and all, then why don't some of the other boys ask me out?"

Harry looked up and turned to her. "Are you kidding? They all must be crazy!"

Pam turned to look at him. "You're so sweet."

Harry nodded. "I think Jim is crushing on you, you know."

Pam's look turned pensive. "Well, you couldn't tell by me. He's always around but he just sort of sits there and doesn't say or do anything."

Harry leaned forward in thought. "Maybe he's just shy. Like that first dance when we met. I was real nervous, but I wanted to have fun so I asked you and Beth and Patty to dance, even though I didn't really know how."

Pam looked up at him. "You're a good dancer."

Harry shrugged. "I was nervous, but I figured I'd take a chance. And it was fun. But Jim thought he'd look silly. I had to push him to ask you to dance."

Pam shrugged. "He's okay, I guess."

Harry nodded. "He just didn't want to look silly on the dance floor. And I guess he doesn't want to look silly trying to ask you out. What if you said no to him. He'd be embarrassed and hurt and he doesn't want to take that chance, I guess."

Pam shook her head. "Well, if he wants to go out with me, he should ask," she said flatly.

"I'll see what I can do," he said, squeezing her hand. "And I mean what I said. You're very pretty."

Pam smiled and leaned over to give him a kiss on the cheek. "You're not so bad yourself. And if you decide not to go back to that school, ring me up."

* * *

"My God, Jim! What happened to you?"

Harry was appalled to see a large welt across Jim's left cheekbone, all swollen and angrily colored.

Jim gave a lop-sided smile, which caused him to wince a little and his left eye to tear up. But he gave a hollow chuckle.

"Met up with what's left of your cousin's old gang," he said in a strong, but oddly pitched voice.

Harry stared at Jim, his fury rising. "I'll get them for you, Jim. They can't do that to you."

Jim's eyes crinkled up and the right side of his mouth turned up in what could pass for a grin.

"No need to," he said with a muffled chuckle. "The four of them cornered me and after a I took a couple punches, I got a good one in, right on Piers' nose, just like you told me. He crumpled up and started crying. He started screaming I broke his nose. But he wasn't even bleeding," he said with a chuckle.

"They were all so surprised that I got another punch in on Gordon's midsection before Dennis and Pudge pulled them away. Pudge even smiled and told me 'good shot'," Jim said chuckling.

Harry blinked in astonishment. "Who's Pudge?"

"Malcolm. Malcolm Biggle. I talked to him later. He thinks Piers is a jerk, too, but just sort of hung around cause they were his only friends. He says Dennis isn't too bad but Piers and Gordon are real jerks."

Harry shook his head in wonder. "You kicked Piers' gang's butt?"

Jim chuckled, then winced again. "You were right. They were just cowards after all. Pudge and I called a truce and he said that the others shouldn't be bothering me any more. Or anyone. I've already heard Piers has a new nickname. 'Crybaby'," he said, chuckling softly again.

Harry reached out and grabbed Jim's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Amazing," he said wonderingly.

* * *

Harry had managed to push Jim into dancing with Pam, who was was full of caring and sympathy over his injuries. And Harry had taken turns between Patty and Beth. Beth looked at him with soulful eyes. "You're not going to be here for the last dance of the summer?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "I leave on Thursday the 31st. I'm sorry."

Beth sighed sadly. "We'll miss you...I'll miss you."

Harry leaned over and gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I'll try to stay in touch. I'm going to be very busy with studies and sports and being a house prefect and all, but I'll try to write. After all, this has been the best summer I've ever had."

Harry enjoyed dancing with Patty and Beth and was pleased to see Pam and Jim holding hands and talking in an animated fashion, or at least as animated as Jim's injured face could manage.

As the dance was winding down, he noticed Peter Boyd near the entrance of the hall and wandered over.

"Peter," he said with a smile. "This is the first time I've seen you at one of these dances. What's up? Did you ask her?"

Peter gave a sad shrug. "Yeah. She said no."

Harry had been after Peter to ask Sara out for the past two weeks. He knew Peter liked her and that Sara was bored with Trevor abroad. So Harry had his hopes up. But things don't always work out like you plan them.

"Sorry, Peter. I thought it might work out," Harry said with a sympathetic look.

Peter shrugged. "She said that Trevor would be back next Wednesday and she would wait for him. She didn't sound all that enthusiastic, but still, they're a couple and she likes him. Don't ask me why."

Harry snorted, and gave Peter a wan smile. "Well, there's always Marianna."

Peter shook his head sadly. "I don't think so," he said quietly. "I've been thinking about her a lot. I kind of realized that we've been going out because we are a couple, rather than because I really like her."

Harry looked at him, a puzzled expression on his face.

Peter sighed. "Look, we've been going out for about a year. At first it was fun, being a couple and finding out about each other. But now it's like we are just going out to go out. And it's boring, when she's not losing her temper. It's like she's always trying to bully me, and I don't like it. And I figure that enough is enough."

"Oh. That's too bad," Harry said. "So what now?"

Peter shrugged. "I figure there are other nice girls at Drayton. Or here in the neighborhood. Who knows?"

Harry gave a shiver. Could that happen to him. Is it as easy to fall out of love as it is to fall in love? Could he be with Hermione and suddenly stop loving her?

No, Harry decided. Peter and Marianna didn't really know each other and only learned they were not in love after they were dating for a while. But Harry knew Hermione. He knew her little habits and her faults, her likes and dislikes, and everything he thought he needed to know about her, except whether she liked him.

* * *

Sara was in a funk. Trevor was supposed to have arrived last night but she hadn't heard anything from him. Harry sat across the table from her, sharing a picture of iced tea after mowing the back lawn.

"He probably had a lot of things to take care of," Harry said mildly. "I'm sure he would have rung you up if he could."

Sara snorted. "Too busy to stop by, maybe. But not too busy to ring me up for a hello," she said with a sulk.

Suddenly, they heard a car pull up. Sara's eyes lit up. "In the back!!" she called as she jumped up, full of excitement.

Trevor came striding round the corner. He was tall and trim and looked a little sunburned. He had fairly short wavy hair and a surprising detached expression for someone who was seeing his girlfriend for the first time in two months.

"Sara, come on. My parents are out if the house until later this afternoon," he said flatly.

Sara blinked. "What?"

"I said, come on. We've got at least three hours alone. Let's go."

Harry was shocked and Sara was annoyed. "Trevor! Why didn't you call last night? Here, sit down and have some iced tea."

"Bugger the iced tea. Let's go."

Sara frowned. "Now wait a minute. Let me introduce you to someone. Trevor, this is Harry."

"Yeah, hey kid," Trevor said without even looking at Harry. He grabbed Sara's arm. "Now come on, let's go."

Harry was now getting angry. He didn't feel it his place to say anything, but he could feel his face growing red.

Sara tried to wiggle out of his grip, but he held fast. "Look, my parents will be back in no time, so let's get going."

"No," Sara said firmly.

But Trevor had already pulled her out of her seat and was forcefully leading her up the path toward the front of the path.

"Stop it!" Sara said.

Trevor paid no heed until he felt a hand grasp his wrist. "She said let go," Harry said angrily.

"Hey, bugger off, kid," Trevor growled and started to pull Sara away again.

But Harry moved around in front of Trevor, blocking his way.

Trevor glared at Harry. "I don't know who you are, kid, but you better get the hell out of here before something happens. Now come on, Sara. Let's go."

Trevor was a full six-foot-two and outweighed Harry by a good forty or fifty pounds, but Harry would not move.

"Trevor! Stop!" Sara cried.

Trevor let her go and grabbed Harry to push him out of the way. Harry lost his balance and reached out to grab Trevor's sport shirt, giving it a yank as he fell. Trevor himself was caught off balance and fell face forward into the gravel along the side of the path.

Harry recovered first and was on Trevor's back in an instant, grabbing Trevor around the neck in a head lock. Trevor managed to rise to his feet with Harry still on his back, while Sara screamed.

Trevor suddenly lurched backward, knocking Harry into a nearby tree, loosening Harry's grip on his neck. Trevor moved quickly to grab Harry, but Harry, retaining memory of his training from Peter Boyd and John Nichol, used his agility to duck and leaned in with as hard a punch as he could muster right at the base of Trevor's breastbone.

Trevor doubled over and dropped to the ground, gasping for breath, the wind knocked out of him. Harry could feel the adrenaline surging as he stood, panting over his stricken opponent. He was shaking and desperately fighting the temptation to inflict further damage on Trevor, when he paused, closing his eyes to regain his composure.

In moments, he felt he was ready to walk away. He turned and faced a distraught Sara. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Sara stared down at her boyfriend with a mixture of sorrow and loathing. "Goodbye, Trevor," she whispered.

Harry took her elbow and gently led her back to the house. He led her to the drawing room, for once ignoring the dirt he was tracking in and simply sat there with Sara for the next two hours while she cried and dozed. He only stirred to retrieve the pitcher of iced tea and glasses from the deck in back to give her something to drink when she needed it.

When Sara's mother drove up, Harry gave her a quick explanation and apology for the grass clippings in the drawing room. It was only as he was leaving, that Sara looked up at him. "Thanks," she whispered.

It was three days before Sara rejoined Harry on the running track behind the local school. It gave him time to nurse the massive bruises on his shoulder and back from his encounter with Trevor.

She didn't say anything about the incident with Trevor at first. In fact, Harry was surprised and disappointed that, after running side by side with him for six laps, Sara broke off and began walking

off the grounds instead of waiting for him in the grass or the bleachers. He continued to run for another six laps, picking up his pace until his muscles burned.

But as he stretched out after a half-hearted series of cool-down exercises, he saw her return. She sat down beside him on the grass and sighed, but did not speak for several minutes.

Finally, she turned to Harry. "I'm sorry, Harry. I really am. I don't know what happened. I wish you didn't have to see that, but I'm glad you were there for me."

Harry nodded as he watched her. "I..." then she paused again. "Look, Trevor is a jerk. I knew he was when we were going out. But he was never that bad."

She paused again, lost in thought. Finally, she looked at Harry with a sad smile. "I've never been physically hurt by a guy before. And I swore I never would be. But..."

Harry continued to wait patiently. He found it difficult to listen to Sara. He was embarrassed and embarrassed for her. But he cared about her deeply. Had he been older and a Muggle he was sure he would have fallen in love with her for real. But she was kind and decent to him as a friend. And as much as he was in love with her, he knew that his love wasn't real and was happy just to be there for her.

Finally, she looked up at him with a rueful smile. "It's funny, you know. All that advice I was giving you about how to treat your girlfriend? It was basically just telling you how I would like to be treated. I've gone out with some real jerks. And I'm not going to put up with that sort of treatment ever again."

Harry nodded. When she didn't continue, Harry fidgeted and finally spoke.

"Sara. You are one of the most beautiful girls I've ever met. But more than that, you are one of the nicest people I've ever met. You don't have to put up with guys who are jerks, or brutes, or prats. Don't ever think that you do."

Sara gave a shrug. After a long silence, she turned to Harry again. "Is Peter Boyd a nice guy?" she said softly.

Harry gave her a soft smile. "I think he's a great guy. All he wants is to find a nice girl who will listen to him and talk to him. And maybe who is fun to be with. His last girlfriend was none of the above. Just pretty, he said. So he broke up with her, or plans to next time he sees her."

Sara nodded and hung her head. "I've known him for a long time. He was always sweet and a little loopy. And he always seemed to be able to make me laugh. Maybe he would be nice to get to know better."

Harry smiled.

"So how long before you go back?" she asked.

"Four more days," he said with a sigh. "This Thursday."

Sara nodded. "I'm going to miss you, you know."

Harry sighed and lay back on the ground. "I'm going to miss you, too. But we still have two more days of lessons," he said with a wistful smile. "It will be like cramming for exams."

Sara chuckled, the first sign of life she'd shown since Trevor's return. "Well, we've got a lot of ground to cover. You don't want to be unprepared when that girl of yours comes around, now, do you?"

Harry closed his eyes and laughed. He was glad that Sara would now have a real chance at happiness with his friend Peter.

CHAPTER 9 Going Home

The summer was finally ending for Harry. He had given his regrets and farewells to all his customers, mowing his last lawn yesterday, for the Downeys.

It was early in the morning, Wednesday, August 30. Harry, as was his habit, had walked the three blocks to the local comprehensive school grounds to the running track. He was doing his stretches and warm up exercises when Sara showed up. Harry nodded to her with a smile. "You're here early," he commented.

She tilted her head in acknowledgement. "I just thought we'd do a quick run and maybe talk before you left. It's tomorrow morning, right?"

Harry nodded with a crooked smile. "Yes. 11:00 am, sharp."

Sara did a few stretches and did a few warm up exercises and the two began their run.

Harry, for his part, felt like he could run like the wind. Normally, he would do his exhausting set of wind sprints that Mr. Nichol insisted was good for endurance and agility, wearing himself out before Sara would show up. That way, she would have little trouble keeping pace. But today, Harry felt like a hobbled horse, trying to pace himself so as not to press the pace beyond Sara's abilities.

They did six circuits around the 400-meter track before Sara finally called it quits and returned to her towel. Harry, almost reluctantly, followed.

She lay back in the grass, breathing deeply. Then, she turned to him. "So, you're finally going to see that girl of yours tomorrow. Your Hermione."

Harry nodded and smiled. "I can't wait...or maybe I can," he said absently.

Sara smiled indulgently. "Look, I'm sure she likes you. You're a terrific guy. So don't worry. Just remember all the things I told you and you'll do fine."

Harry chuckled. "I don't think I study as hard in school as I did with all those girls' magazines you gave me."

Sara gave him a sharp, but friendly, look. "Listen, you might think they're silly. Maybe they are. But like I've been telling you, at least they tell you what girls like your Hermione are thinking and feeling about boys."

Harry chuckled again. "Yeah, but some of those pieces of advice. 'A good boyfriend bends in the face of his lady's wrath like a reed against the wind, ready to spring back when the storm ends.' I have a teacher who talks like that. She's the worst."

Sara snorted to keep from laughing. "Okay. A little too Zen for you. Just remember that girls are just about as of scared of you than you are of them. But they also want you to like them as much as you want them to like you. So don't treat them like some sort of alien species. They just want to find a nice boy who is interested in them. If you treat them nicely, you'll find them falling all over themselves to be your girlfriend. Just look at Patty and Beth and Pammy. They spent most of the summer competing for your attention."

Harry smiled at the thought. They were sweet. Pammy was pretty enough, and he enjoyed kissing her. But Patty and Beth were nice and he enjoyed being with them and the attention they showed him.

"And don't worry if they tease you. That only means that they like you. If they didn't like you, they wouldn't bother. And if you can tease them back--remember, in a nice way--they'll like you even

more. Show them you're not intimidated but actually enjoy the attention and can return that attention back in kind and they'll really like you."

Harry flexed his neck as he leaned back on his elbows. "Well, Hermione is not much for teasing. I guess she doesn't mind it too much, but she gets kind of defensive at times when you tease her about her studies. I think she's kind of sensitive."

Sara nodded. "Like I told you. Just be attentive to her. I think she'll appreciate it."

Harry sighed and leaned back to lie on his back. "I guess."

Sara giggled. "And remember what I told you about kissing."

Harry blushed. He still thought about Sara's kissing lesson. He had walked around in a daze for the rest of that morning and he occasionally liked to think about it before he went to sleep at night. Even if Sara was clinical in her description and demonstration, it knocked Harry for a loop. So he was disappointed when there was no follow-up lesson. Sara didn't love him. He shrugged. "I remember," he said quietly.

"Good," she said with a quick nod. "Well, I've got to get going. Peter and I are going out this afternoon. I'll see you at the vicarage tomorrow morning before you leave."

"Peter?" he said with a pleased smile.

Sara smiled back. "Well, he asked me out a couple weeks ago and I turned him down. So this time, I asked him out."

Harry chuckled in and felt like hugging himself in pleasure. "Okay. I hope you two hit it off. You're two of the nicest people I know and I'm sure you will," Harry said with a fond smile. "Oh, and Sara?"

She turned with a smile.

"Thank you....for everything," he said with a misty smile.

She gave him a wink that made him recall Lavender Brown's winks, and turned and jogged off.

* * *

Harry was out on the vicarage porch an hour before the car was due. He wandered in and out of the house countless times in nervousness. He went all the way up to his room three separate times to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything.

"Do you have your razor, Harry?" Mae asked with a smile.

Harry jumped and went to run up to the upstairs bathroom when he remembered that he'd packed it in his toiletry kit. Tony had showed him how to shave when he first showed some chin whiskers in late July. They were sparse, but dark like his hair and he was sure that they would be silly looking once his summer tan faded. Then he ran up to the upstairs bathroom in a panic to make sure he had packed his toiletry kit. He had.

While he was up there, he took one last look at his reflection in the mirror. He had a nice golden tan. 'I'm darker than Parvati,' he chuckled. He looked again. His hair was still unruly, but his face was now more angular. 'Not handsome, but no more baby fat,' he thought. 'Just okay.'

As he was leaving, he stopped to look at the edge of the door. He chuckled on how Mae measured him against the side of the door and marked his height with a date in blue pencil when he first arrived. He saw several generations of such marks on the door edge. Then Mae did it last night. He was shocked to see he had grown two inches in two months. He was now just a shade under five-foot, ten inches. He smiled. He wasn't about to challenge Dean in height, but he wouldn't be

considered short any more.

When he returned to the porch, he saw Sara there in her jogging shorts and noticed the Downeys pulling into the drive.

"Who am I going to run with now?" she said with a smile.

Harry laughed as Mae squeezed his shoulder. "Peter, of course."

Sara rolled her eyes as Harry came down to meet her on the steps. "As if I could get him up that early," she said with a tinkling laugh.

"Harry!" Pat Downey said as he got out of the car. "Come to see you off. And to deliver something from John Nichol," he said with hearty laugh. He handed Harry a small bag which looked to be full of booklets and pamphlets on karate and exercise.

"Thanks, Mr. Downey," he said with wide eyes.

"Oh, and Evvie's got something for you," he said, nodding to the other side of the car. Evvie Downey got out with two modest sized boxes.

"Oh Harry, here's something for you and your friends for the trip. Just some sandwiches and some treacle fudge. And a variety of soft drinks," she said with a fond smile.

The Downeys and Sara followed Harry up to the porch and sat down with Mae and Tony to wait, chatting idly about Harry's adventures to come.

Harry had worried about how he would be picked up. He assumed it would be by car. But he was afraid it would be some sort of bizarre magically modified Muggle car or a variation of the Knight Bus that would shock and startle everyone.

So he was as surprised as anyone when he heard the purr of a powerful engine make the turn up the road. He looked in amazement as a huge old Daimler limousine cruised to a stop in front of the vicarage.

"Tea with the Queen, Harry?" Pat Downey uttered with a surprised smile.

The front doors opened and two large men in black suits and dark sunglasses stepped out, making a quick survey of the neighborhood and seeming to speak into cellular phones. Harry recognized Cyrus Thomas as one, and the Hufflepuff auror who helped install wards at the vicarage at the beginning of the summer as the other.

As Harry stepped down off the porch, the two aurors nodded and suddenly the two passenger doors on the right-hand side of the limo burst open and a sea of redheads led by a pretty young girl with thick light-brown hair seemed to explode out.

Hermione raced and jumped into Harry's arms. "Harry! I missed you so much!" she exclaimed, giving him a warm, tight hug. "You look wonderful! And you've grown!"

Suddenly, he was surrounded by Weasleys pounding him on the back and squeezing his shoulders and mussing his already mussed hair.

Hermione only let go the embrace when she spied the tall pretty blond girl in the skimpy jogging shorts staring at her with a smile.

She backed a step away from Harry. "Who's that?" she whispered.

Harry gave everyone a broad smile. "Hey everyone. I want you to meet my friends and family.

He quickly introduced the Strowbridges, the Downeys and Sara to Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Fred and George. The excited teenagers babbled excitedly to Harry and his Muggle family and friends.

But Sara grabbed Hermione by the arm and gently pulled her aside.

"So you're Hermione," she said with a warm smile. She embraced Hermione, which the young witch returned with uncertainty. Sara leaned close to Hermione's ear. "Harry's talked a lot about you. He's a wonderful boy. I hope you take care of him, because if you don't, there will always be someone like me waiting for someone as special as he is." She backed up and gave Hermione another smile and turned to meet the rest of Harry's friends.

Hermione blinked, confused. She looked at the girl, realizing she was a little older. But she was very pretty. And very sexy in her brief, satin jogging shorts. Hermione decided immediately she didn't like this girl.

Mae and Tony Strowbridge, on the other hand, were wonderful. Mae reminded her a little of a younger, dark-haired Molly Weasley, with her warm manner and hugs. And Tony was equally warm and seemed a very caring. So she was shocked when Harry gave George the devil for some off-color remark, saying with a laugh that "Reverend Strowbridge" would have him scraping bumblegum from the church pews for eternity for such language.

Tony laughed heartily. "Oh, I've heard worse," he said. "How do you think I keep the church so clean. All those penances."

The Downeys were equally happy to see all the friends Harry had talked about during the summer. Even Ginny seemed to bask blushing in the attention and in the knowledge that Harry had thought about her during the summer enough to tell his friends about her.

But as Harry gave his new family and friends a last misty goodbye, Hermione couldn't keep her eyes off Sara. 'Who is this girl that should be so friendly to her Harry?' she thought in annoyance. Her annoyance only increased when Sara gave Harry a warm, tight hug and a kiss on the cheek and whispered something in his ear that made him smile broadly as he was about to get in the car.

So Hermione was relieved when Harry finally got in and, waving frantically one last time, closed the door.

Ron was the first to start. "So, who is she?" he asked with wide eyes.

George was laughing. "Oh, we've all heard of these sons of the preacher man. They're hell on the ladies."

Fred poked Harry in the ribs. "Did you kiss her yet?"

Harry's blushing suddenly intensified beyond even what Ginny was showing at all the teasing about Sara.

"Come on, guys. She's got a boyfriend," he complained. "I told you about Trevor the Toad, Ron. Well, she ditched him last week and is now going out with a friend of mine."

Ron guffawed. "Squashed the toad, did she?"

Harry lowered his head. "Something like that," he said with a small smile. "He was a world class jerk. He was away all summer and I surely am just glad I got to meet him only once."

Fred and George exchanged glances and burst out laughing. "And while the cat's away, the Harry will play," Fred exclaimed.

"So, while the Toad was out of town, did you catch her snitch, Harry?" George asked in a conspiratorial voice.

Harry, who was in one of the jump seats, sunk down in embarrassment.

"George!!!" Hermione exclaimed in annoyance. "Ginny's here!"

Ginny made a face at Hermione and rolled her eyes. "I'm not a child," she said with a pout. "After all, I grew up with these louts."

Hermione sunk into her seat facing Harry and pouted.

Ron reached across Ginny in the middle jump seat and grabbed Harry's shoulder. "You didn't answer the question mate," he said evilly. "Did you kiss her?"

Harry sulked. "Hey, she's just a friend. And she's seventeen...and a half, for Merlin's sake. And she's now dating my best Muggle friend," he complained, blushing furiously.

Suddenly, Fred and George turned to each other and gave each other a high-five.

Ron blinked. "What did you just do?"

Fred laughed. "You wouldn't understand. It's a Muggle thing." He turned to Harry. "Did you shag her, too?"

"George!!!" Ginny shouted in dismay.

"No!!!" Harry exclaimed, as the limo pulled on to Queen Anne Road and up to a stop light. Harry, who was now gazing out the window in embarrassment, suddenly saw Pam and Beth on the sidewalk. He rolled down the window. "Pam! Beth!"

The two squealed and ran up to the car. "Harry!" Pam gushed, practically pulling his head out of the window to kiss his cheek. "I was hoping to see you. Good luck!"

Beth leaned in and gave Harry a shy peck on the cheek, too. "Ring us up. Or write. Please."

"I'll try," Harry said as they backed away to let the car pull away. "Say goodbye to Patty, will you," he called to the two waving girls.

He turned with a smile back to his companions.

"Geez, Harry," Ron said with wide eyes. "How many girlfriends do you have?"

Harry started. "They're not my girlfriends," he said, suddenly startled. "I just know them from the parish youth dances. They're nice."

Ron chuckled. "Well, the one in the glasses was nice, all right. And they both kissed you. Wow, Harry."

Fred and George were busy whispering to each other and were about to say something when Ginny gave George a kick. "Shut up, both of you. Let's see what Mrs. Downey gave us."

The Weasleys all exclaimed over the sandwiches and were amazed at the taste of the treacle fudge. "All this was made with no magic," Ron said with his mouth full.

Harry nodded laughing. "Sure beats Hagrid's fudge, right."

Harry noticed that Hermione was being quiet. But as the ride progressed, he caught her several times looking at him and then quickly looking away. He prodded her with his toe. "How was America?" he asked with a smile.

She gave a vague smile. "Okay. I'll tell you on the train," she said and looked out the window.

"By the way. Congratulations on being made prefect."

Hermione gave Harry a brief smile. "You, too," she said and turned back to the scenery.

Harry frowned, but soon was engrossed in catching up with Ron, Ginny, Fred and George. He no longer noticed Hermione's furtive glances at him. But Ginny did, because she was doing the same.

* * *

The ride took just over two hours, mostly because of the London traffic. They arrived and checked in to Leaky Cauldron. The boys shared one large room and the Ginny and Hermione shared a smaller room.

Once they were settled and Fred and George took off for Diagon Alley, Ron pulled Harry aside.

"Tell me, you kissed Sara, right?"

Harry shrugged. "We talked a lot about girls and dating and stuff. And when she found out I never really kissed a girl..." he paused, blushing furiously, "...ahhh...well, she said she would teach me how. It wasn't really romantic or anything. She said girls kiss each other all the time to practice for when they go snogging with boys...It was sort of like that."

Ron's eyes got wide. "Whoa," he said with amazement. "Girls kissing other girls? I'd like to see that."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Ron. It's not like that. It's like Lavender and Parvati walking arm and arm. Or Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones. You see that all the time. Girls kissing each other is just like practicing Quidditch. It's not the real thing. Just practice."

Ron was lost in thought. "I'd like to see that. Parvati and Lavender kissing. Whoa," he said with a dream-like look on his face.

Harry gave Ron a playful punch on the shoulder. "Come on, Romeo. We've got to buy our school supplies," he said, beginning to get up.

But Ron reached up and pulled Harry back. "No, wait. What was it like, kissing Sara?"

Harry smiled. "It was pretty cool, even if it was just practice. Her lips were soft and warm. And you don't just pucker up and press your lips. It's like you touch your lips together and sort of gently pull on the girl's lips with yours...I don't know how to explain it. But it was really nice."

"Wow..." Ron said with a sigh. "I'm going to have to learn how to do it. I made a promise to myself that I would go snogging before the end of the first term."

Harry smiled. "With who?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't know. As long as she's pretty. Maybe Lavender." He looked up with a wary expression. "...or Hermione."

Harry gave Ron a halfhearted smile. "I vote for Lavender for you, but I guess that depends on Hermione, doesn't it?"

Ron blushed and hung his head. "I guess." Ron fumbled with his shirt, trying to tuck it in as Harry got ready to leave. Finally, Ron spoke in a soft voice. "Uhhh, Harry?"

Harry frowned at Ron's nervous shuffling. "Yeah?"

Ron was making a face as he seemed to debate with himself. "Could you help me...on how to talk to girls?" he said shyly.

Harry gave Ron a wry smile. "Well, first you've got to memorize all the major figures in all the Goblin Rebellions," he said, chuckling to himself.

Ron stared at Harry blankly. "Whaaa?"

Harry sighed. "Well, if you want to score points with Hermione, you're just going to have to do better in your history of magic," he said with a crooked smile.

Ron blinked and blushed. "Well...maybe something I could use on other girls...maybe. Like Lavender."

Harry's brows knitted. "What do you mean," he said softly.

Ron shuffled again. "Well...I wasn't sure I wanted to tell you or anything..."

Harry's face became even more serious. "Yes?"

Ron blushed again. "Well...I asked Ginny to keep Fred and George busy on the trip after we picked up Hermione so I could kind of talk to her...you know?"

Harry nodded, speculatively.

Ron was getting more uncomfortable by the moment. "Well...I guess my brothers sort of caught on and...well, they said hi to her and all and then kind of kept to themselves. Ginny, too."

Harry was watching Ron intently.

Ron took a deep breath. "Well, I sort of tried to talk with her, like, just the two of us, about our summers and sort of trying to figure out how to show her I liked her and all..."

Ron shifted on the bed again, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles in the bedspread. Finally he took another deep breath.

"Well, she sort of told me America was fun but hectic and all. But then she started asking me about you. About where you were, why you weren't with the Dursleys anymore, if I'd heard from you, and all."

Harry blinked, a little surprised.

Ron made another face. "All she wanted to talk about was you," he said with a sad look. "It was kind of hard to talk to her like I wanted to." Ron's head was hanging now. "I think she kind of likes you," he said with a deep sigh.

Harry was torn between elation and compassion for his friend. But then, he thought about how Hermione reacted to him in the car. She barely spoke to him during the hour-long drive into London. He made a face of his own.

"I don't know Ron. Maybe she does. But maybe she doesn't. You never know."

Ron looked up and shrugged. "I was a little put out," he said. He made another face and then shrugged. "Okay. I was a lot put out."

Harry reached over and squeezed Ron's shoulder. "If you don't end up with Hermione, you're sure to find someone else great. I mean, Lavender is really pretty. I think you two would make a great couple. And Parvati's hot stuff. And you mentioned they were both available. You never know."

Ron shrugged again. "That's kind of what I was thinking. I sort of like Lavender. Parvati's really pretty and all, but I was there when she punched what's his name in fifth year...well, sixth year now. I didn't know a girl was strong enough to break somebody's nose."

"Dan Turley," Harry said.

"Yeah, that's his name."

Harry chuckled. "Hermione told me she and Lavender were up half the night doing healing charms on Parvati's knuckles. But you notice no one gets too forward with her now."

Ron nodded with a smile. Then the smile faded as he lowered his head. "You know, I was really upset when you wrote to me this summer," he said softly. "Ginny really did give me hell. I'm really sorry about not writing for so long. Then, when you wrote me to say you'd been moved out to a safer place, I began to worry like anything. Then it kind of hit me--at least when Ginny wasn't hitting me--that you might be in real danger. And I might lose you. And you are my best friend and all. What would I do if something happened to you when all I was doing was sulking around the

house." Ron suddenly looked up at Harry. "It wasn't You-Know-Who that made you move, was it?"

Harry shrugged. "It's just that the Muggles in the neighborhood started getting involved and Dumbledore thought it was better that I stay with the Strowbridges."

Ron shook his head. "Living with a priest," he said flatly. "It must have sucked."

Harry started. "No!" he exclaimed. "It was the most wonderful summer of my life. Tony and Mae were wonderful. They were so nice. Even when I messed up...like when they found out I was almost in a fight with a bunch of my cousin's old gang and once when I stayed out past curfew when I was out with one of my buddies, they didn't yell or anything. Tony just sat me down and talked to me about responsible behavior. But what really hurt me that time I came home late was seeing how worried Mae was. I could tell she was probably thinking Dudley's old gang had come after me...or maybe Voldemort. And Peter and I were just talking about girls and stuff and lost track of the time. It was stupid, but it made me realize how thoughtless I was. Just knowing someone is worried about you is really nice, but it makes you think, too."

Ron sighed. "I never thought about that before. I guess I'm lucky having a cool mum and dad and all and having all my brothers," he said with a thoughtful look. "Of course, you can have Ginny if you want...No, maybe not. She's my sister, after all," he said with a chuckle.

Harry leaned back on the bed, chuckling as well. "You almost ready?"

Ron blinked. "No! You haven't told me what to say or do around girls. What did you do this summer? You seemed to have all these girlfriends. What happened to you, anyway? Did Lavender brew you a supply of love potions or something?" he said, chuckling.

Harry giggled. "No. Sara, you know, the blonde girl at the vicarage..."

"Oh, I remember Sara, all right," Ron said with a smile.

Harry chuckled. "Well, she gave me all these girls' magazines with all sorts of advice in them. Some of those articles were really dumb. But some of the advice was pretty good. Like one said girls shouldn't put up with a guy who only talked about himself. And the ideal boyfriend should be willing to give a girl an unexpected compliment. Especially when the girl looks like she's in a bad mood or something. The article said the girl should respond with a nice word or a hug or something like that. The article says that this is called 'positive reinforcement.' If a guy knows the girl is going to be nice to him when he gives her a compliment, he'll become more sensitive to her needs and moods or something like that. A lot of it was sort of weird, but some of it made sense. So you should try that. You know, being nice and complimenting a girl you like, even if you figure it might be a little embarrassing or something."

Ron nodded. "I guess it makes sense...maybe," he said with a look of concentration.

Harry sighed. "Sara said that most girls want you to like them as much as you want them to like you. And that if you show a girl that you like her, there's a real good chance she'll like you in return. Maybe not always like a girlfriend, or at least not right away. But if you do that, you've got half the battle won."

Ron leaned forward, looking thoughtful. Then he started chuckling. "I keep thinking about Lavender and Parvati kissing each other. Whoa..."

Harry chuckled.

"I wish there was a way to learn how to kiss. Like a snogging instructor...like you had," he said with a laugh.

Suddenly Harry stood up and slapped Ron's back. "Whoever your instructor is, don't count on practicing with me beforehand," he said with a laugh. "Maybe you can practice with Ginny...if she's

not already practicing with Hermione."

"Oh, that's disgusting," Ron said, turning red.

Harry laughed and led Ron out of the room.

* * *

Harry leaned back on his chair at an outdoor table at Florian Fortesque's Ice Cream Parlor. Hermione was engrossed in her sundae. Fred and George had dragged Ron off to Madame Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, and Ginny tagged along to supervise the purchase of Ron's new dress robes. Harry was enjoying the late summer sunshine when Hermione suddenly looked up at him.

"Who is Sara?" she asked quietly.

Harry tilted his head as he licked his strawberry ice cream cone. "I mowed her parent's lawn every week. And we got to know each other. She decided to teach me all about the Muggle world."

Hermione blinked. "She knew about you? About us?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I mean she tried to teach me about, I don't know, dating and stuff," he said, suddenly shy.

Hermione leaned forward slightly. "But you kissed her. Is she your girlfriend?" she asked urgently.

Harry suddenly gave Hermione an exasperated look. "No. I told you, she was dating this university guy. I met him. And he would give Malfoy a run for his money on being a world-class jerk. I'm glad she broke up with him."

Hermione gave him a puzzled look. "But you still didn't explain about kissing Sara."

Harry sighed. "She was trying to teach me how to kiss girls," he said quietly with a blush. "You know, like girls practicing kissing each other so they know what to do when they kiss a boy. You probably did that."

Hermione blushed. "I never did that," she said firmly. "Although Parvati and Lavender did that a few times in third year...yes, it was third year. I thought it was weird. They invited me to try, but I wouldn't. I thought it was kind of gross."

Harry began chuckling. "Well, don't tell Ron about Lavender and Parvati. I told him about girls practicing kissing and he nearly passed out."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me. He likes Lavender."

Harry shrugged. "I guess. I think he's a little afraid of Parvati."

Hermione chuckled. "Well, he better watch himself. Parvati's got a temper, but doesn't let her anger linger. But Lavender remembers. If she thinks you did her wrong, she'll give you the evil eye for months. She got mad at me over something in April--I don't even know what--and barely spoke to me until near the end of term."

"I didn't notice," Harry said.

"You were busy with other things," she said quietly.

Harry nodded.

Hermione then slowly looked up and into Harry's eyes. "So Sara isn't your girlfriend?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

Hermione gave a curt nod. "Okay. And those other girls?"

Harry tilted his head at her. "Pam and Beth? No. I would meet up with them and a few of their

friends at parish youth dances. We danced and had fun together. But Sara warned me not to lead them on. They were nice girls and we had fun, but I never went snogging with them or anything. Pam kissed me a couple times, but I knew we couldn't really be a couple, so I sort of set her up with another guy I met. He was kind of goofy, but we talked a lot and he started to come around by the end of the summer and they actually started dating, I guess."

For the first time all day, Hermione started to relax. Harry smiled fondly at her. "So, how was America?"

Hermione was still in Edmonton in describing her summer when the Weasleys returned looking triumphant except for Ron, who was sulking. "I still don't know what's wrong with orange."

Fred, George and Ginny did a collective eye roll and the six of them returned to the Leaky Cauldron.

* * *

The prefects' meeting in the first car of the Hogwarts Express was a pleasant surprise to both Harry and Hermione. Professor McGonagall introduced the eight new prefects from the fifth year, along with Angelina Johnson, who Harry was delighted to learn was Head Girl, and Roger Davies of Ravenclaw, who was the new head boy.

The meeting itself was mercifully brief, with McGonagall reemphasizing the responsibilities of their new positions and urging them to reread their prefects guides and rulebooks.

What was even more merciful was that Draco Malfoy, the new Slytherin boys' prefect left immediately after the meeting without a word to anyone. But the other seven new prefects stayed to chat for a while.

Harry was particularly pleased to get to know the Hufflepuff prefects, Hannah Abbott and Ernie MacMillan. They had been a couple for as long as anyone could remember. But Harry found Ernie a lot of fun, joking and talking Quidditch. And Hannah, who had developed marvelously over the summer, was as sweet as ever. And she had finally abandoned her pigtails, letting her hair grow out and tumble over her shoulders in thick golden ropes of waves. It made Harry feel guilty as he occasionally glanced at her chest, which she could not conceal under voluminous robes.

Mandy Brocklehurst of Ravenclaw was pleasant, but a bit on the formal side in her conversation, at least until she and Hermione got talking. Terry Boot, Mandy's counterpart, started to discuss the history of prefects at Hogwarts but, when not even Hermione noticed, shut up.

But Harry was most surprised by Millicent Bulstrode. Millicent was about an inch taller than Harry and at least as wide. And she had a plain face with long, wavy dark hair. But it turned out that she had a wry sense of humor and generally friendly manner. She even teased Harry about how he would get along with his favorite potions professor this year. Harry looked at her closely and was satisfied that Millicent was just teasing and laughed along with her.

After about an hour, the discussion broke up and the group walked back through the train to join their friends in other cars. As Harry followed Hermione, they ran into Parvati and Lavender. Lavender was looking about the same as the year before, her thick blond hair tied up in a french twist. But Parvati looked like she had grown dramatically over the summer. She had grown from a pretty young girl to a statuesque beauty with a trim figure that did not lack for feminine curves.

Suddenly Harry looked down at Parvati's tee-shirt and burst out laughing. It had a slogan: 'Witches Have Wands, Too,' followed underneath in smaller letters: 'So Watch What You Do With Yours.' In between was a witch on a broom in silhouette casting hexes at a wizard below.

"And what are you doing, Harry? Admiring my chest?" she said mischievously.

Harry chuckled. Parvati had developed over the summer. Not quite on par with Hannah Abbott, but she was more shapely than the year before.

"Just taking heed of the warning, Parvati," he said with a smile.

Parvati laughed and grabbed Harry's arm, pulling him aside. "Harry," she whispered urgently, suddenly more serious, as Hermione simply continued on her way and Lavender stepped back to watch with a proprietary interest. "Is Ron seeing anyone? Hermione, maybe?" she asked earnestly.

Harry looked at her blankly. "No. Not at the moment. Why?"

She smiled. "Well, we ran into each other, and he smiled at me and blurted out how nice I looked and he smiled some more. I wasn't sure, but I thought he was flirting with me. He sure has grown tall over the summer."

A small smile crept across Harry's face. "Well, to tell the truth, he was complaining last night about how he didn't have a girlfriend and all. I suppose your name did come up," he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Parvati's smile broadened. "He has gotten pretty good looking over the past year or so. I suppose if the matter just happened to come up in conversation, you might let him know that I just might have some openings on my dance card."

Harry giggled. "Whatever happened to your Beaubatons beau. What was his name? Olivier?"

Parvati snorted. "That ponce? He was gone after our second date. And he keeps writing me, still. Half of those letters are in French." She sighed. "Those French. They can't speak good English. They've got a different word for everything."

Harry blanched and stared at her. Could she be serious?

Suddenly, she reached out and pinched him. "That was a joke, silly. Tu ne parle pas Francais? O, quelle dommage," she said with a chuckle.

Harry leaned around to Lavender. "Can you help, Lav? Parvati's speaking in tongues," laughing as he now knew her first comment really was just a joke.

Parvati laughed and gave Harry a quick hug. "Remember, let Ron know. Just don't be too obvious. Okay?"

Harry smiled. "Sure."

* * *

Harry finally found his friends in the second to the last car on the train. Ron, Fred and George were engaged in a game of exploding snap on one bench, while Ginny and Hermione were busy talking on the other. He scooted in next to Hermione on the seat next to the door.

Suddenly, Ron, Fred and George dropped their cards and stood up together and made a deep bow. "Your Highness," they chorused. "Your wish is our command."

Harry grabbed a notebook and threw it at the three playfully.

The group collapsed in laughter and then lapsed into companionable conversation.

It was about a half hour later, the pleasantness was disrupted as Draco Malfoy, along with his companions and bodyguards, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, passed by and stopped.

"I thought I smelled moth flakes. This must be the Weasley compartment," he sneered.

Ron began to stand in anger, but George pulled him back.

"Oh, and Granger. I don't know why you were made a prefect. They shouldn't allow Muggle-borns

to be prefects," he said with a smirk.

Harry felt his anger rise, but remembered Mr. Nichol's instructions about maintaining control of any situation. Instead, he leveled his gaze. "What's this, Malfoy?" he said with a snarl. "Come to show off your dark mark?"

"I'd watch myself, if I were you, Potter," Malfoy retorted with an evil grin.

Harry raised his head with an evil smile. "Tell me, Malfoy. How does it feel to be willing to sacrifice everything and risk Azkaban to be a mere servant? To be a house elf?"

Malfoy started. "You better watch yourself, Potter," was Malfoy's only reply, his voice rising.

Harry nodded. "That's right. A mere servant. A junior league Death Eater. Not even a Death Eater of the first order. You have to stand at the end of the line to kiss Voldemort's arse," Harry sneered.

People from nearby compartments began to stick their heads out to see what the disturbance was about.

"Shut up, Potter!" Malfoy screamed.

"Not that you have any choice in the matter. Your father sold you out a long time ago, didn't he, Malfoy?! My parents were murdered, but at least I have the satisfaction of knowing they loved me. Can you say that? Did anyone ever love you? Did anyone ever care if you lived or died except to serve their purposes?"

"I'll get you, Potter!" Malfoy screamed.

Harry was now on his feet. "That's right, Malfoy. You're nothing but Voldemort's house elf. Your only use is as a servant. That's your birthright. The powerful Malfoy family. Born and bred to be slaves to something that isn't even human. You could play Dobby to Voldemort, but that would be giving you too much credit. At least Dobby had a backbone."

"Go to hell!!!" Malfoy screamed.

"No, you don't even have a choice in the matter," Harry continued, his eyes flashing. "You just take orders from daddy. And what if you don't? He'll kill you, if Voldemort doesn't get there first."

Malfoy was hissing in rage.

"No, you don't have a choice. Because you don't have the courage to make that choice, you silly little git. No, Mr. House Elf didn't even have the courage to say anything at the prefect's meeting without your friends here to protect you. Malfoy, are you a puppet who only speaks or acts in the presence of Daddy, or Crabbe and Goyle! Tell me," Harry said in a loud voice. "Which one of you pull the strings to make him move. Is it you, Crabbe? Or you, Goyle?"

"Shut up!!!" Malfoy screamed.

"Malfoy. House elves are supposed to keep their voices down. So shut up and get out and do your master's bidding," Harry yelled. "Unless you have the balls to be your own man. To prove you're more than that loathsome excuse for a man that you call your father. The chief house elf to scum like Voldemort. I just don't think you've got the balls to be a man. Just a miserable little second class house elf!"

Malfoy was now purple with rage and speechless. Then they all heard it. The chuckling coming from up and down the hallways. Suddenly, an anonymous voice called out. "Hey, Malfoy. Get us butterbeers like a good house elf."

"Shine my shoes, Malfoy," another voice called out.

"And kiss my arse, while you're at it," came another.

Crabbe and Goyle were looking back and forth up and down the hallways in confusion, then looking back at Malfoy, who was frozen in rage.

Harry took a step forward. "You see, you little shyte. Not even your butt boys can protect the little house elf when he steps too far out of line. So get out before somebody gives you what for."

"You'll pay," Malfoy said through gritted teeth as he turned on his heel and left, trailing a still confused and frightened Crabbe and Goyle in his wake.

Ron looked up at Harry, who was now shaking slightly in anger. "That was bloody brilliant, mate," he said, a broad grin on his face. "That was even better than the amazing bouncing ferret."

Fred and George were heaving in laughter and Ginny was looking up at Harry in awe. But Hermione looked troubled. "Do you think that was wise, Harry?" she asked in a small voice.

"Better than killing him with my bare hands," Harry growled as he sat down with a thump.

In the meantime. Malfoy, who was leaving the car, heard an ominous sound: Laughter.

CHAPTER 10 The First Years

Harry's dark mood over his confrontation with Malfoy lingered for almost an hour. Even the appearance of the food cart lady, bearing her panoply of goodies, didn't do the trick. Harry bought a large assortment of sweets for the compartment, and so did Fred and George, so everyone else was happy, especially Ron, who dove into the sweets like they were manna from heaven.

It was only a few minutes after the candy was distributed, when Harry looked up to see Ron attempting to describe a Quidditch move to his grinning brothers despite having a mouthful of pumpkin pasty, that his mood lightened. Ron had now grown to nearly six feet tall and his features had begun to lose the softness of childhood. He had taken on the larger-boned frame of his mother, unlike that his sister Ginny and the twins, who took after their father, Arthur. He was becoming a man. And yet Harry chuckled inwardly that this was the same old Ron who would dive into food, especially sweets, like there was no tomorrow.

But beyond the young man whose actions recalled the eleven-year-old he had met on his first trip to Hogwarts, there was something more about Ron that warmed Harry's heart. Here was his friend. His best friend. A person with whom he now knew he could share his deepest secrets, and for whom Harry would do anything.

He could imagine what Ron had gone through during the summer. Ron liked Hermione, too. Maybe, Harry thought, not with the intensity that he had developed as he sweated and strained at his little jobs or as he lay dazed and hurt in the cupboard under the stairs at Number 4 Privet Drive. But perhaps this wasn't being fair to Ron, Harry suddenly realized.

He knew Ron had a few acquaintances in and around Ottery St. Catchpole, and that the family would go on occasional weekend outings. But, for the most part, Ron spent the summer at home with only Fred and George and Ginny for company.

In any other summer, Harry would have viewed Ron's summer as a large slice of paradise. But this summer, Harry's life had be filled to the brim. He had morning runs with Sara for over a month. He had met numerous nice people with interesting stories to tell among the neighbors for whom he's worked. He had Peter Boyd for practicing karate, or for just hanging out at Langans, drinking soft drinks and talking about girls, and cars, and then girls again. And when Peter wasn't around, he could usually find Jim Jamison and Jack Tallerdy and simply loaf around, listening to them about life at Smeltings and sharing his own freshly won knowledge of self-defense.

And, of course, there were the dances and the girls. Harry was thoroughly shocked, and touched, by the attention they paid to him. He was not the 'Boy Who Lived' or the 'Boy With the Scar' to them. He was 'just Harry.' But they seemed to like him anyway. He was thrilled to know that the lively Patty enjoyed being around him, that shy Beth had a crush on him, and that pretty Pam flirted outrageously with him.

And when he came back to the vicarage, he knew he would be the center of attention, at least when Tony and Mae were not busy with the parish and its parishioners. And Harry felt a real sense of fulfillment when Tony or Mae would bring him along to baby-sit, and provide support for, the children of families in distress seeking counseling.

He now understood that, while Hermione was the focus of his thoughts during the summer, she wasn't the only thing to occupy his mind. But Ron had little to do. So Harry could image what Ron had experienced, having gone through similar periods of isolation in previous summers.

That's why Harry looked at Ron so fondly now. Ron had probably been forced to do a lot of thinking over the summer. And Harry's letter doubtless had caused those thoughts to be troubled.

And so Harry now more fully appreciated how much it took for his friend to confess yesterday about how Hermione seemed more interested in him than in Ron. And his heart went out to his friend. Harry now understood that he would do almost anything to help him be happy.

So, as the train pulled into Hogsmeade Station, Harry vowed to himself to do his best to see that Ron found happiness.

* * *

There was the typical confusion and milling around as 259 students, including 38 confused, frightened and awed first years, debarked from the Hogwarts Express. Harry nodded at some familiar faces and tried to keep his head while being jostled by the crowd. Then he saw Lavender and Parvati, along with Parvati's twin sister Padma and Mandy Brocklehurst, walking toward them. Harry nodded as Parvati approached and quietly slipped behind Ron, giving him a shove forward.

"Erroff! Harry, watch yourself," Ron exclaimed as he tried to find Hermione and Ginny. Ron turned back and found he was face-to-face with Parvati. "Uhhh, hi Parvati," he said with a crooked smile.

"Well, fancy meeting you here, big boy," she replied seductively, grabbing his arm.

Ron blushed but was interrupted from saying anything more when Hermione and Ginny ran up.

"There you are!" Hermione said in exasperation. "Come on! The coaches are filling up! We've got to hurry if we want to keep together!"

Ron gave Parvati another crooked smile. "See you at supper," he mumbled.

Harry looked at Parvati and they gave each other mutual eye rolls, as Lavender giggled and Padma and Mandy looked at each other with smiles.

Harry turned and caught up with Ron, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him back. "Ron! What did you say to Parvati?" he whispered.

Ron blushed again. "I don't know. I was in the train corridor and I saw this tall, pretty girl and I didn't know who it was until she turned fully around. It was her. And I kind of blurted out how nice she looked and all. I don't know. You said that stuff about saying nice things to girls and all. So I just...said it." Ron was now turning an alarming shade of red.

Harry slowed their walk toward the horseless carriages. "Well, it sure did work," Harry whispered. "I think she really likes you...a lot," he said, giving Ron's arm a squeeze.

Ron's blush remained. But a small smile played around the corners of his mouth. "You think so?"

Harry chuckled. "Yeah," he said with a grin. "Did you see the way she looked at you?"

They arrived at the carriages and saw Hermione pop her head out of the fourth one from the end.

"Are you two coming," she said with a look of wide-eyed exasperation.

Harry chuckled and gave her an indulgent smile. "Don't worry. We've got reserved seats at the feast. Front row. I promise."

* * *

Harry and Hermione, as House prefects among fifth years, were seated across from each other at the very last occupied seats at the front of the Gryffindor table nearest to the staff table. Ron was next to Harry and Parvati was next to Hermione. On the other side of them were fourteen empty places closest to the staff table to seat potential new house members. There hadn't been fourteen first years sorted into a single house since 1974, when an astonishing sixteen first years were sorted into Hufflepuff and there was a scramble to find two extra chairs for the house table. Most attributed this bounty to the four sets of twins that all ended up in that house.

As fifth years, Harry and Hermione were unofficially considered to be in charge of the first years, as the current sixth year prefects were unofficially in charge of the second years and the seventh year prefects were in charge of the third years. The fourth years, being presumably more mature--and beyond the handling of anyone--were on their own.

Harry glanced at the High Table and was startled to see the members of the staff unchanged from the year before.

Well, unchanged was perhaps not entirely correct. For there, sitting next to Professor Snape, was 'Mad Eye' Moody, presumably the real one rather than an impostor, as Barty Crouch Jr. had been last year.

Moody was looking directly at Harry. Or, at least his normal eye was. Moody's magic eye was drifting over the rest of the assemblage, occasional darting back and forth. Moody gave Harry a slight nod and his gaze drifted elsewhere.

Snape, on the other hand, seemed to be gazing out with an unfocused stare. A sudden clatter near the front of the Ravenclaw table made Snape jump, but he quickly recovered and simply resumed staring, this time at a new spot in space.

Hagrid, on the other hand, was talking with animation with Professor Sprout. Harry was surprised and pleased, believing that Hagrid would not be returning for an extended period of time from what he presumed was the land of giants.

Professor Vector and Madame Hooch were carrying on an animated conversation, with Madame Trelawney, making a rare appearance at the High Table, in between them, looking disconcerted when she wasn't trying to look mysterious. And, at the far end of the High Table, it looked like the tiny and aged Professor Flitwick was flirting with a prim school nurse, Madame Pomfrey, much to the amusement of the school librarian, Madame Pince, who was trying her best to fight a thin-lipped smile. And off to the side, the ghostly Professor Binns slept through everything.

Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was watching the Sorting Hat with absorption as the various ghosts made their appearances.

Suddenly, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, the Gryffindor House Ghost appeared, swooping down from the charmed ceiling above. Ron, who wasn't paying attention, jumped as Nearly Headless Nick seemed instantly to settle into a hover right in front of him.

Harry laughed and turned to the ghost. "Well, Sir Nicholas. How was your summer?"

Sir Nicholas rose a little above the table, a frown on his face. "Horrible, as usual," he sniffed. "Three times I challenged the Bloody Baron to a duel in hopes that he would finish the job on my head. And three times that...gentleman contented himself with skewering me in the chest. Not one swipe at my neck," he said morosely. "Well, at least *he* enjoyed himself."

Harry chuckled, but tried not to make it too apparent to his spectral friend, who now was drifting down the Gryffindor table, tipping his head to startled and frightened first year students, nervously making their way up the center aisle of the Great Hall to the High Table.

He turned back to Hermione and smiled to himself. 'God help the poor first years if Hermione decided she was going to ride herd on those put in her charge,' he thought. He had remembered how lost and frightened he was when he was being sorted. He had met Ron on the Hogwarts Express and already was his friend by the time of the sorting, hoping to be in the same house. And he had met Hermione briefly and thought she would be interesting to get to know. But he knew no one else and was anxious as to what to expect. Harry smiled inwardly. 'Let Hermione lay down the law to the first years. I'll just try to be their friend,' he thought. He watched as the assembled throng of 38 new students awaited their fate.

Professor McGonagall now rose to the platform in front of the High Table and announced that the sorting was about to begin, motioning the first years to come forward. Harry nudged Ron and pointed to a young girl with bright red hair. "One of yours?" he said with a smile.

Ron snorted. "Never saw her before."

Hermione hissed. "The Hat's about to start."

The students all turned to the tattered hat, which suddenly took on a bright aura. Slowly, the slouch in it straightened out as if it were sitting up. And the Sorting Hat began to speak.

*When first I started looking at
Young students' minds so new,
Their clothes were made of animal hides,
Their faces painted blue.
I've seen them dressed in armor,
I've seen them dressed in lace.
But one thing all the students shared
Were scared looks upon their face.
I've seen the hopes, the fears, the dreams
Of tens of thousands, true.
But I'll always look for the best in all
Young students such as you.
If it's danger or excitement
Or a challenge you adore,
You know you'll find a happy home
In the House of Gryffindor.
If amity and loyalty
And gaiety's enough,
I'll send you where you'll most belong
To the House of Hufflepuff.
If the toughest tasks of academe
To you hold little awe,
Then the place for stimulation
Is the House of Ravenclaw.
If you're focused on the finish line,
You're greatest goal: To win,
Then you'll find your kindred spirits
In the House of Slytherin.
I know you feel quite out of place,*

*The spotlight you do shun.
But you'll find yourself your destiny
When my sorting chore is done.
So come on up and put me on
Like thousands have before,
And share with me your hopes and dreams
And I'll tell you what's in store.*

The seated students roared their approval, but some of the standing first years waiting to be sorted shifted nervously. A couple glanced back to siblings already at their house tables, looking for reassurance.

And so the sorting began.

* * *

"Samantha Bauman," Professor McGonagall called.

"Gryffindor!" the Sorting Hat called.

A pretty young girl with long blond hair that hung down nearly covering her eyes, looked around with a frightened expression, but Harry jumped up and walked toward her, waving her over to the cheering Gryffindor table.

"Eugenia Beauvoir"

"Gryffindor!"

Eugenia, who had dark blonde shoulder-length hair and a pug nose, reminiscent of Pansy Parkinson, jumped down from the chair with a smile and practically skipped to the Gryffindor table to be greeted by Harry, Hermione and the rest of the cheering house.

"Violet Brown."

"Gryffindor!"

The third person sorted and the third blond girl in a row sorted into Gryffindor, strode happily to join her new mates on Hermione's side of the table.

Harry looked across at Lavender, who rolled her eyes. "A distant cousin from the north, up in Yorkshire.

"Michael Burwasher."

"Gryffindor!" the Sorting Hat announced. The fourth first year in a row to be sorted into Gryffindor, and the first boy, carefully rose from the sorting chair. The Gryffindor House table was now going wild as Harry rose to applaud and wave over the stocky young boy with sandy hair and a bemused smile who made his way over.

Harry remained standing and shook Burwasher's hand. "Congratulations, Michael. I'm Harry Potter and across the table is Hermione Granger. We are your prefects. You can come to us with any questions or problems you might have," he said with a warm smile.

Hermione reached across the table and shook Burwasher's hand briefly, but the boy turned back to Harry to stare.

"Oh, sit down you young git and enjoy the show," Harry said laughing as he mussed Burwasher's close-cropped hair. The boy smiled and turned back to the ceremony.

Two others were sorted, into Slytherin and Ravenclaw, when the next new student put on the hat.

"Maura Duffy."

"Gryffindor!"

There was a sudden whoop from down the table as Maura's sister, fourth-year Gryffindor Moira Duffy, jumped up on her chair, waving with both arms in celebration. Maura, a tiny girl with mousy brown hair like her sister, but with the same mischievous look, ran to the chair next to Hermione, waving frantically at Moira.

There was a lull as numerous students were sorted into different houses when McGonagall announced: "Patrick McGrady

"Gryffindor!" the Sorting Hat called.

A cocky looking young boy with bushy dark brown hair falling across his forehead and a light spattering of freckles across his nose walked over Harry. He stuck out his hand. "Pat McGrady...and don't call me Paddy," he said resolutely with a distinct Irish lilt.

Harry laughed and looked down the table. "Hey, Seamus. We've got a kinsman for you."

Seamus walked over to Pat. "What county?" he demanded.

"Roscommon. County Armagh," Pat replied.

Seamus frowned. "The North," he said flatly. "Orange or Green?"

"Green."

Seamus relaxed and laughed. "Well, boyo, when is FAT DAD coming home? We miss you."

Seamus and Pat began laughing together, but Harry looked puzzled. "Who is fat dad?"

Seamus laughed some more. "The six counties of the North," he said with a smile and an accent suddenly as Irish as Paddy's Pig. Pat nodded solemnly.

Suddenly, Ron elbowed Harry and nodded toward the platform.

"William Peters."

"Gryffindor!" Peters, with a mop of dark brown hair and one of the smallest boys to be sorted so far, stepped out from under the Sorting Hat and made formal bow toward the cheering Gryffindor table. Then he raised both hands as high as he could, showing the victory salute to the entire Great Hall. Professor McGonagall had to give him a firm push to get him off the platform to make way for the next first year to be sorted.

Ron, who was laughing hysterically, slapped Harry's shoulder. "Uh-oh, Harry. Here comes trouble," he said, breathless with mirth. "I'll bet this one will give Fred and George a run for their money."

Harry turned around to Ron, grinning, then looked at Hermione, who had a kind of stern expression that would have done McGonagall proud.

Peters walked up to Harry and stuck out his hand. "Willie Peters, at your service," he said with a grin.

Harry smiled. "Harry Potter, who will be attending your services if you don't watch out," nodding toward Hermione, who was still giving Peters poisonous looks.

Willie turned and gave Hermione a quick shake of the hand. The he turned back to Harry and, in a conspiratorial whisper said: "I hope all the professors aren't like her."

Harry burst into laughter. "Oh, they're worse. But you'll have to be careful of Professor Granger. She lives with us."

The table's attention turned back to the Sorting Hat.

"Thomas Richardson."

"Gryffindor!"

A tall, gangly boy with carefully cut and groomed light brown hair strode toward the Gryffindor table. He held out his hand. "Tom Richardson," he said with nervous enthusiasm, then started. "Oh...you're him," he said.

Harry shook his head with a resigned grin. "No. I'm his evil twin."

Harry settled back to enjoy the rest of the sorting, but was mildly disconcerted as Richardson, and to a less extent Burwisher, kept glancing back at him.

"Stephen Shaunessy."

"Gryffindor!"

Shaunessy, a large boy for an eleven-year-old, walked up to the table and shook Harry's and Hermione's hands with a serious expression. He went through the brief introductions to many of the current Gryffindors. Then he turned and gave a broad smile to Mike Burwisher. "We made it together, eh, mate?" he said with a laugh.

A smile of relief washed over Burwisher. "Beaters to the end," they said together with a chuckle, raising their fists into the air and banging them together.

The sorting was winding down and the last first year, a girl, walked up to the platform.

"Cassandra Young," Professor McGonagall announced.

"Gryffindor!"

No one much noticed the last first year to be sorted until now but, at least for the boys at the table, they noticed in a hurry. Ron whispered over Harry's shoulder. "If she's eleven, I'm thirty-five."

Cassandra Young had silky, jet black hair, cut shoulder length. She had the bluest eyes anyone had ever seen. And she walked casually over to the Gryffindor table with a sashay that would have turned any boy's head. It was only when she got close that people recognized how young she was.

Harry looked at Hermione, who was giving Cassandra a pointed stare. Then he noticed Lavender and Parvati quickly exchanging whispers and motioning the young girl over.

Harry leaned back against Ron. "I think Lavender and Parvati just found a new protégé," he whispered, getting a chuckle from Ron in return.

"Prodigy, is more like it...if she was a few years older..." Ron whispered.

Harry elbowed Ron playfully. "Well, she's not. But Parvati is, and keep that in mind," Harry said with a smile. "So you leave her alone. She's one of my children, after all."

Ron let go a laugh. "Oh...daddy."

* * *

Professor McGonagall banged on the side of her large crystal goblet to get everyone's attention and slowly the noise level fell. "Now, students. Our Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore, would like to say a few words."

Professor Dumbledore rose and smiled benignly at the gathered students. He cleared his throat and began.

"Normally, on these occasions, I give you a few words of wisdom, such as limerick, toffee, roses, summer breeze and love. I have done this in recollection of a headmaster in years gone by who used to enjoy giving speeches. He enjoyed them so much that, after a while, all were sorely tempted to push him off the stage like certain young Gryffindors who shall remain nameless," he said with a broad smile.

Willie Peters began to rise to wave, but Steve Shaunessy grabbed his robe and pulled him back in his seat.

Dumbledore nodded in Willie's direction with another smile. But his face became more composed. "Alas, today is not one of those days for a few words. There is trouble abroad in our world, no matter what you have heard. And it is not trouble that can be dismissed with a few words. So I will take this time to issue you a reassurance. You are safe so long as you are here. But I ask you to be careful. And please follow the rules and instructions given to you by your Professors and the heads of your houses."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "A few beginning of term announcements. In light of the success of last year's event, there will be a Yule Ball this year unless changed circumstances dictate otherwise..."

There were audible groans from many of the boys and even more sighs and applause from many of the girls. Harry frowned. He wondered when it would be a good time to ask Hermione. Not yet. Not until he let her know his feelings.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "The third floor is undergoing repairs and continues to be off-limits. And, of course, the Forbidden Forest remains, as always, strictly forbidden."

Dumbledore heaved a sigh. "As for Hogsmeade weekends..."

There was a sudden grumbling among the student body.

Dumbledore blinked. "As for Hogsmeade weekends, they will be limited. I have been assured by certain officials at the Ministry of Magic that a security force of Aurors will be available for your protection. But you will be required to stay on Hogsmeade Road and not stray beyond."

The grumbling among the students subsided a little.

The Headmaster continued. "Mr. Filch, our devoted caretaker, has issued a new list of prohibited items, with many new additions, which brings the total to, what, 1,200?"

Filch, who stood by the side door of the Great Hall with his beloved cat, the scrawny Mrs. Norris, gave a curt nod. "Yessir. My count shows 1,213, Headmaster," he growled.

Dumbledore nodded. "This list will be distributed to all prefects for your perusal."

Dumbledore then looked around the gathered students and his smile returned. "And now, the most beloved words in the English language: 'Let the Feast Begin'."

* * *

The welcoming feast, as with all welcoming feasts, was sumptuous, and its sudden appearance on their plates startled and delighted most of the first years. But Samantha looked distinctly uncomfortable throughout the meal. Harry gave her an appraising glance. She was pretty, but it looked like she was trying to curl in on herself, only giving the others sidelong glances. He was a little annoyed that Hermione seemed to be too busy rattling off a myriad of facts and anecdotes, doubtless gleaned from *Hogwarts: A History*, to notice Samantha's discomfiture.

Harry leaned over the table. "Samantha," he said with his warmest smile. "Tell me about yourself." Samantha looked a little startled. She gave a small shrug. "What do you want to know?" she said in a quiet voice.

Harry continued to smile. "Where you're from. What your parents do. What you think of all this. Whatever."

She sighed. "I'm from Devonshire. Near Plymouth. My father's a fisherman. And all this is kind of scary."

Harry nodded, beginning to understand. "So your parents are muggles...I mean, nonmagical folks?" She nodded.

"And they didn't know what to make of you," he said evenly.

She looked up, startled, and nodded. "You too?"

Harry smiled. "Not quite. I was raised by my aunt and uncle, who are muggles, after my parents were killed. They knew what I was but never told me. I only found out after I got my letter from Hogwarts and Hagrid...he's our Care of Magical Creatures Professor...came to get me."

She was staring at Harry now. "Really? You didn't know? Then you must have been just like me, always getting into trouble and not knowing why."

Harry shrugged. "My aunt and uncle hated me, so it didn't matter what I did. I was permanently in trouble. But don't worry, you're among people who understand you now."

Samantha gave him a wistful smile and went back to her feast.

The only discordant note after Dumbledore's speech was when Harry glanced up across to the Slytherin table. Malfoy was sitting there, watching him with an odd look. It looked like a cross between malevolence and thoughtfulness.

Harry glared back.

Suddenly, Malfoy seemed to recognize he was staring and his face changed into a more characteristic smirk. He turned to say something to Crabbe, who seemed to chuckle and the two Slytherins went back to eating.

* * *

Once the feast ended, Hermione stood up. "All right. All first years, follow me."

Harry smiled. Then he noticed that most of the first years had stood up but were looking back at him. He smiled again and nodded. "Let's go now. Hermione is your prefect, just as I am, and we don't want to keep her waiting." As a group, the ten first years scrambled to catch up to Hermione.

Hermione led the way, giving instructions and pointing out things, like the way to the library and the still-forbidden third floor, as if she were a tour guide. Harry brought up the rear of the group to see that no one strayed, keeping an especially close watch on Willie Peters.

But almost immediately, his resolve dissipated as he watched the first years in his care looking agog at their wondrous new surroundings. And suddenly, he was seeing Hogwarts through their eyes, recalling the amazement, anxiety and wonder that he experienced when he arrived here five years before. For Harry suddenly realized that Hogwarts was, for him, not just an escape from the hated Dursleys. It was a wonderland. He smiled.

Harry was glancing up at the portraits of people that moved, when he felt someone tentatively take his hand. He looked down to see Samantha was holding his hand, looking up at him with an anxious look. He thought for a moment of letting her hand go, but thought better of it. The girl was clearly

overwhelmed and frightened by everything, and so he gave her hand a squeeze to reassure her.

Suddenly, he felt someone take his other hand. It was Maura Duffy, who looked up at him sweetly. He smiled at her and shook his head, knowing she was just being an eleven-year-old flirt. "Come on along, everyone. Keep up," he said with a laugh, as he walked hand in hand with two adorable little girls--his children.

* * *

Hermione gathered all the first years into a far corner of the common room that had, by centuries-old tradition, been the exile, and the domain, of first year students. She took out a carefully prepared list of rules and instructions that she had worked on rigorously since being informed by owl during the summer that she had been named prefect.

Harry, for his part, simply sat on the arm of one of the sofas, listening patiently as Hermione turned to page two, then three, of her notes. Suddenly, he felt a tugging on his sleeve. He looked down to see Willie Peters motioning him down. "She's not really a professor, is she?" he whispered.

Harry smiled and shook his head.

Willie nodded. "Good," he said quietly.

Hermione had finished her lecture. "Well, unless there's anything else, I've got some transfiguration homework to review. Anything else, Harry?"

Harry smiled at Hermione. "No. I think you've covered it all. You go do your work. I think I'll just sit down here and get to know everyone a little better."

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment and was about to say something, but then shrugged and gave a curt nod. "Okay, Harry. Whatever you want," she said and walked off to the fifth year table where she had already set up her notes for review.

Harry slid off the arm onto the sofa itself, bumping Willie over into Maura, who bumped into Samantha. "Well, first things first. I'm Harry Potter, and I'm the other prefect among the fifth years here. Hermione and I are sort of in charge of you all. So what I would like to do is to try to get to know each other. Why don't we all introduce ourselves and tell everyone a little about ourselves."

"Willie, how about you?"

Willie's eyes lit up. "Well, my name is William Flavius Peters, but everybody has always called me Willie. William is too stuffy and Bill is too common. But Willie suits me, and I'm fine with that. My dad runs a potions' shop in Diagon Alley. I like Quidditch and am a champion wizard card tosser and I think that Miss February in Gentleman Wizard is the"

"Ahem," Harry interrupted with a lopsided smile. "I think that's enough from you for now. You can take up these important matters with your mates after lights out. Maura, you next."

Maura looked up at Harry, smiling sweetly. "Oh, Harry. I think you should go next. After all, you're in charge here."

Harry shook his head, chuckling inwardly. "All right. My name is Harry Potter, and I come from a little town south of London called Little Whinging. My parents are dead and I was raised by my aunt and uncle, who are muggles. I love Quidditch, too, and I am the Seeker on the Gryffindor House Quidditch team. Okay, Maura. Your turn."

"But what about You-Know-Who and the scar," Stephen Shaunessy interrupted.

Harry's face clouded. He looked around and several of the first years were leaning in intently.

He sighed. "All right. I might as well get this out of the way. But do me a favor. Please don't bother me with a lot of questions about this afterward. It is a painful subject that I'd rather not talk about."

While a couple of the first years looked a little uncomfortable, the rest seemed to lean in even more intently.

"First of all, when I was little more than one year old, Voldemort came to our house and killed my father and mother, who was trying to shield me from him."

Several of the students gasped not at Harry's tragic tale of violence and death but at his use of the Dark Lord's name.

Harry looked around at all of them. "Don't be afraid to say his name. It only gives him more power, more sway over your lives if you give him that much respect."

Harry sighed and continued. "Well, it seems that Voldemort tried to kill me, as well. Our headmaster, Professor Dumbledore, says it was the power of my mother's undying love for me that caused his death curse to rebound against him."

"But you killed him, right?" said Tom Richardson.

Harry shook his head. "He was severely hurt and was unable to continue his quest for power. That is, until now."

"But the Ministry says..." Tom tried to continue.

Harry's face took on an angry look. "The Ministry is wrong. I know. I saw Voldemort's resurrection last June. I was there. And I saw one of the best people I know murdered in front of me as part of that rebirth. Whether the Ministry has the intelligence or guts to admit it or not, he is back. Now let's put an end to this," Harry said, trying to soften his tone as he saw the youngsters leaning back into their seats.

"I'm sorry. You think that all this is just part of history, or some celebrity thing in the newspapers," he said mildly. "But to me, it's a nightmare that haunts me to this day. I know you're curious, but it's a very painful subject for me. I'd prefer that we talk about you. Okay?"

He got sympathetic looks from most of the girls, although Samantha looked puzzled. But, except for Mike Burwisher and Willie, the boys looked at him in curious consternation.

Harry looked around at the group. "Okay, one more question...Tom?"

Richardson looked at Harry cautiously. "What did it feel like to beat You-Know-...Voldemort?"

Harry shook his head. "Tom. I was one year old. I don't remember." He pushed up the hair from his forehead. "You see the scar?"

The ten all took a close look and nodded.

Harry sighed. "Until I was eleven years old, I thought that it had come from a car accident that had killed my parents. My aunt and uncle didn't want me to know I was a wizard...or that my parents were magical. So they told me my parents died in a car crash. For all I knew, that was the truth. Okay?"

Violet Brown suddenly had tears in her eyes and Cassandra Young was staring at him sympathetically with her big blue eyes. But most of the boys and Maura were looking down angrily. "How could they do that?" she muttered.

Harry shrugged. "They just did," he said flatly.

"Now, enough about me. What about you, Maura?"

She looked up, then smiled. "Well, I'm Maura Duffy. I'm from Wiltshire on the Salisbury Plain. My

parents have a small farm there. And my sister is a fourth year here in Gryffindor. Her name is Moira. And she's sitting right over there," she said pointing, as Moira waved back.

"Samantha?" Harry asked.

Samantha looked around anxiously. "I'm Samantha Bauman," she said tentatively. "I come from the coast just east of Plymouth. My dad's a fisherman and my mum's a housewife and seamstress. I have an older brother Mickey. And I've never been away from home before and I miss my family very much," she said, trying to blink away tears.

Harry gave her a concerned smile. "Don't worry. You'll have fun here....Michael?"

The stocky boy shrugged. "I'm Mike Burwasher. Me and my mate Stevie Boy are from London. Our dads are Aurors and we love Quidditch," he said with a sudden glow in his eyes.

Harry smiled. "What's your favorite team?"

"The Midwitch Cuckoos," Mike and Steve chimed in together.

Harry threw his head back and laughed. "Well, don't tell my best friend Ron that. He's a Chudley Cannons man and he'll never forgive the Cuckoos for beating the Cannons in the Quid Association semifinals years ago. He keeps going on about something about illegal substitutions in that match."

Mike and Steve turned and smiled at each other smugly.

"Steve, anything to add to your mate's eloquent recitation?"

"Nah. Not much. Except we plan to be beaters on the house team. We're really a good pairing."

Harry nodded. "Well there's no openings this year for beaters. We've got a great pair in Fred and George Weasley. But they're seventh years, so there'll be two openings next year. So keep that in mind....Eugenia?"

"Genie," she said with a sparkling smile. "Genie Beauvoir..."

"Don't you mean Beaver?" Tom Richardson said with a mischievous grin.

Genie turned to Tom with an angry look. "I've heard all that before, and it's not funny. My name is pronounced Bo-vwar. Not the way you Midlands clods do."

Harry was looking confused.

"Okay, Genie," Tom continued, tauntingly. "It's B-e-a-u-v-o-i-r, right?"

She nodded.

"Well I've been to Beauvoir Castle, and they pronounce it Beaver," he said with an evil grin.

Harry stood up. "All right. Enough. Tom. It's pronounced Bo-Vwar. The next one to pronounce it Beaver..." and he pulled out his wand "...gets turned into a toad."

As the rest of the first years started chuckling, Tom whispered to Genie "Beaver" once more.

Harry whirled around with his wand in Tom's face, muttering nonsense words with his eyes closed. Tom jumped back in his seat, terrified.

Then Harry slowly opened one eye, then the other, and stared at the boy. "Oh, I'm sorry, Tom. I'm too late. You're already a toad."

At that point, the rest of the first years collapsed in laughter, including Samantha. Thus was born Tom 'The Toad's' nickname.

"Genie," Harry said, still chuckling as he sat back down, "you were saying?"

Genie sniffed at Tom and turned to the rest of the group. "Well, I'm from East Sussex, and my family runs a group of small inns for the wizarding tourist crowd. My grandfather owns the business, but my dad runs it for him and my mum supervises the cooking at our main inn near Brighton."

"Tom?" Harry said with an amused expression.

Tom looked up sulkily. "Well...Genie's right. I'm from the Midlands. Richardson Manor is just outside Birmingham. My father owns some factories there, mostly making gowns and other wizarding clothing. I've got three younger brothers, so I'm the first to come here."

"Violet?"

Violet tossed her thick blonde hair. "Well, I'm from the northern branch of the Brown clan, unlike my cousin over there," she said haughtily as she pointed to Lavender Brown, who was huddled, as usual, with her roommate Parvati and watching Harry curiously. "I'm from Yorkshire, and my father runs a portion of the main Brown estate. My uncles run most of the rest, although their cousins do manage a significant portion, as well."

Harry nodded, not entirely happy at Violet's tone. "Patrick?"

"And don't call me Paddy," he said with a grin.

Harry laughed.

"Well, we've got a small farm in Ireland...in the North..."

"You mean Ulster," said Tom the Toad, rounding back into form.

Harry gave Tom a look and the Toad sank back in his chair.

Pat gave Tom a skeptical look. "We're from County Armagh, just outside of Roscommon. My dad's a muggle, but my mom's a witch. But he knew all along, so it wasn't such a surprise, you know."

Harry burst into gales of laughter. "Oh, Patrick. You and Seamus will be getting along just fine," he said, tears brimming from his eyes.

When Harry recovered, he turned finally to Cassandra Young. "So Cassandra. What surprises do you have in store for us?"

Cassandra looked at Harry with a small smile. "Well, my father is Wolfram Young..."

Harry heard gasps from several of the other students.

"...and my mum is Caitlin Young."

"The actor and actress?" Violet gushed.

"I saw them at the Bardavon Theatre in the Wizard of the White Cliffs," said Genie. "Your dad is so dreamy."

Willie was staring at Cassandra goggle-eyed. "Your mum is really hot stuff," he sighed.

"Willie!" Harry exclaimed.

Mike and Steve simply looked at Willie, who looked back as all three nodded.

"Oooo, what's it like to have famous parents..." Violet continued.

Cassandra sighed. "It's okay I guess, but I don't get to see them much."

Samantha, was confused, never having heard of Wolfram or Caitlin Young. But she somehow seemed to hear the unspoken longing in Cassandra's voice and looked at her new roommate with sympathy.

The group began to talk excitedly amongst themselves, so Harry got up and motioned Ron over. "Ron. You want to get everyone in the room over here so I can introduce you all to the first years?" Harry whispered.

Ron looked puzzled. "But nobody did that for us when we were first years," he said with a puzzled expression.

"I know. And look how long it took us to even recognize half the people in our own house, much less know their names. That's why I want to do it for these kids. After all, I want my children to know who they're living with."

Ron nodded and wandered over to gather up the troops.

After Harry introduced everyone to the first years, knowing that only a few of the names would stick with faces to the excited eleven year olds, he gathered them around him.

"Now look, everyone," he said with a smile. "Your housemates are going to be like your second family. So I want you all to stay together and get to know one another at least for the first few days. You're lucky that September 1 is a Friday this year, so you'll have the whole weekend to go exploring and learn a little about Hogwarts before classes start on Monday. If you have any questions, you can ask Hermione or me. If you have any problems, do the same. I don't guarantee that we'll have all the answers or, if we have an answer, it will always be the right one, but we'll be here to listen and help if we can."

Harry looked at them all and smiled. His children, he thought. Was he ever that young?

"All right now. Hermione already showed you where your dorms are. Let me tell you now that lights out is at 11:00 pm, and it's strictly enforced," he said with a serious look. Then he gave them a broad wink, and several first years giggled. "Your trunks and pets should have been delivered by now, so why don't you all retire to your dorms and get to know each other a little better."

Harry watched the group troop up to their dorms and was amused to see the Toad stick his tongue out at the Beaver and to see the Beaver bump playfully against the Toad, both blushing all the way up to the stairs.

He then turned to see if they'd left anything behind and almost ran into Samantha.

"Harry?" she said in a tiny voice. "Can I talk to you?"

Harry sat down next to her and gave her a concerned look. "Sure, Samantha. Is anything the matter?"

She nodded with a pained expression on her face. "I don't understand most of what's going on," she said quietly. "I never heard of Cassandra's parents, but they must be famous, because everyone seemed to know them."

Harry nodded. "To tell the truth, I've only heard their names in passing."

She nodded. "But there were other things. Mike and Steve said their fathers are...Or-Ors?"

Harry smiled. "No. Aurors They're like the wizarding police."

She looked up at Harry. "And how did the food get on our plates?"

Harry sighed. "Down in the dungeons...the castle's basement, there are kitchens where the house elves work preparing all the food. They have special magical powers that allow them to make the food disappear from the kitchens and appear on our plates. The elves are very special people, and one of them is a good friend of mine. If I get a chance, I'll introduce you to Dobby sometime. He is a lot of fun," he said with a smile.

But Harry saw she was still anxious about her new world. "Listen, Samantha. This is a place where you can have loads of fun. You'll make all kinds of new friends, and find out how special you really are. I know when I was growing up, I didn't even know I was a wizard, but I seemed to make weird things happen when I was upset or afraid. But when I came here, it all started to make sense."

Harry noticed that Samantha was crying softly and leaning against him. He put his arm around her shoulder. "Now come on. There's nothing to cry about. You're about to start on a wonderful new adventure. And I guarantee. You'll love it once you get used to it."

Samantha nodded, but continued to cry softly. "I know. But I miss my family. Especially my brother Mickey. Whenever something would happen, or my parents got mad, he would give me a hug and make everything seem like it was going to be all right."

Harry looked at the pretty young girl. "Well, like I told you. While you are here, we are like your second family. Here now," he said, wrapping his arms around her. She put her face against his chest and he gave her a warm, brotherly hug.

Then he noticed that she had stopped crying. "Well, are you ready to join the rest of the girls upstairs? I'll bet they want to know all about you and I bet they'll have a thousand fun stories to tell."

She looked up at him with shining eyes. "Thank you, Harry. You're really nice. I'm glad I'm in Gryffindor House with you," she said with a sad smile.

Samantha stood up and took a deep breath, preparing to go up to the girls' dorm. But Harry grabbed her arm. "Samantha, could you do me a couple favors?"

She looked at him quizzically.

"Look, you heard what Cassandra said. Did you see how sad she looked when she said she didn't get to see her parents much? Could you do me...and her...a favor and try to make friends with her? I think she would appreciate a friend, especially one who knows about being lonely."

Samantha's face brightened a little and then took on a determined look. "Okay, Harry."

"Oh, and the other thing. Could you send Maura down to see me. I think she'd probably like to talk to her sister for a few minutes and, since it's getting close to lights out, it might be easier if she did so under the 'careful supervision of a prefect'," he said in a mock pompous tone.

Samantha giggled and nodded.

"Well, get up there and start having fun with your new friends," Harry said with a smile.

Samantha smiled back and ran up the stairs.

Harry leaned back on the sofa. Suddenly, Parvati and Lavender jumped on the sofa on either side of him and threw their arms around his neck.

"Ooooo, Mister Prefect. I'm sooo alone and don't know what to doooo," trilled Lavender, who, with Parvati, had been watching Harry with the first years.

"Mister Potter! Mister Potter! What do I do if the teachers don't like me..." Parvati said in a high falsetto.

Harry had blushed an alarming shade of red, but thought of all the things Sara told him about girls during the summer. One was that they enjoyed embarrassing boys they liked, but enjoyed it more if the boys could return it in kind in a friendly, nonthreatening manner.

He started to laugh, then tried to put a severe look on his face as he disentangled his arms and put them around the two girls.

"Now, now, you two young ladies. There's nothing to fear. Here, just let me take you up to the Astronomy Tower and we'll try to figure out some answers for you."

The two girls shrieked with laughter. Then Harry turned to Lavender with a devilish glint in his eyes and put his lips on her bare neck and blew, making a rude noise.

"Accckkkkk!" she squealed in laughter.

Harry then turned to Parvati and threw his arms awkwardly around her, mocking a passionate embrace. Parvati, shrieking with laughter, pushed him off and on to the floor.

"Harry Potter," she said as she stood up with a mock glower, hands on her hips. "Don't you touch me...unless you mean business!"

Lavender and Parvati hugged each other in hysterical laughter and walked off to their dorm rooms to finish unpacking.

Maura, who had witnessed the scene, was trying desperately to stifle the giggles. "Ah..." she gasped, shaking in mirth. "Ah...Harry? Samantha said you wanted to see me?" At this point, she gave up and started to giggle behind her hand.

Harry rose from the floor and dusted off and straightened his robes. Giving his best Snape impersonation, he looked down his nose at her. "Just doing my duty as a house prefect," he intoned.

Maura burst out laughing, and Harry joined her.

"Lavender and...what was the other girl's name?" Maura said.

"Parvati," Harry said with a smile.

Maura was still giggling. "They look like they're a lot of fun. Is one of them your girlfriend?"

Harry's smile softened. "No. They're just a lot of fun when they want to be."

Maura gave a knowing smile. Then her face shifted to a more serious look. "Oh, Samantha said you wanted to see me," she repeated.

Harry suddenly nodded. "Oh...ah...yes. Look, Maura. You seem to have a good handle on Hogwarts, what with Moira going here and all. I need to ask you a favor. Could you keep an eye on Samantha for me...to help her adjust?"

Maura tilted her head to give Harry a quizzical look. She shrugged. "I guess."

Harry nodded. "Look. She's from a muggle family. She probably didn't know a thing about the wizarding world until a month or so ago. I think her family has always sheltered her and protected her whenever her powers...you know, whenever she did any accidental magic. Now she feels alone and isolated in a strange world and she's going to need someone to lean on from time to time."

Maura suddenly understood. "She's never been away from home before, right."

Harry nodded his head.

"Oooo, that must be tough," she said sympathetically.

Harry nodded. "Look, I'm not asking you to baby-sit her. Just try to be her friend. Okay?"

Maura nodded, then suddenly got a devilish grin on her face. "What do people do in the Astronomy Tower?"

Harry burst out laughing. "I'm not going to tell you."

"That's where couples go to snog, isn't it," joining Harry in laughing.

"You didn't hear that from me, young lady," he said smiling.

"Can you show me where it is?" she said with a not so innocent smile.

Harry's eyebrows arched. "Go ask your sister."

Maura's eyes lit up with mirth. "But I don't want to snog with her..."

Harry suddenly blushed, but he continued to smile. "I'm going to tell Moira on you. Or maybe I'll just lock you up in your dorm until you turn seventeen."

Maura laughed. "Oh, well. It was worth a try."

Harry shooed her away. "Oh, go see your sister then get up to bed," he said with a fond smile.

'Oh, my children,' he thought, laughing to himself. 'Where do they learn this stuff?'

CHAPTER 11 The Gray Ghost

Ron was in his pajamas and sitting on the side of his bed when Harry came in. "Done prefecting?"

Harry gave a soft chuckle. "They're going to be a handful, I'll wager."

Ron gave a mirthful snort. "Shouldn't be too much trouble after tonight. Now that you and Hermione set them straight. Hey! You up for some Quidditch practice tomorrow? I really think I can make the team this year. I've been working all summer."

Harry, who was dressing for bed, shook his head. "No, I'm going to give the firsties the grand tour tomorrow. Show them around."

Ron looked up. "Why?"

Harry gave Ron a wan smile. "So they don't end up getting lost like we did in our first year. Maybe give them a few pointers about life here."

Ron gave Harry a puzzled look. "Oh, come on. They'll find their own way. We did. This is Quidditch we're talking about."

Harry sighed. "Look, Ron. When I came here, I had no idea what was going on. I was so lucky that we became friends right off. You had Fred and George, and Percy was a lot more patient with you than with some of the other first years. And I had you."

"But some of these firsties don't have that," Harry continued. "Maura has Moira, and Violet has Lavender. Some of the others look like they should have no problem adjusting. They seem ready. But I worry about Willie, and Mike and Steve--those two are cuckoo for Midwitch, by the way."

Ron made a rude noise.

Harry chuckled. "I knew you'd have that reaction. No, but I was saying about Willie. He's liable to get himself into all sorts of trouble unless someone takes him in hand. He seems like a good kid, but I have a feeling that he doesn't know his limits yet."

Ron hrmphed. "Turning into Hermione?" he muttered.

"No. I don't mind if he gets in a little mischief now and again. We should be the last ones to talk about that. But I can just see him running into something like Fluffy, like we did, and deciding to try to make friends with it."

Ron guffawed. "More likely, that one would jump on Fluffy's back and try riding it around the corridors," he said, laughing at the notion.

"And Mike and Steve...well, I don't know where they're coming from. They're Quidditch crazy, and I can see them not paying attention to anything else...like some other people I know," Harry said with a smirk.

Ron didn't respond.

Harry chuckled. "The Toad..."

"The Toad?" Ron interrupted.

Harry chuckled again. "Tom Richardson. The tall skinny one."

Ron nodded.

"Well, I think he could be a handful, too. I saw him teasing a few of the others right off. I would never have dared do something like that when I came here."

Ron nodded again, with a puzzled frown.

"But I'm especially worried about your girlfriend, Cassandra, and even more so about Samantha."

Ron looked at Harry. "Why?"

Harry looked down. "Well, I get the feeling that Cassandra has been...I don't know...isolated? Her parents are famous, but were never around. So she probably was always catered to by house elves or nannies. Maybe she doesn't know how to cope on her own. Maybe she grew up trying to copy her mum and dad. You saw the way she walks. That's not the walk of an eleven year old. I'll bet her mum walks like that."

Ron's face had been showing fierce concentration. Suddenly, he chuckled. "Yeah. When she came up to our table after the sorting, I thought she was some sort of dark-haired Veela sent to tempt and torment me. Then, when I saw her sitting in Siberia down in the common room, I realized she was just a scared little girl. Very pretty, but very young."

Harry nodded. "And Samantha is going to have real problems unless someone helps her. I bet she's been sheltered by her family all her life. Especially her big brother. She says she always had him to run to whenever something went wrong. And now that she's on her own, she's terrified. She's going to need all the support she can get."

Ron sighed. "I guess...but what about Quidditch?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe Sunday."

Ron got into bed. He was quiet for a few minutes. Then he turned to Harry. "You know, you seem different from last year. Not bad different. It's just that...well...I didn't notice any of that stuff about the first years. I guess you spent all that time talking with them and all."

Harry, who had his fingers interlaced behind his head and was staring up at the ceiling, thought deeply. "I don't know. I spent a lot of time talking with Tony and Mae this summer. They say that most people just want to be noticed and appreciated. To be a part of something. To be friends. And the worst thing you can do is ignore them, like they weren't worth noticing. And being a first year is the worst. You know the least and nobody pays attention to you. Like nobody cares."

Harry paused, gathering his thoughts. "And Tony says you have to listen not just to what they say, but what they don't say. And you have to be able to notice stuff about people."

Ron screwed up his face in concentration. "I notice stuff."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, you noticed Parvati all right."

Ron made a rude noise.

Harry smiled. "Look, Ron. I had a weird conversation with Sara right at the beginning of the summer. She was asking me all about girlfriends and dating and stuff. And I told her I liked this girl--I was talking about Hermione," and Harry suddenly blushed.

Ron made a noncommittal grunt.

Harry paused and then sighed. "Well, I told her about you, too, and how you liked her and all and that I would be a little put out if Hermione was your girlfriend but that you would always be my best mate..." he said in a sudden rush.

Ron sighed. "I know, Harry," he said softly.

Harry paused again, lost in thought.

"And Sara?" Ron prompted.

"Oh, yeah," Harry continued. "Well, I told her how we went out with Parvati and Padma to the Yule

Ball and all, and I guess she got Hermione and Parvati confused and she thought I was crushing on Parvati."

"Whaaa?" Ron responded.

Harry sighed. "Well, I explained about how we just sort of asked Parvati and Padma out at the last minute and all and were prats at the Ball, and she got mad at me."

Ron snorted. "It didn't seem to hurt you later on, with all the snogging lessons she gave you."

Harry turned on his side to look at Ron. "Look, she only was trying to tell me that I was an prat for not trying to talk to Parvati. To find out what she was like and interested in and all."

"Clothes. Makeup. Boys. Trelawney. Did I leave anything out?"

Harry shook his head. "You never know what someone is like unless you take the time to listen to them. Here, I'll give you an example. What did you think of Beth?"

Ron blinked at Harry. "Who's Beth?"

"You know those two girls who I said hi to when we were on our way to Diagon Alley? At the traffic light?"

Ron smiled at Harry. "Pam was the pretty one, right? So Beth must have been the fat one."

Harry leaned back and closed his eyes, his mind working again. Finally, he turned again and gave Ron a sad smile. "No. Beth was the smart one. The shy one. The one who is sensitive. The one who is soft and warm when you slow dance with her. The one who likes giraffes and plays the piano. And the one you wouldn't notice unless you made the effort, unless you took the time to get to know her."

Ron gave Harry an astonished look. "You like her?"

Harry sighed. "Yes, I like her. She's very nice and very sweet. But a lot of people only notice that she's the fat girl. No, she's not my girlfriend. But she's a nice person. An interesting person. A nice person to be friends with. And this summer, I discovered there's a lot of people who I never would have paid much attention to who are really nice."

Ron was quiet for a moment. "Well, I guess..."

Harry rose to lean forward on his elbow. "No, Ron. You don't get it. I started thinking about that. Beth is the fat girl. Well, I'm the boy with the scar. I'm 'The Boy Who Lived.' That's all that most people think of me. That I'm some sort of hero, or a stuck-up prat, or just weird, or something like that."

Ron chuckled. "Well, you are a prat."

Harry made a rude noise. "Okay. But my point is how many people take the time to find out that little tidbit about me," he said sarcastically.

Ron laughed.

"You want to know something I found out today?"

"That you really are a prat?"

Harry grabbed his pillow and threw it at Ron, who tossed it back, still chuckling.

Harry leaned back on his reclaimed pillow. "No, you git. I found out that Millicent Bulstrode is pretty cool."

Ron's head jerked up. "But she's a Slytherin!"

Harry nodded. "I know. But we talked for about 15 minutes after the prefect orientation meeting and she's got a neat sense of humor. Sarcastic, but pretty funny. I don't know if I'd trust her entirely, but I enjoyed talking to her."

Ron hrmphed.

"And Ernie Macmillan is really cool. You and he would get on great."

Ron seemed to shrug in the dim light. "He's on their Quidditch Team. He's not that good, though," he said sullenly.

Harry smiled to himself. Then, he got an evil grin. "Oh, and it's a good thing you ran into Parvati before you saw Hannah Abbott. She's really hot. I'd hate to see what you would have done if you met her on the train with your 'unexpected compliments' and subtle romantic style. They'd probably still be picking up the pieces after Ernie got through with you," Harry said, bursting out in laughter.

Ron sat up. "She's hot?" Then Ron tilted his head and gave Harry a sly look. "You like her?" he asked with a knowing smile.

Harry chuckled. "Well, if she came by the dorm needing a place to stay, I suppose I could make room," he said, patting the side of his bed.

The two boys chuckled.

Finally, Harry turned to Ron. "Well, she's going out with Ernie. It's just that it was so nice how they always seemed to be holding hands, even when they were talking to other people. It was really nice," Harry said dreamily as he leaned back against his pillows.

Ron murmured agreement. "I guess I know what you mean," he said quietly. After a few moments, he turned again to Harry. "Who else was there?"

Harry blinked. "Well, McGonagall...and Malfoy."

Ron chuckled. "Oooo, what did the house elf have to say?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing. He just sat there, saying nothing. He just seemed to be watching. A little nervous, like. But he didn't say or do anything."

Harry let his cloudy thoughts about Malfoy pass. Then he turned to Ron. "Oh, and Mandy Brocklehurst and Terry Boot are the prefects from Ravenclaw."

"Boot?" Ron exclaimed. "But he's so weird."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. He's supposed to be real smart. But his class rank isn't all that much better than ours. And he'll start talking about the weirdest things. When McGonagall left, he started talking about the history of prefects at Hogwarts. Not even Hermione paid attention."

Ron snorted again in mirth. "He must be pretty bad for that to happen."

Harry shook his head. "No, but Hermione and Mandy seemed to hit it off pretty well. Mandy's okay, I guess. But I get the impression that she's real intense. Like...I don't know."

"She's not bad," Ron said absently. "Not really pretty, but not bad."

Harry made a face in concentration. "I don't know. She was really into being a prefect, but seemed all worried that she wanted to do the right thing. So Hermione pulled out her list of things to tell the Gryffindor first years and the two of them started talking like anything. Too bad Mandy isn't in Gryffindor. I'll bet she and Hermione could be best girlfriends or something. They seem to have a lot in common. Although Hermione seems a lot more sure of herself."

Ron made a face. "She's already got us as best friends."

Harry shook his head. "Yeah, but I don't know if she ever talks to anyone about, you know, girl stuff. I mean, she doesn't say much about talking with Lavender and Parvati."

Ron looked thoughtful. "What can't she talk about with us? I mean, she isn't the type to talk about girl stuff."

Harry gave Ron a look. "Well, I'm sure there's lots of girl stuff she'd like to talk about. Like the way we talk about girls and Quidditch and stuff. I mean, you wouldn't want to talk to her about Hannah's knockers, would you?"

Ron blushed. "Hermione isn't like that," he muttered.

Harry shrugged. "I didn't think so. I mean, I didn't know what girls talked about or thought about. Then I started talking to Sara and she told me stuff..." and he paused, blushing furiously.

Ron sat up again. "Like what?" he asked urgently.

Harry turned away. "Well, it was mostly the stuff in all these girls' magazines she gave me. Some of the stuff was...embarrassing."

Ron looked at him sharply. "What?" he asked urgently and a little apprehensively.

Harry blushed. "Well, there were lots of stories on guys who have tight bums. Like the Top 5 tight bums in movies and stuff. And I read one article where this woman said girls should never date nice guys because it makes them feel so guilty when they cheat on nice guys."

Ron snorted. "That's stupid. And disgusting. I don't think Hermione would ever talk about crap like that," he said with a frown. "Tight bums!" he said with contempt.

Harry gave a wan smile. "Not like us. And nice knockers."

Ron pursed his lips and tried to stifle a giggle. "That's different."

Harry started giggling. "Sara says girls talk about that a lot. They're curious, just like us. I just thought it was weird, but those magazines had a lot of stuff like that. Especially the women's magazines."

Ron lowered his head. "Well...I don't know...I mean, I'd be interested in knowing that stuff, I guess. But don't bring those magazines around here. I don't want anyone to think I'm a poof or anything."

Harry sighed. "I suppose. But there was some real interesting stuff in those magazines. Like what girls think about boys. And how they should treat boys they like and the things they should do when boys mess up or are nice. I learned a lot. You could probably learn a lot, too."

"Maybe," Ron said warily. Then he lay back and pondered Harry's comments. "Okay," he said finally. "I'm just worried that you're going to spending all your time with the first years."

Harry sighed again. "And I'm just worried that you're going to spend all your time snogging with Parvati."

Ron blushed in the darkness. "Oh, shut up and go to sleep."

* * *

Saturday seemed to be a blur and, by the end of the day, Harry was worn out. He had done his best to show his children, the first years, around Hogwarts. He had remembered how he and Ron and gotten a stern lecture from Professor McGonagall after getting lost on their way to their transfiguration class--their first class at Hogwarts--and ended up ten minutes late. Harry vowed he wouldn't let something like that happen to his kids.

So Harry had played tour guide, attempting to show all ten Gryffindor first years where each of the classrooms, bathrooms and other important places were so they would feel comfortable navigating

the large, confusing and often changing layout of the castle.

Unfortunately, the first years had other ideas. It started early when he brought them to the entrance of the castle after breakfast to get them oriented. He wasn't halfway down the corridor to the library when he noticed the group was smaller by two. A quick survey showed that Mike Burwasher and Steve Shaunessy were the missing duo. After about twenty minutes, Harry realized there was just one place that they might be. So he brought the group out to the Quidditch pitch and, sure enough, Steve was making motions with his hand to illustrate a play as Mike looked in awe at the size of the pitch and at the elevated grandstand.

Not a half hour later, it was Genie 'the Beaver' Beauvoir and Tom 'the Toad' Richardson who had wandered off. After several minutes of calling out, bringing Professor Flitwick out of his office to shush them, they found the Beaver and the Toad just outside Moaning Myrtle's off-limits girls' bathroom. The Toad, a self-proclaimed expert on Potter lore, had been explaining to the Beaver about Harry's adventures with the Troll in Harry's first year and with the Basilisk in the Harry's second year, when Moaning Myrtle showed up to lament her fate. It was only their decision to flee the tearful ghost that allowed Harry and the rest to find them at all.

The next to wander off was Willie Peters and Maura Duffy. Harry made the mistake of showing the first years the stairs to the Astronomy Tower and the two smallest of the first years were off to explore, perhaps hoping to catch daylight snoggers. At least Harry was prepared this time, after Maura's playful suggestion to him the night before.

To top it off, Violet Brown and Pat McGrady decided to take to arguing about their respective positions in the world. Violet took pains announcing in no uncertain terms about her father's lofty position on the Brown estate. McGrady retorted, announcing loudly that at least his family owned their own farm outright and were nobody's 'estate caretaker.'

The only two who didn't cause problems were Samantha Bauman and Cassandra Young. Samantha was no longer tearful, but observed everything goggle-eyed. And Cassandra appeared to be happy to have someone her own age who treated her as a friend, rather than some little princess because of her parents.

By lunchtime, Harry was already worn out chasing around or trying to calm down the firsties, as he had taken to calling them. He offered Hermione the chance to take over, but she declined, pointing out sensibly that only Harry knew what he had shown the firsties in the morning and only Harry knew what needed to be covered in the afternoon.

The afternoon was no less tiring or frantic. First, he had to calm Samantha's fears that the dungeon wasn't where they imprisoned disobedient students. And he had to confiscate potions ingredients from Willie and Maura that they'd appropriated from the general potions supply cabinet--the *alohamora* spell at work again. Harry was thoroughly beat. He managed to stay up with the firsties to answer any questions they could come up with, and they had plenty, including some not so appropriate, before dragging himself to bed.

* * *

He awoke on Sunday morning surprisingly refreshed. He had been so preoccupied with his 'children' that he hadn't worried at all about the nightmares, and none came. He'd only had three or four nightmares since moving in with the Strowbridges, but they had left him with an uneasy feeling when he went to bed. After showering and washing up, he dressed casually and walked down to the common room with a vague feeling that he'd forgotten something. He was startled to be greeted by all ten of the firsties, all freshly scrubbed and dressed up, waiting to greet him.

"What do we have here?" he asked with a nervous smile.

Genie stepped forward. "Harry. It's Sunday. We were all wondering about...well...church."

Harry was taken aback. That's what he'd forgotten. He gave himself an inward kick. After all that Tony and Mae had meant to him during the summer, after all they had taught him, and after all the solace he gained from Sunday services and all the satisfaction he felt from doing little things for the church, here he was on the first Sunday back at Hogwarts and he had promptly forgotten all he had learned to rely on during the summer.

Harry shook his head. He rarely attended services here at Hogwarts. But he did on occasion, when things felt like they were closing in on him. It was time to return to regular services now, he vowed.

"Well, we have a chapel on the first floor, behind the library. It's presided over by the Rev. Micah Meacham," he said, and noticed frowns on the faces of Duffy, McGrady and Shaunessy. "Uh...it's a nondenominational Christian service and has the unofficial blessing of the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Catholic Churches, and others, I believe, but I don't remember which," he said nervously. "If any of you are not Christian, there are other arrangements. If you're Jewish, you can see Rachel Weiss. You met her last night when I introduced you around. She's a fourth year. She's always looking for Jewish students to make up...to make up..." Harry paused, not remembering the word.

"A minyan?" Cassandra offered.

Harry looked at her. "I guess. Are you Jewish?"

She smiled shyly. "No. But a some of my parents friends are. I like to listen to what my parents' friends talk about, and I guess I picked that up."

Harry smiled. "Anyone have problems going to services this morning? It's not required, you know."

The firsties all looked at each other. "No problem, I guess," said Pat.

Harry nodded. "Okay, them. Give me a chance to change. Then we can go down to breakfast together. Services are generally immediately after breakfast. I think you'll like Rev. Meacham. Oh...by the way. He's a ghost."

Harry left the firsties to look at each other in shock as he returned to the dorm to change.

* * *

The Castle chapel was small, with two rows of twelve pews, each capable of holding six students across--seven in a pinch. There were additional benches on the side and assorted chairs in the back. But Harry had never seen the chapel full. He shrugged internally. He figured that this was to be expected, with students no longer under the supervision of their families preferring to lie in on Sundays.

Harry brought the firsties in. He noticed Neville, Lavender and Parvati, the only regulars among the Gryffindor fifth years, as well as Seamus and Dean, who made occasional pilgrimages to services. He shook his head at Parvati. She may be of Indian ancestry, but her family had been in England since the days of Robert Clive and the East India Company and, in many ways, she was as British as John Bull. Even Hermione was there, sitting next to Ginny Weasley, although she was as irregular at services as Harry was. Ron, on the other hand, was missing as usual, preferring to take breakfast and then return to bed to worship his pillow on Sunday mornings.

* * *

"Good morning, my young friends at Hogwarts," said Rev. Micah Meacham from the pulpit. While his body was semitranslucent, his voice was strong. He was tall and thin, and appeared to be in early middle age at the time of his death. He was wearing an old-fashioned surplice and collar that dated from the mid-17th Century. He smiled a benign smile at his congregation, which numbered

about 100 students. Professors attending the service had their own balcony seats out of sight of most of the students.

Meacham continued to smile at the congregation. "I am going to start services, as I do at the beginning of each year, by trying to explain who I am and why I am here. First off, my name is Micah Meacham. I was ordained under the Anglican rite in 1628. I was appointed vicar in Hogshead, just beyond Hogsmeade, in 1634. It was a pleasant, happy life."

"Unfortunately, there came the troubles of the Civil War. During the hostilities, I tried to keep my people safe. I was arrogant enough to believe I was succeeding when the clan uprising occurred. It was 1645. There was an attack on Hogshead. I remember the pain. Then the light. Then I was here."

"It is not my place to understand the divine plan. Only that it is a work in progress. And that I am a very small part of that larger work. And my part is to provide whatever spiritual help I can to you. Thus, I am before you now. I hope to see you here often. And remember, I am always here if you need counseling or someone to talk to or a shoulder to cry on, even if you can't actually feel that shoulder," he said with a smile.

Several of the older students smiled and rolled their eyes, understanding that jokes from ghostly adults here at Hogwarts were no better than those from their living counterparts.

"Given the perilous nature of your time, I have taken today's first reading from 8 Romans: 35 to 39..."

* * *

Harry looked at his own flock as services ended. While several were startled by Meacham as a ghost, none seemed dissatisfied with the nature or tone of the services. "I wish Rev. Graham back home were as nice and understandable as Rev. Meacham seems," Harry heard Genie whisper to Tom.

He nodded to Hermione as she joined the group. "I should have thought to bring the first years here," she said with a slight blush. "I've been so caught up in homework and planning what I should be doing as a prefect, that I haven't been acting like a real prefect. Thanks, Harry."

Harry smiled at her and squeezed her shoulder. "Don't worry. But you get to head the next guided tour they get, because they ran me ragged yesterday," he said with a smirk.

Then Seamus and Dean came up to Harry. "Hey, Harry. Looks like old Meacham wasn't the only ghost here today," said Seamus, nodding toward the back.

Harry turned in time to see a figure dressed in a gray monk's habit with the hood pulled far over his face to make him, or her, unrecognizable, quickly turn and exit before everyone else. Harry turned back to Seamus and Dean. "I wonder who that was, and what that was all about."

Harry turned back, but the figure was already gone. "You think it's one of the professors?" he asked Seamus, Dean and Hermione.

By this time, Lavender and Parvati had joined the group. "What's up?" Lavender asked.

"Did you see that person in the gray monk's robe?" Hermione asked them.

"I guess," Lavender said. "But I didn't really pay attention."

"He was about my height," said Parvati, who was now about 5-foot-7.

"He?" Harry asked.

Parvati nodded. "Definitely a man's stride. Women don't walk that way, or haven't you noticed the differences between the sexes yet, Harry," Parvati replied with a chuckle.

Harry made a face at her. But he was troubled. Except for the color and the coarser fabric, the robe was almost like that of a Death Eater. Finally, he simply shrugged it off.

He turned to the first years. "All right, everybody back to the Tower. I want everybody to change into casual clothes. It's almost time to play 'Pin the Tail on the Firstie'," he said with a grin, drawing laughs from several of his charges, although Mike and Steve scowled and Samantha looked shocked.

Hermione stepped forward. "Oh, stop it, Harry," she said with a smile as the fifth years chuckled. "First years. Follow me," she commanded, and the group left the chapel.

* * *

"Harry. Might I see you for a minute in my office?"

Harry turned from walking with his procession of firsties, and gave the beaming Professor Dumbledore a quizzical smile. "Yes, sir." Harry turned to Hermione, who had paused in her duties shepherding the young students to look expectantly. Harry shrugged. "Go ahead. I'll see you later."

Harry followed Dumbledore down the corridor until they came to the gargoyle protecting the entrance to the stairs to the headmaster's office. "Raspberry sorbet," Dumbledore announced and the door opened.

As Harry stepped off the revolving staircase behind Dumbledore, he smiled at the Headmaster's office. It was, as always, filled with all manner of magic implements and gadgets, along with books, scrolls and papers. Fawkes, the phoenix, was looking resplendent, doubtless having suffered, or enjoyed, a recent immolation and rebirth.

"Sit down, Harry. Sit down," Dumbledore said with his characteristic twinkle.

Harry sat down across from Dumbledore

Dumbledore pushed forward a crystal candy dish. "Lemon drop?"

Harry smiled. "No, thank you. I just had breakfast."

Dumbledore's expression became more serious. "Harry, the reason I called you up here is that there are things going on in our world that I thought you should know about. We understand from our spies that Voldemort is out there, building up his strength. As far as we can tell, he is not planning any overt move against us in the immediate future. That is why I allowed...well, allowed outside forces to prevail upon me to allow Hogsmeade visits and to go ahead with plans for the Yule Ball."

Harry nodded, curious.

Dumbledore pursed his lips. "However, there have been some disturbing reports from our spies. Have you been having any of your dreams?"

Harry's eyes widened. He frowned. "I have been having...nightmares. About the TriWizard Tournament and...Cedric."

Dumbledore tilted his head. "But none that affected your scar? No signals from Voldemort himself, or his activities?"

Harry shivered. "No, Professor. Whenever I wake from my...Cedric dreams, I sort of check first thing. But no pain in the scar. No visions of Voldemort, beyond seeing him order Cedric's death," he said in a barely audible voice.

Dumbledore nodded. "It's just that it has come to our attention that Voldemort may be taking his less useful followers and...well, absorbing their magic, their power."

Harry blinked, uneasily. "I don't understand."

Dumbledore leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "It appears that Voldemort has uncovered some very ancient magic. Some very dark magic. He has learned to steal the power of other wizards."

Harry blinked again. "What happens to those other wizards?" he asked in a whisper.

"They die," the Headmaster said softly. "He takes their life essence. Our spy spent the summer in fear that he would be next. He reports that those who should know about such things say that Voldemort has absorbed the magic from and disposed of at least six of his followers."

Harry's blood ran cold.

The Headmaster nodded. "He is growing in power. But he is not ready. His forces are not strong enough and he is not satisfied with his own strength. So we have time to prepare, as well."

Harry was about to speak, when Dumbledore began again. "We have to prepare in earnest. A small group of us have joined forces to work toward this end. And we hope you will be prepared to join us. That is why I have asked Professor Moody to help you with additional training beyond what you will learn in your Defense Against the Dark Arts classes. We will need your aid. And the aid of everyone on the side of Light."

Harry lowered his head in thought. "Why don't we strike at him now? Or at least his main followers? Lucius Malfoy. Macnair from the Ministry. They are walking as if they didn't have a care in the world. There was a Crabbe and a Goyle. Peter Pettigrew, if we can find him. They were there. They are waiting to kill you. To kill me. To kill hundreds or even thousands of innocent people."

Dumbledore closed his eyes and lowered his head. "Alas, Harry. It is not so simple."

Harry blinked. "Why?"

Dumbledore raised his head and looked at Harry sadly. "The world is a complicated place. And the answers are not as clear cut as we all might wish. Let us just say that we are working hard and intend to meet Voldemort prepared."

Harry sighed and looked down again in sorrow and frustration.

It was Dumbledore's turn to sigh. "Harry. There is something I must say to you. I am sorry. I am sorry for the Dursleys. I am sorry for the years of difficulties you suffered through. I am sorry for your pain and I am sorry for your sadness. Had I known what you went through, I would never have left you there. We did have people from our world watching out for you. But they had assumed your bruises and your scars were all part of childhood injuries suffered by all Muggle children growing up without the benefit of wizarding healing charms. They were more concerned with the threats from our world and ignored the threats from your own. For that, there is no excuse on our part. And for that, I am truly sorry."

Harry, his head down, sighed sadly, nodding acknowledgement.

Dumbledore paused. "I want you to know that arrangements are in progress to find you a good, safe wizarding family to stay with in the future."

Harry's head jerked up, a stricken look on his face. "Mae and Tony don't want me any more?" he asked in a panic.

Dumbledore shook his head. "They will be informed once we decide where you should go."

Harry blinked rapidly. "What do you mean? Who decides?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a fatherly smile. "I think you would be better off in the wizarding world. There are places where you will be safe. I am sure the Strowbridges will understand."

Harry was now breathing heavily. He stared at Dumbledore's smiling face. Finally, he spoke: "No," he said softly.

Dumbledore's smile faded. "Harry?"

"No," Harry repeated. "If they want me, I will be spending Christmas...at home...with my family."

The Headmaster's face took on a look of concern. "Harry. We have your best interests in mind. And we believe you should be raised in the wizarding world."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "No, Professor," was all he said.

Then Dumbledore felt it. The quick flash of cold. It was coming from Harry.

Dumbledore lowered his head. "Very well, Harry. If that is how you feel, I will respect your wishes. I only thought it would be in your best interests."

Harry nodded and waited. Finally, the old Headmaster, looking older and more sorrowful than Harry had ever remembered, looked up. "Thank you, Harry, for seeing me."

Harry slowly rose and nodded. And he turned and left without a word.

Dumbledore looked up at Fawkes. "You felt it, old friend?" he said quietly.

Fawkes seemed to nod in assent.

Dumbledore closed his eyes. He had only felt it in two other people. Grindelwald and Voldemort. Only they had the power to translate their anger into a physical presence.

Oh, and there was one more that the old Headmaster had heard of who had that power. It was someone who had long ago learned to control and focus his anger.

His name was Albus Dumbledore.

CHAPTER 12 "Not of the Wizarding World"

Harry brooded for a long time after his meeting with Professor Dumbledore. He did not respond to Hermione's or Ron's questions about the meeting not out of reticence, but because he simply didn't hear them. Finally, as if in a daze, he walked up to his dorm.

Harry was both upset and a little frightened by his actions. Harry had looked on the old Headmaster as a sort of mentor or idealized grandfather. But he was upset that Dumbledore would suggest he leave the Strowbridges without asking him. Tony and Mae were as close now to being a family to him as he had ever known. His reaction in the Headmaster's office alarmed and frightened him. But the thought of leaving the Strowbridges frightened him even more.

Suddenly, as he sat in the Headmaster's office, he felt like a pawn in a larger game of wizarding chess, being moved for purposes he didn't understand by forces he was unaware of and only being able to see the squares immediately around him, but knowing all the while the consequences of a wrong move by the person making the moves.

And now, as he sat at his desk, he began to wonder about the person making those moves. He had been angry at first at the Headmaster when he was recovering from his injuries in the hospital this summer. But he soon realized that this was being unfair. Dumbledore had no way of knowing about how critical the situation could have, and actually did, become.

But Harry began to have even more troubling thoughts. No, Professor Dumbledore had no way of knowing about the Dursleys. But what about other things? Surely the Headmaster couldn't have know about Professor Quirrell in Harry's first year either, else he could have done something to stop Voldemort when he was at his weakest. And Dumbledore couldn't have known about location of the Chamber of Secrets, or he would have done something to contain the menace that the Basilisk posed to the Muggle-born and half-Muggle students. And what of how the TriWizard Tournament had been manipulated to ensure that Harry would win and claim the portkey Championship Cup that led to Voldemort's rise? Or of Barty Crouch's disguise?

If Professor Dumbledore did not know these things, which nearly cost so many lives and, in Cedric Diggory's case, ended in death, what else did he not know?

Suddenly Harry felt like the child who discovered that the father he loved, feared and worshipped was not the all-powerful, all-knowing center of the universe. Albus Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard of his age. And he was kind and strong and wise. But now Harry understood fully that there were limits to what the Headmaster knew, or could do, to protect him. Albus Dumbledore was a great wizard. But he was human.

It was a shattering thought for a naïve boy. And Harry now understood that, if his defiance of the Headmaster might have conflicted with or interfered with larger or smaller considerations, at least it was right for him. And he was satisfied that he had done the right thing.

And now he understood that he would always listen carefully to Professor Dumbledore and follow his advice when he could. But he also understood that He would ultimately make his own decisions.

* * *

Dear Mae and Tony,

I made it to Hogwarts after a fun day with my friends Hermione and Ron and Ron's brothers and sister. Ron thinks Hermione likes me, but I don't know if that's true. He was a little upset about it, but I let him know he will always be my best friend, no matter what.

He did flirt with Parvati, the girl I told you about. The one who I took to the Yule Ball. She's grown

tall and is even prettier than last year. And she noticed Ron, too. She told me she wouldn't mind going out with him. But getting Ron to ask her will be a real trick. I think they would make a nice couple.

I met all the first year students and they are very nice. But I think they will be a handful. Being a school prefect will not be as easy as I thought. I look forward to getting to know them all better.

Already, I have met some new people from my year. They are nice, too. I thought about what you said about paying attention to people I don't know. You were right. I think some of those people I didn't pay attention to before are interesting and could be good friends.

I miss you both already. I love being here but I also wish I could see you both more often. I've only been away for three days and already I miss talking to you, asking your advice, just sitting around a chatting. I told the Headmaster that I would be coming back to the vicarage for Christmas. Is that all right? I hope so. I can't wait.

I love you both.

Your foster son,

Harry

** * **

"Whoa! Harry, check out Hannah Abbott," Ron whispered.

Harry chuckled. They had just entered Greenhouse Number 3 for their herbology class with the Hufflepuffs. "I know," he said with a smile. "I told you. And check out Ernie MacMillan. He's almost as big as you and I'll wager he's got a hex with your name on it if you say anything to her."

Ron chuckled. "It might be worth it."

Harry glanced at Hannah. She had her golden wavy hair pinned up to keep it out of the way while dealing with oft times aggressive plants. But a few tendrils had charmingly fallen free. And her robe was cinched at the waist, also for safety reasons, emphasizing her well-developed figure. And her peaches and cream complexion a gray-blue eyes made her probably the prettiest girl in Hogwarts.

But for all her physical charms, she seemed to be a sweet and mild-natured as ever, as Harry had found during the prefects' meeting on the Hogwarts' Express. And she seemed as devoted as ever to Ernie MacMillan. Harry had noticed them walking hand-in-hand in the hallways, blithely oblivious to the occasional comment that they should get a room.

She was drawing stares from several of the boys in the class and Ron was no exception. So Harry was startled when he heard Ron yelp.

"Ron, I believe there's an open seat over there," Parvati whispered in an annoyed tone. "Over on Hannah's lap."

Parvati turned back to Lavender and whispered something, who then leaned over to give Ron a dirty look.

Ron blushed and turned to Harry. "Parvati pinched me," he said in a startled voice.

"You're lucky she didn't break your nose," Harry giggled.

Harry still was chuckling, and Ron was still blushing, over Parvati's proprietary interest in Ron's amorous attentions when the class ended.

As they left the greenhouse, Ron frowned. "Time to go to hell," he grumped.

** * **

Snape had completed listing the latest potion's ingredients on the chalkboard when he quickly turned and leveled his gaze on Harry.

"This year, the focus of this class will be on medicinal, curative and preventative potions. Tell us, Mister Potter, what is the significance of limiting the belladonna in the *Oculus Corrigere* potion to one-half a leaf," Snape snapped.

Harry looked up from his cauldron. He had studied the potions to be prepared for the class, but was uncertain about the point of Snape's question. Belladonna was a common ingredient in many medicinal potions. But what was Snape getting at? Harry decided to guess.

"Adding more than a half leaf would tend to reduce the effectiveness for the potion, professor," Harry ventured.

"Oh, really?" Snape said with arched eyebrows. "Are you familiar with the properties of Belladonna, Mister Potter? Are you aware that it contains the alkaloid atropine? And could you enlighten us on what would happen if you used, say, five leaves, rather than point-five leaves?"

"Could kill ya," muttered Goyle, from the Slytherin side of the room.

"Quite correct, Mister Goyle," said Snape, to the snickering of the other Slytherins. "That's why it is also called the Deadly Nightshade. So, Mister Potter, your answer is technically correct. 'Adding more than a half leaf would tend to reduce the effectiveness of the potion' in one who tried it if that person had a sudden heart seizure or went into convulsions and died," Snape sneered. "It has been our experience in the wizarding world that potions generally are not considered efficacious if they kill the person taking the potion ... unless, of course, death was the intended consequence. As your answer was, in the most general of senses, correct, I will only assess 10 points against Gryffindor, rather than 20 points."

Harry sunk down in his chair in embarrassment and fury. 'It's starting already,' he thought in a rage. 'The first day of the new school year, and Snape is already at it,' he fumed silently.

Throughout the class, Ron and Hermione kept giving Harry worried side-long glances as he continued to stare malevolently at Snape. When the class mercifully drew to a close, Ron and Hermione began packing their cauldrons and ingredients to leave, but Harry didn't move.

"Come on, Harry," Hermione whispered. "We have to get this packed away before lunch."

But still, Harry didn't move.

Ron started to say something but caught the direction of Harry's gaze, which was leveled on Snape. "Don't do it, mate," he whispered to Harry. "The git's not worth getting expelled over."

Hermione's eyes widened in fear. "Do what??" she whispered in a panic. "Harry, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to tell Snape what I think of his teaching...and him. I'm tired of being bullied. Of all of us getting bullied. Four years of this is enough," Harry said with an edge of steel in his voice.

"No!" Hermione whispered furiously, while Ron tried pulling out Harry bodily from the classroom. But Harry would not be moved.

At that point, Snape turned around and glared at the three remaining students. "Shouldn't you three be joining your little friends at lunch," he said sarcastically.

"Professor Snape," Harry said icily. "I need to talk to you."

Snape narrowed his eyes at Harry. "Mister Potter, if you have a question, raise your hand in class and ask it. Now I'm very busy, so be off with you, all of you."

"This doesn't have to do with potions, professor," Harry said in a low tone.

Snape stared thoughtfully at Harry for a moment. "Potter. My office. Now!" he snapped. He then turned to Ron and Hermione. "You two. Get out. Unless you'd like to spend the next month scrubbing cauldrons."

Hermione and Ron nervously gathered up their belongings and headed for the door. "I'm telling you, don't do it," Ron whispered.

But Harry had quickly gathered his materials and stormed out of the classroom in Snape's wake.

. * *

Snape was still 20 feet from his office when he muttered a spell and casually waved his wand, opening his office door. He swept into the office without breaking stride, with Harry right behind.

"Sit down, Potter," Snape said as he sank into the chair behind his desk.

But Harry remained standing. He put his hands on Snape's desk and leaned forward. "I want to know why you are constantly picking on us, humiliating us."

"Are you questioning my teaching methods?" Snape spat angrily.

"Yes I am," Harry growled.

"Don't take that tone with me, Potter! I'm not one of your little friends in the Gryffindor common room."

Harry continued to glare at Snape.

Snape leaned back in his swivel chair, his fingers tented under his chin, and gave Harry and narrow-eyed, appraising stare. "Are you sure you want to know, Mister Potter?"

"Yes, I want to know!" Harry said angrily.

"SIT DOWN, POTTER!" Snape commanded, and Harry slowly sank into the chair in front of Snape's desk.

Snape eyed Harry as he swiveled back and forth for several seconds. "Potter, you're a slacker. You like to cut corners. You cram everything you need to know the night before and probably promptly forget it the next day. In other words, you're a lousy potions student."

Harry bit back a nasty response. Taking a deep breath, he leveled his gaze at Snape. "I do well enough in your class," he said angrily.

Snape snorted. "You'll have to do more than well enough if you know what's good for you."

"Are you threatening me?" Harry snapped.

"Watch your tone!" Snape snapped back, then took a moment to recompose himself. "No, Mister Potter. I'm warning you."

"Warning me about what?"

Snape was silent for a few seconds. "I'm warning you about your ability to survive in the wizarding world."

Harry's glare intensified. "I seemed to survive pretty well so far, against greater enemies than you," he spat.

"I warned you about your tone, Potter. Maybe you'd like to spend the rest of the term scrubbing cauldrons."

Harry leaned back in his seat, but didn't take his eyes off Snape's.

"I'm not talking about Voldemort and the Death Eaters, you fool," Snape barked. "I'm talking about simple everyday living. You, of all people, should be working furiously to catch up."

"I study hard. I'm no slacker. And what about Hermione? She's the top student in the class, but that doesn't keep you from tormenting her, humiliating her in front of everyone."

Snape snorted again and paused to look at Harry thoughtfully. "Tell me, Potter. What's your favorite class?"

Harry started at Snape, confused. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Tell me, Mister Potter. What's your favorite class?" Snape repeated.

Harry shifted in the chair. "Defense Against the Dark Arts," he said, "as if that had anything to do with anything."

Snape leaned forward, staring intently. "Oh, it has everything to do with you, Mister Potter."

Harry looked confused.

"Tell me, you were raised as a Muggle, weren't you?"

Harry nodded cautiously.

"Have you ever spent much time in a wizarding household?"

"I've spent a lot of time with the Weasleys over the past few summers," he said.

Snape nodded. "A fine old-line wizarding family," he said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Harry snapped. "But that hasn't kept you from"

"Shut up, Potter," Snape commanded. "Tell me, while you were with the Weasleys, how many boggarts did you chase off? How many vampires did you fight?"

Harry shrugged, confused.

"And you probably know the six ways to kill a werewolf."

Harry blanched.

"Oh. Did I forget that you were the prize student of Remus Lupin a couple years ago? So you now know how to kill him six different ways. But what happens if your good friend Remus stops by for a visit around a full moon? Do you kill him? Or just lock him in the basement and hope for the best?"

Harry gaped.

"Or do you brew a potion that might ease his suffering and anguish? And protect you and him from having to try to kill each other?" Snape said sarcastically.

"Uhhh...." Harry grunted.

"I thought so," Snape said smugly.

"You are essentially a Muggle. And so is Miss Granger. So let's say you and your Muggle friend Miss Granger decided to set up housekeeping. What would the two of you do first?"

Harry felt his face flush.

Snape leaned back in his chair, casually staring at a corner of the room. "Let's see, what would you start with? Well, I suppose you two being adolescents, the first thing you would do is look for a contraceptive potion. Unless, of course, you were determined to start a family early. Then a nice fertility potion. And maybe a health potion for the expectant mother and her child. And maybe a

potion to increase the odds that the child will develop full magical skills. That's a complicated one, with some expensive ingredients. Too bad Filch's parents couldn't put one of those together, eh Potter?" Snape said turning to stare at Harry.

Harry was staring at Snape, gabbling angrily.

Snape returned his unfocused gaze to the corner of the room. "Oh, yes. And the house. How about a nice anti-vermin potion. And an anti-pest potion to keep the flies and mosquitoes out. And a fungicidal potion to keep the mold and mildew away. Of course, you'd want to infuse your carpets in a dirt repellent potion. And your clothes would need another potion to repel stains and to prevent stretching or shrinking. And a potion to coat the fireplace to keep the flue clean. And an potion to keep the wood in the house from warping or splitting. And a potion to help insulate the house from the heat and cold. And a potion for the roof to keep it from leaking."

Harry was now staring wide-eyed at Snape.

Snape continued without looking at Harry. "Oh, I almost forgot. Your medicinal trunk. There's your general tonics, your basic health elixirs, your illness potions. And of course, your ingredients for emergency use for potions for everything from the grippe to morning sickness for your lady friend. There's the pepper-upper potions for those days you just don't feel like getting out of bed, and your sleeping potions for those long nights of tossing and turning," Snape said, turning to face Harry. "You've got to be careful about those, you know."

Harry's mouth was working but nothing was coming out.

"But, of course, you and your brilliant young lady know all about these," Snape said with a sneer.

Harry continued to gape.

"...or maybe not," Snape continued. "You see, Potter, you are in the wizarding world, but not of it. Neither is Miss Granger. Yes, she is very bright. But she treats potions like a series of recipes to be memorized. I have little doubt that she spends all her spare time preparing for her next exam when she should be preparing for life. You think you are studying school subjects, you two. But you are both wrong. You are learning a way of life, a life foreign to both of you."

Harry was stunned.

"So maybe I was a little premature, matching you up with Miss Granger. I'd give you two six months before you went full-blown Muggle. Better you find a nice young Ravenclaw witch...no, you wouldn't want one too smart...a nice Hufflepuff girl. Not too smart, but savvy enough in the wizarding way to at least keep the bedbugs out of your nuptial chambers."

Harry turned red with anger. "How dare you..."

"Shut up, Potter," Snape snapped, cutting Harry off. "You wonder about all the hostility between the purebloods and the Muggle-born--the 'Mudbloods,' as some of our more thuggish wizards call people like Miss Granger. One of the sources of that conflict is the fear that, as more Muggle-born witches and wizards enter the wizarding world, increasing amounts of precious wizarding knowledge is lost or forgotten, as those in the wizarding world start looking to the Muggle world for solutions to basic needs and problems."

"That's why I take issue with some of the Sorting Hat's decisions," Snape continued. "It seems every year, more and more Muggle-born students are concentrated to Gryffindor. Sure, there are a few scattered among the other houses. We even have a couple in Slytherin. But how many Muggle-born or half-Muggle students are there in your year in Gryffindor?"

Harry looked down and shrugged.

Snape snorted. "I'll tell you. Exactly half. The only purebloods are Miss Patil and Miss Brown,

among the girls, and Mister Weasley and Mister Longbottom among the boys. Mister Finnegan at least had a fully trained witch for a mother. Mister Thomas, on the other hand, was raised as a Muggle for all intents and purposes, even if his mother was a witch...of sorts. Miss Granger was raised a Muggle and so were you."

"So what?" Harry snapped.

Snape glared at Harry. "You Muggle-borns need as much exposure to the wizarding world and its ways as possible. But by concentrating so many of you in Gryffindor, the Sorting Hat only serves to reinforce your continued reliance on your Muggle habits."

Harry's head snapped up. "So if you hate us Mudbloods so much, why do you pick on Neville more than anyone except maybe me."

Snape leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head. "Tell me, Potter. Do you think Mister Longbottom is a squib?"

Harry's eyes widened. "You know he isn't," he said angrily.

"Well, is he retarded?"

"No," Harry snapped.

"But clearly slow-witted. Much less intelligent than, say, Mister Crabbe or Mister Goyle from my own house, or Miss Brown in yours."

Harry was getting really angry now. "Neville is not stupid. Neither is Lavender. And Neville's a good student in Herbology."

"So it must be the professor," Snape remarked.

"Maybe it is," Harry sneered.

"The same professor teaching the same classes to Messers Crabbe and Goyle and Miss Brown, who consistently do better on their work than Mister Longbottom," Snape said.

"Well, that's to be expected," Harry sneered. "After all, Crabbe and Goyle are Slytherins."

Snape's eyes widened and he lurched forward, pointing his finger toward Harry's chest. "Now you listen here, Potter. I take care of the people in my house. But I have never, and will never, give a student an advantage or disadvantage in their grade based on what house they are from or what my personal feelings toward them are. You remember that," he said furiously.

Harry looked down. "Sorry professor..." he said quietly.

"You want to know about Longbottom? Is that it? I'll tell you about Longbottom. I knew his father back when I was a student here. He was a few years ahead of me, but everyone knew Frank Longbottom. He was a tough guy. He kept the Gryffindor House in order. But maybe he had to be a tough guy to survive living with his mother. She was a dominating old harridan."

"But Frank Longbottom had a spine. As soon as he graduated from here, he got married and moved out. He went into the Auror service and with Patsy, his wife, were two of the most effective aurors the ministry ever had. Then they got their minds destroyed by that miserable little shyte, Barty Crouch Jr. And their son, young Mister Longbottom, got stuck with Frank's mother."

Snape was breathing hard now. "I sympathize with Mister Longbottom's upbringing. I'm sure old lady Prunella Longbottom terrorized him, never letting him out of her sight or letting him make a decision for himself. I thought that coming here, and knowing a little more about his parents, particularly his father, away from Prunella, would help him grow a spine. Maybe he would learn to fight back. Maybe he'd learn to fight back against me. But then, maybe I was wrong."

Harry stared at Snape in shock.

Snape lowered his head as he glared out at Harry through narrowed eyes.

"Tell me, Potter. What did Dumbledore tell you the first thing before your sorting ceremony?"

Harry shrugged in confusion.

"I'll tell you what he said. He said that, once you are sorted, the people in your house will become your second family. And what has Mister Longbottom's second family done to support him? What?! Do you keep him around as some kind of court jester while the rest of you Gryffindors are plotting new adventures and planning new grand gestures to impress the rest of the school?"

Harry slumped down in his seat in shame.

"I admit that I've failed Mister Longbottom. But I'm not in the hand-holding business. I'm a teacher. And I've got my own house to worry about. But you and your little Gryffindor friends are supposed to be Mister Longbottom's family, his friends and confidants. Yes, Potter, I admit I've failed him. But you should share the greater portion of the failure, the shame."

Harry lowered his head in humiliation. He had known for months about Neville's story. But had he ever taken the time to talk to Neville, to help him? And what had he done for Neville's academic struggles? Console him about what a nasty person Snape was. Show him a few spells. Harry was furious that Snape, of all people, could shame him like this.

"Potter. You raised the issue of Crabbe and Goyle's grades and their being Slytherins. Let me tell you about Slytherin House. You Gryffindors love all the theatrics, the grand gestures. You celebrate your Quidditch victories and your House Cup. But in Slytherin House, we take care of our own, whether it's celebrated or not. I know. I'm probably a lot more intrusive on my house than the other heads of houses. So I see what's going on."

"And you know what I see? I see Draco Malfoy riding herd on the boys in your year, making sure they are prepared, making sure their homework is done. And I see Millicent Bulstrode doing the same thing with the girls. It's part of Slytherin pride. And the ones being helped will always remember those who helped them. It's called a Wizard's Debt. I don't know if you ever heard that term, but it means a lot in the wizarding world. It may not mean much to you, but it means a lot to us."

Harry was near tears in his shame.

"Potter!" Snape barked, and Harry's head snapped up. "I'm going to demonstrate the difference between Slytherin and Gryffindor in terms you can understand."

Snape got up from his desk and approached Harry. "When I was a first year here at Hogwarts, there was something of a fad raging throughout the school. Some of the students had seen some American Muggle Western films and got caught up in the trappings of American cowboys. One of those was something they called the fast draw. Two American cowboys would face each other and attack each other with Muggle weapons. The winning cowboy would blow the smoke out of his weapon and twirl it before smoothly depositing it in its holder."

Harry looked up at Snape with a puzzled expression. "What is he talking about?" Harry thought.

Snape looked down at Harry with a small, almost embarrassed smile. "It seems very few were immune to this fad."

At this point, Snape turned toward the fireplace in his office. In a motion too quick for Harry to follow, Snape's wand was out and he had lit a fire in the fireplace. Snape then held the tip of his lips, and blew on it, dispersing a puff of smoke from the spell. He then twirled the wand so fast as to be a blur and pocketed the wand again in a motion too quick for Harry's eyes to follow.

Harry sat open mouthed as Snape returned to his seat. He stared intently at Harry. "Mister Potter. Your inattention to detail in today's class cost Gryffindor ten points. If you can come into class tomorrow and tell me honestly that you did not attempt to duplicate my childish little demonstration, I will restore those ten points to Gryffindor. If not, it will cost Gryffindor an additional ten points. Is that understood?"

Harry nodded numbly.

"Do you know why I make this offer to you, despite your rude behavior?"

Harry shook his head, miserably.

Snape leaned forward in his chair. "Because a Slytherin would put his wand in his pocket and leave it there. He, or she, would realize that ten points for the House is important, no matter the urge to play or show off. Can you say the same for a Gryffindor?"

Snape leaned back in his chair. "Unless there is anything else, Mister Potter, you are dismissed," Snape said as he turned to his paperwork.

Harry shook himself and rose. He gave Snape, who was ignoring him, a last look before leaving the office. Halfway up the stairs to the Gryffindor, he noticed that he had his wand out and was absently trying to twirl it. He shook his head. Ten more points from Gryffindor, he thought sadly.

CHAPTER 13 Stonecutter

"Good afternoon, students, and welcome to your fifth year at Hogwarts," said the diminutive Professor Flitwick with a sparkle in his eye and a beatific smile on his face. "And welcome back to the wonderful study of charms. As you probably all are aware, at the end of this year, you will be taking your O.W.L. exams, and I am sure you all have been studying hard all summer to make sure you are prepared."

The class reacted with groans and chuckles, causing Flitwick to chuckle himself. Hermione gave Ron, then Harry, and self-satisfied look. "I told you that you should have spent more time revising," she whispered to the two of them.

"Well," Flitwick said with a knowing smile, "for the one or two of those among you that did not have a chance to recap during the summer, we will be spending the next two weeks reviewing what we have learned these past few years. But for this week, we will not be having regular classes. Instead of coming up here for your regular classes, I will be having you come down in small groups to a special room down in the dungeons for a very basic test. And no, Miss Granger," Flitwick said with a chuckle as Hermione already had her hand in the air, "it is not something you can study for."

Hermione turned red and gave Ron and Harry a worried look.

Flitwick looked around as several students giggled at Hermione's discomfiture. "No, There is no need to study for this. It's just a basic test of how well your powers have progressed over the past five years. You will be given a very simple spell to perform. You will be judged solely on how effective your results with the spell are."

Harry saw Hermione stare over to the Ravenclaw side and saw Padma Patil look back and shrug. He knew Hermione saw Padma as her only serious competition for top of the class in Charms and knew that the two enjoyed a friendly rivalry.

Ron leaned over to Hermione. "I heard from Fred and George that it's really simple, Hermione," he whispered with a sly grin. "It's just how well you can handle a broom. You know, how fast you can fly. How high. Can you do loops. Can you fly upside down. There's a slalom course. You know, that sort of thing. Piece of cake."

Hermione gave an audible gasp as Ron leaned back to wink at Harry behind Hermione's back. Harry nodded and leaned toward her. "Don't worry, Hermione. I'm sure you'll do great. And, after all, it only counts as half your grade in Charms for the year."

Hermione gasped even louder in a panic. Harry noticed Parvati and Lavender in the row in front of him, their shoulders heaving as they tried to stifle the laughter on overhearing the exchange.

"Miss Granger? Is everything all right?" Flitwick asked, a note of concern in his voice.

Hermione, notoriously the worst flyer in Gryffindor, looked up in a startled panic. "Ah...uh...yes, professor," she gasped. "But does this have anything to do with flying?" she blurted out.

Flitwick smiled, suddenly realizing what was going on. "No flying. Just a simple spell. I promise you, your feet will never leave the ground."

Hermione let out a huge sigh of relief and then gave furious looks at Ron and Harry.

Flitwick gave the trio a mischievous smile. "Now, if we can get back to our review. Unless, of course, Mister Potter and Mister Weasley have something more important to add..."

* * *

The Gryffindors were scheduled for their test on Wednesday afternoon. They were divided into two groups alphabetically, with Lavender, Seamus, Hermione and Neville reporting at 3:00 pm and Parvati, Harry, Dean and Ron reporting at 4:00 pm.

Ron and Harry got there early to see what they could find out from the earlier group, particularly from Hermione. However, when she strode out of the dungeon room, trailing a slightly smoky smell behind her, she simply gave the boys a self-satisfied smile and refused to give details. "We're not supposed to talk about it," she said smugly, and walked off.

Neville had just entered the room when Parvati and Dean joined Ron and Harry on the bench. The four Gryffindors looked at each other with worried expressions. "Come on, Ron. Fred and George must have told you something," Dean pleaded.

Ron shook his head with resignation. "No. They told me we would have to wrestle a troll and fight a dragon. You know, all the crap people told us before the sorting ceremony," he said with a sigh. "They wouldn't say anything even after I threatened to hex them or try some of their own pranks against them."

Parvati turned to Ron and patted his hand. "Don't worry, Ron. Whatever it is, I'm sure you'll do well," she said with a smile.

Moments later, Neville walked out of the room with a small smile on his face and Flitwick called Parvati in.

As soon as the door closed, Harry and Dean burst into laughter. Harry turned and threw his arms around Ron's neck. "Don't worry, Ron, you big hunk of a man," he said in a sing-song parody of Parvati's voice. "You'll do sooooo wonderfully well." Harry then gave Ron a noisy kiss on the top of his head.

"Gerrofff a me," Ron said, his cheeks coloring.

Dean was rocking back and forth in laughter. "Oh, Ron," he said, tears of mirth streaking down his cheeks. "She wants you sooooo bad..."

"The two of you are so full of it," he said and leaned forward thoughtfully. Harry looked over to Dean and they both burst out laughing again.

A few minutes later, the door opened and Parvati walked out and smiled at Ron as she passed. Harry gave Dean a wink as he was called into the dungeon room by Flitwick.

* * *

"Come on in, Mister Potter, and relax," Flitwick said with a smile. "And don't worry, all the trolls came down with colds, so there will be no wrestling them today," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Harry smiled and looked around the room. It was a small room, no more than 25 feet square. There was some broken furniture in the corner, along with some trunks and old filing cabinets. On the other side of the room were some large granite blocks that looked like leftovers from when they built the castle. In the center of the room were two large granite blocks stacked one atop the other. The top one looked like it was well-pitted with small holes of various depths in it.

"Mister Potter," Flitwick said, regaining Harry's attention. "This is a very simple test to see how you are progressing in developing your magical powers. I am going to give you a very simple spell. It's a stonecutters spell--*Petrus Liquefacare*. All you have to do is point your wand at the granite block and cast the spell. I'll give you 30 seconds to see how deep a hole you can put in the block. That's all."

Harry looked down at Flitwick, who was smiling benignly. "*Petrus Liquefacare*?" Harry pronounced carefully.

"That's right. *Petrus Liquefacare*," Flitwick said. "Say it a couple time to get you tongue--and your mind--around it. Just concentrate on burning a hole in the rock."

"*Petrus Liquefacare. Petrus Liquefacare. Petrus Liquefacare*," Harry said absently, getting his mind set on the spell. He turned to Flitwick and gave a quick nod.

"All right, Mister Potter, just point your wand at a clean portion of the block. And keep it level and steady. Just concentrate on the spell," Flitwick said in a soothing voice. "Let me know when you are ready."

Harry looked closely at the block. He recalled the concentration exercises Mr. Nichol had made him try during the summer as part of his karate training. He had thought they were silly, and Peter agreed. But Harry recalled lying on his stomach in the grass and concentrating on a single clover leaf. Once his embarrassment and feeling of stupidity passed, he began to notice things he'd never seen before. The tiny veining in the leaf. How the leaf was not smooth, but furry. And the edges of the leaf was not smooth but slightly serrated.

So he looked at the block of granite more closely. He noticed it was a little lighter than that of the walls of the castle. And how the candle dancing off to the side made the little crystals embedded in the stone flicker. And how there was a very subtle veining in the stone.

Then slowly he nodded. "I'm ready."

Flitwick picked up the small hour glass. "All ready? Three...Two...One...Go."

Harry's world contracted rapidly until it consisted only of his wand and the stone. He shut his eyes. He could feel a sudden warmth in the Ojibway grass Earth Drawer around his wrist. His eyes rolled up in the back of his head. "*Petrus Liquefacare*," he whispered.

Suddenly, Flitwick was screaming. "Stop! Harry, stop!"

Harry's eyes jerked open. He looked around. "What's the matter, professor? Did I go over the time limit? What's wrong?"

But Flitwick's eyes were riveted on the back wall. There was a small, smoking hole about waist high in the stone wall.

Suddenly, a portion of the back wall crashed open and Professor Snape burst through a door that hadn't been there moments before.

"What the hell is going on!" he roared. "That almost killed me! And it destroyed half a days' work!"

Snape looked around in an absolute fury and spotted Harry. "Potter! I should have known it was you! I'll have you expelled for this. I'll see you in Azkaban for attempted murder!!"

Flitwick finally recovered. "Severus! Severus!!! SEVERUS!!!" he screamed. It was only then that Snape noticed Flitwick.

"Filius, what the hell is going on here? Potter almost killed me! What are you teaching your people?" Snape snarled.

"Severus," Flitwick said, calming down. "You knew it was the stonecutter test. Now I think we need to talk. If you'll excuse us for a moment, Harry."

Harry nodded blankly. He had no idea what had gone wrong. He just followed Flitwick's instructions, but must have lost his concentration and not heard Flitwick tell him to stop. He had no idea how long he had been casting the spell, but he must have been out for a long time. But that didn't make sense, he thought. Mr. Nichol taught him that, no matter how deep his concentration, always keep a part of his mind attuned to his surroundings. You never know when an attacker might be sneaking up from behind. That's the way Bruce Lee would do it, he thought.

His thoughts were interrupted at Flitwick reentered the room through the hidden door, followed by Snape and 'Mad Eye' Moody, clumping in on his wooden leg. Moody was scowling, as usual, but seemed intrigued. Snape, however, looked thoughtful, for once.

"Potter," Moody barked. "What spell did you just use?"

Harry jumped. Then looked at Moody wide-eyed, shrugging submissively. "*Petrus Liquefacare*, like Professor Flitwick told me to," he said quietly.

Moody clumped over to the block of granite, looking through the hole Harry made. He then looked up at Flitwick. "Fully charmed?" he asked.

Flitwick nodded.

"No fractures or fissures?" Moody asked. "No hollows or gaps?"

Flitwick shook his head.

Moody looked up at Snape. "Give it another swipe, would you?"

Snape waved his wand slowly across the top of the block, his eyes closed. Then he swept the sides and front and back. Snape opened his eyes and shrugged.

"Sorry about that, Filius. I had to be sure," Moody said, a little less gruffly. He turned to Harry. "What did you know about this test beforehand?"

Harry shrugged. "Nothing. Ron and I...that's Ron Weasley...asked Ron's brothers Fred and George about it. But they just said we would have to wrestle trolls and fight dragons...you know, the typical scare stuff," Harry said.

Moody squinted at Harry. "So you had no idea what this test was about? You haven't been practicing this spell? You had no idea?"

Harry shook his head, a surprised look on his face.

Snape turned to Flitwick. "What about the others? Anything like this?"

Flitwick shook his head. "Longbottom just hit 18 inches. A few minutes ago. Peoples from Hufflepuff hit 16-and-a-half. Granger and Malfoy hit 16 even. We haven't gotten to the Ravenclaws yet."

"Longbottom?" Snape said incredulously.

Flitwick nodded.

"And Weasley?" Snape asked, suspiciously.

"He's coming up in a few minutes," Flitwick said.

Moody moved in front of Harry. "Harry. Something may have gone wrong with your test. So we are going to try it again."

Moody turned to the other two professors. "Filius, Severus, would you be so kind to help move some of the spare blocks." They nodded and the trio began to move magically the heavy spare blocks until there were four stacks of two blocks each in a line.

Flitwick then positioned Harry so he would face the first set of blocks as before, with three more sets behind the first set.

"Okay, Mister Potter. We are going try this again. And don't worry, you did it right the first time. I just want you to do it exactly the same as the first time. And concentrate even harder, if you can," Flitwick said with a reassuring smile.

Harry nodded, still confused. He knew now that something extraordinary was happening, but he wasn't quite sure he liked it. But he gave himself an internal shrug. If they want me to cut these blocks, I'll give them what they want, he thought to himself.

"Ready, Harry?" Moody said softly.

Harry nodded.

"Ready, Mister Potter, on my count of three," said Flitwick. "Three...two...one...GO!"

Once again, Harry, closed his eyes, which rolled up in their sockets. He muttered the spell and let go.

Flitwick, Moody and Snape watched in amazement as a pencil-thin blue flame shot out of Harry's wand, cutting the dense and charmed granite like butter. Within seven seconds, a flame flared on the other side of the first block and Harry's spell slammed into the second block. In about ten seconds, it hit the third block. It was already boring into the fourth block when Flitwick yelled "TIME!"

Snape walked open-mouthed over to the fourth block with the measuring rod. "Fourteen inches and a fraction." He stood there, staring at the rod, then stooped to look through the hole in the third block. "Clear. All the way through," he said, seeing Moody's normal eye peering back through the first block.

Flitwick sat down in something of a daze. He looked up at Moody. "Alastor, you were a block breaker, weren't you?"

Moody nodded. "But only one, Filius. And only seventeen inches into the second," he said softly.

Snape came over to sit next to Flitwick. "I never even heard of anyone breaking two blocks before," he said quietly.

Moody looked across at Snape. "Just one," he said. "Orville Williamson."

The three professors nodded.

"Who's Orville Williamson?" Harry asked.

The three looked up at Harry, suddenly remembering he was still there.

"Orville Williamson was the greatest Auror who ever lived," said Moody with a gruff tone of reverence Harry had never heard before. "He went to Hogwarts in the 1870s. Was chief Auror from about 1900 through the 1930s."

"He ended the first Muggle world war," Flitwick added.

Moody nodded. "That's right. After years of campaigning during the first Muggle world war, the Ministry of Magic finally allowed him to try to intervene in Muggle activities in 1918. He used a series of charms to single-handedly turn the entire German Army as it was advancing into France, forcing the armistice ending the war and all that senseless Muggle slaughter," Moody said with a faraway look in his normal eye.

"For all the good that did," Snape muttered.

Flitwick nodded. "He was offered the job of Minister of Magic countless times, but his heart was in the Ministry of Magical Law Enforcement. And no Minister of Magic was powerful enough to interfere with him. It was the era of good feeling in the magical world, thanks largely to Orville and his ability to administer stern justice without losing his compassion and sense of decency. Probably the greatest Ravenclaw who ever lived," he said in a faraway voice.

The trio of professors sat there in silence for a long minute. Snape seemed to be the first to come

out of the collective reverie. "Mister Potter. We've finally found something you can do," he said with an evil smile. "You'll make an excellent stone mason."

The three professors started chuckling. To see the nasty Snape, the irascible Moody and the gentle Flitwick sitting in a row chuckling informally made Harry want to laugh out loud.

Then Moody turned suddenly to Harry.

"Harry. Trust nobody with this," he said with a dead serious tone. "You have a gift. And I wouldn't want knowledge of this gift to get into the wrong hands. So don't say anything to anyone. Not your classmates, not your friends, not your lovers, no one. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, confused. 'Not to Ron or Hermione? And what lovers?' he thought.

"Harry," Flitwick said mildly. "If anyone asks, just say you did well and that old Professor Flitwick was 'satisfied'...no, make that 'pleased' with your progress."

Harry nodded.

"Very well," said Flitwick. "Let me escort you out and we'll bring in the next victim. And remember. 'Mum's the word'," he said with a conspiratorial smile.

Then Moody spoke up. "Harry! I'd like to see you after our class tomorrow. I think someone with your talent could use a little additional guidance now and again."

Harry nodded with a neutral expression on his face. "Sure Professor Moody. Professor Dumbledore mentioned something about that. And thank you."

Harry wasn't sure he would enjoy being tutored by Moody, any more than he would like such attention from Snape, who was looking at Harry with an inscrutable expression on his face. Harry shivered.

Flitwick squeezed Harry's arm just before they got to the door. "Harry," he said quietly.

"Alastor...Professor Moody is probably right. I wouldn't go bragging about his. I also know that everyone compares notes afterwards. So I trust you'll share what happened here with discretion," the tiny wizard said with a smile.

After Flitwick escorted Harry out and brought Dean Thomas in, Ron grabbed Harry and sat him down on the bench outside the room. "Well, how was it? You were in there for an awful long time."

Harry smiled. "Well all the trolls have colds, so I had to wrestle Snape," he said and started giggling, half in relief to be out in the corridor after what had just happened.

Ron began to look frantic. "No, really. What do we have to do? Is it painful? Is it some sort of initiation?"

Harry smiled at Ron. "No, Ron. Flitwick told us the truth. It's just a simple spell. And you have to hold the spell for 30 seconds. And no, it's not painful. All you have to do is concentrate on the spell and put as much power behind it as you can. That's all I can tell you," Harry said with a grin.

"So you did all right?" Ron asked.

"Yes, Ron. Flitwick said he was very pleased with my progress," Harry said as he got up to go to the Gryffindor tower to wash up for supper. "See you up there."

* * *

That night, Harry, Hermione and Ron were sitting together at a table in the common room, cautiously talking about the test.

"Well I for one thought it was rather stupid," Hermione said with a sniff. "There was no art to it. You just stand there holding your wand concentrating on a spell for 30 seconds."

"Ron's had lots of practice with holding his wand," said his brother Fred from behind the trio.

Ron, blushing furiously, turned, threatening to throw a school book at Fred.

"Oh, I don't think Ron ever lasted 30 seconds," said George, laughing.

"Shut up, you jerks," Ron said, his color rising.

Hermione, trying to look shocked, started giggling uncontrollably.

"You better start concentrating on lasting more than 30 seconds if you want to keep up with Parvati, Ron," Harry now added.

"Shut up, all of you!" Ron yelled.

"Parvati?" George whispered, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Harry started laughing even louder. "Sure. She came out of the test and reassured Ron that such a big strong man like him would do well on the test," Harry said. "Didn't she feel your muscles, too, Ron?"

"SHUT UP, ALL OF YOU!!!" Ron screamed, and started to stalk off to the dorms.

"Ooooo, nooooo, Ronniekins," said Fred. "Parvati wants to come out to play. And you want to be here to tell her about what a big, strong block breaker you are."

Hermione, just recovering from her giggling fit, looked at Fred. "I've heard that expression before. What's a block breaker?" she said with a curious smile.

Fred looked at George in amazement.

"You mean you...you didn't break the block?" said George. "Oh, Hermione, I'm so sorry," he said in mock sympathy.

"Yes," Fred added. "You have to be able to break the block to earn your O.W.L. in Charms."

Hermione began to look uneasy. "But what does breaking a block mean?"

George suddenly lurched forward as Katie Bell smacked him in the back of the head. "Breaking the block means your stonemason spell went all the way through the block of granite," she explained. Then she laughed at Hermione's puzzlement. "Don't worry, Hermione. I overheard some professors talking about it last year. No one's broken the block in over 40 years, from what I heard."

Ron, who had calmed down and returned to the table, looked up at Katie with a puzzled expression. "If nobody's done it in 40 years, why did they have four sets of blocks in a row during the test?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably.

Hermione looked even more puzzled. "There was only one set of blocks when I took the test. Are you sure there were four?"

"Sure I'm sure. And they all had a hole in them. I thought for sure I'd failed because I couldn't even get half way through the first block," Ron said with a confused look.

The table was suddenly silent. Everyone turned to look at Harry, who was in the process of collecting his books and getting up.

Hermione grabbed Harry's arm, pulling him back into his seat. "Harry. You did it, didn't you," she said in a near whisper.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about. Professor Flitwick just said he was pleased with my progress," he said uncomfortably.

George was staring at Harry intently. "Harry...?"

"Just drop it. And don't say a word about any of this to anyone," he said menacingly. "Not a word, do you understand?" he pleaded.

"Harry...?" said Hermione.

"Please, Moody told me...."

"Moody was there? He wasn't there when I was testing," Hermione said.

"Me, either," said Ron.

The group was silent again, with Harry hanging his head miserably.

Finally, George cleared his throat. "Harry, you broke the block, didn't you."

Harry gave a weak nod.

"More than one?" Ron said.

Harry shrugged, miserably.

"You're the reason why there were four sets of blocks, aren't you," Ron said softly.

Harry nodded again, his head down.

"Did you break all four, Harry?" Ron whispered.

Harry simply held up three fingers.

"But you hit the fourth," Ron asked, now with his hand on Harry's back, rubbing gently.

Harry nodded.

"How deep?"

"Snape said fourteen inches," Harry said quietly.

"Snape was there?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded again. "It was just Flitwick the first time, when it went through the block and the wall of the room into Snape's office. Then Flitwick got Moody."

"You drilled Snape's office?" said Fred with an awed smile. "I wish I could have seen it."

Harry looked up with a mournful smile. "Yeah, and was he pissed," he said with a quiet chuckle.

"Three blocks plus fourteen inches," Ron said, shaking his head. "All I could manage was seventeen inches," he lamented.

Harry suddenly made a strangling sound and looked furtively over at Hermione. She was turning red, knowing now she had been bested by both her best friends.

"But Harry, nobody's ever broken two blocks before," said Katie quietly.

Hermione looked up. "Now I know where I've heard that phrase before." She bent down and retrieved a thick book from her bag. It was, of course, *Hogwarts: A History*.

Ron groaned and rolled his eyes, as Hermione thumbed through the book. "Here it is," she read. "'Among his other youthful accomplishments, Williamson was the only double block breaker in Hogwarts' history.' I never knew what that meant. I was meaning to look it up but I never knew where to start."

"Who's Williamson?" Katie asked.

Hermione turned to look up. "He's the person credited with modernizing the Auror service into a true magic police force. Until he came along, Aurors were looked down upon as simply goons

terrorizing the wizarding community on behalf of the Ministry of Magic," she said with authority. "Many consider him to be the greatest and most powerful wizard in the 20th Century. Don't you people ever study?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Listen to me, all of you," he said, looking at each of his five companions in turn in the eye. "Moody told me not to breathe a word of this to anyone for fear that Voldemort might find out." He saw Katie and the Weasleys flinch at the use of the dark lord's name. "So please...I'm begging you...don't say anything about this to anyone."

As Harry looked at each of them again, they each nodded in turn, looking solemn.

After a few moments, George leaned forward with a very serious look on his face. "Harry," he said quietly. "Do you know what this means?"

Harry slowly shook his head at George's uncharacteristic solemn look.

George sighed. "It means that next Hogsmeade weekend, you owe us three rounds of butterbeers, one round for each block broken," he said with a frown.

At that point, Katie poked him in the ribs.

George jumped up in surprise. "Hey, come on. It's a tradition."

"What do you mean, it's a tradition?" Katie said with a smirk. "Block breaking hasn't happened in 40 years. In fact, it's never happened like this."

George put his hands to his hips and put on a stern look. "Well, traditions have to start somewhere. And now is as good a time as any, especially if there's free butterbeer involved."

At that point, the everyone at table dissolved in laughter, and Harry relaxed for the first time in nearly an hour.

CHAPTER 14 Beater Cage

"Mister Potter," Moody said with a nod.

"Professor Moody," Harry replied.

Harry didn't know what to expect. It was a little after 4:00 in the afternoon. He had finished his Charms class, the last class of the day, moments before and sauntered down to the dungeons to a special room as Moody had instructed. Harry didn't know if he liked the idea of getting special tutoring from Moody. He was sure that it would involve mysterious doings and pain. Lots of pain.

"Mister Potter, you've had instructions on defensive charms, I presume," Moody said with his characteristic drawling Scottish burr.

Harry nodded.

Moody nodded in return. "En garde!" he shouted and whipped out his wand.

Harry, in a blur of motion, had his wand out before Moody cast his first spell, easily parrying a series of hexes.

Moody stopped and nodded again. "Very good. You're quick with your wand."

Harry chuckled. "You can thank 'Quick Draw' Snape for that," he said with a smile.

Moody blinked his good eye while his magic eye seemed to dart back and forth furiously. "He warned you?"

Harry blinked in surprise. "Warned me about what?"

Moody cast an appraising glance Harry's way. "What do you mean, 'Quick Draw' Snape? And it's Professor Snape, if you please."

Harry blushed. "Sorry. It's just that Professor Snape and I had a...well, a discussion on Monday. And he showed me how the American cowboys used to duel. How they had to draw their pistols quickly and shoot at each other in the streets."

Moody snorted. "And I suppose he showed you his fancy wand twirling, the showoff," he said dismissively.

Harry blushed and nodded.

"I didn't know you were so chummy with our Potion's master."

Harry shrugged. "Well, not exactly. He just showed me that stuff and then challenged me not to try it for 24 hours."

Moody snorted again, this time with a smile. "How long did you last?"

Harry hung his head, blushing. "About ten minutes. Cost Gryffindor 10 house points," he said glumly.

Moody gave a cackling laugh that sent chills up Harry's spine. "Well, laddie, keep up the practicing. Severus may love his theatrics, but that 'quick draw,' as you call it, comes in handy in tight situations. Come here, now."

Harry followed Moody to the back of the room. Moody waved his wand at a blank section of the wall and a door appeared. "Come on, lad. You'll love this."

Harry followed Moody into a small room. "You recognize this?"

Harry looked at the room. It was like entering the inside of a sphere with irregularities on the wall. There seem to be little lumps and protrusions spaced about a foot apart around the entirety of the wall. Harry blinked a couple times. "Looks like a small beater cage."

Harry was familiar with beater cages. Quidditch players would enter the beater cage with a spent bludger and a broom set to hover. They would mount the broom and launch the bludger, which would be charmed to travel in a straight direction. The bludger would hit the wall and bounce off in irregular directions. It would be the player's job to hit the bludger if it came within reach. Depending on the speed of the bludger, the cage would give a good simulation of game conditions and hone the beater's reflexes as he or she would continually fend it off. Harry had tried the cage a couple times without a bat and got stung a few times when the practice broom did not respond to his commands as quickly as his own to avoid bludgers coming directly at him. Harry hated beater cages.

Moody began his cackling laugh again. "Aye, 'tis a variation on the beater cage. But instead of a bludger, we have a hard rubber ball. It's your job to throw up a charm to block the ball as it comes off the wall. It responds to the standard blocking charm. It'll give you a workout and show what yer made of."

As Harry looked around the room, he heard a distinctive click. Moody had locked him in. Suddenly, a black rubber ball bounced in front of him and headed for a wall behind and to Harry's left. He spun and hit the ball with a charm as it came off the wall. It instantly changed direction and Harry hit it again with a blocking charm as it again ricocheted.

Harry continued to hit the ball with blocking charms on each rebound for several minutes when he noticed it was picking up speed. Suddenly, he was sweating and occasionally missing the ball, dodging to avoid being hit. He was nine minutes into the exercise when he was hit for the first time, feeling a sting on his right bicep. He didn't recover in time and was hit again on the back of the left thigh. He recovered and began frantically casting blocking charms, managing to avoid the ball for nearly a minute before he missed again. The ball was now a blur and Harry began to panic. Finally, he cast a full body shield and screamed.

The rubber ball fell to the floor and bounced a few times before coming to rest. The hidden door opened and Moody strode in, his good eye wide. "Thirteen minutes and 42 seconds. That's excellent. Didn't think you'd last more than five or six minutes."

Harry gave Moody an angry look. "Is that your idea of fun? Is this supposed to be some sort of a joke? Well I don't think it was funny. I'll be bruised for a week!"

Moody chuckled. "Nae, lad. Getting hit with the ball ain't nearly as painful as getting hit with a hex. And judging by what's out there waiting for you, a hex is the least of yer problems. But you did well, laddie. I'm amazed that you could last so long yer first time."

"You make it sound like there'll be a second time," Harry said with a scowl, rubbing his bruised upper arm, refusing to give Moody the satisfaction of seeing him rub his bruised backside.

"Aye, there'll be other times. But not right away. This was just a preliminary test to see what you got. And you got plenty, laddie. But now we'll concentrate on yer blocking charms."

Harry, sulking, sat down gingerly where Moody indicated and proceeded to begin a new, intensive course in blocking and shielding charms.

* * *

"Come on, Ron. You might make the team as a keeper, but you'd be better off as a reserve chaser," Harry explained to his best friend. Ron desperately wanted to make the Gryffindor Quidditch team this year, but Harry was worried about the long-term health of the team. "Ron. You're a mediocre

keeper. You might give Percy a challenge in games at the Burrow, but I don't think you're going to make it as a keeper here. But you're a great chaser. With your size and strong hands, you'll be nearly unstoppable once you get a little practice against this level of competition."

Ron looked down, sulking. "But I want to play this year," he complained.

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. "You will play, although not in regular games unless there's an injury. Look, I told you that Angelina agreed to field a full reserve team. She isn't going to have time to devise all the elaborate plays the way Oliver Wood did in the past. So we'll be practicing standard sets of plays over and over again. And I talked her into fielding a full reserve team so we can practice against live competition. So every practice will be like a real match. The only exception will be multiple times out to go over mistakes or try something new on the spur of the moment."

Ron pouted. "So who's a better keeper than me," he said petulantly.

"Huddleston," Harry said flatly.

"Huddleston? A third year?"

Harry nodded. "I've seen him play in informal practices. He's got talent and he's almost as tough as you. And he's more agile," Harry said in as firm and honest tone as he could muster.

Ron grunted, his head lowered. "I'm agile," he said sulkily.

Harry reached out and grabbed his best friend's shoulder. "Who's the best keeper in your family?"

Ron pulled his shoulder out of Harry's grasp. "Charlie, probably," he said in a low voice.

Harry nodded. "What about Fred? Or George?"

Ron continued to pout. "They're beaters."

"They're also reserve keepers," Harry said softly.

Ron sighed. "So I'm not going to make the team," he said, his eyes beginning to cloud up.

Harry sighed. "You'll make it as a reserve chaser. You may even give Alicia a run for her money. But you're better off as a reserve chaser than putting all your efforts into trying for keeper and failing. You'll be playing twice a week against the best Hogwarts has to offer and by next year, you'll be ready to take the school by storm. And there's no chance you'll ever go pro as a keeper. But I've seen you as a chaser. You work on your skills and there's a good chance you might be able to take the next step."

Ron looked up suddenly. "What?"

Harry looked intently at his friend. "You are a very good chaser. You have the potential to be a great one, if you're willing to work at it. I've seen some of the moves you've made at the Burrow and you've got the talent. You've got the quickness, the coordination and the hands of a great chaser. And you've got two things that you can't practice for: size and fearlessness. What you need is the discipline and the practice. And you won't get that as a keeper or someone who has to sit out another year because he tried out for the wrong position."

Ron looked away and off into the distance. "So we'll be playing regular matches in practice?"

Harry nodded. "That's the plan. Angelina is going to be so busy as Head Girl that she's not going to be another Oliver Wood. And next year, we're losing all three chasers and both beaters. So there'll be an open field for you if you work at it this year."

Ron's eyes now showed some fire. "Oh, I'll work at it. What's the first step?"

Harry chuckled evilly. "Ever been in a beater cage?"

* * *

Ron entered the common room rubbing his bruised arms. "I hope you enjoyed that, Potter," Ron said over his shoulder with a groan.

Harry, following his best friend into the common room, grabbed Ron's shoulders and gave them a squeeze. Ron winced. As the two walked slowly through the common room, Harry leaned forward and whispered with a leer into Ron's ear. "I'll bet you if you ask really nice, Parvati would be glad to massage those kinks out of your back and shoulders."

"Oh, shut up," Ron growled. "Now I know why they call the cage the torture chamber."

Harry chuckled. "Come on, Ron. It was only the quaffle. Maybe tomorrow, you can grab my two firsties, Mike and Steve, and introduce them to the cage with live bludgers."

Ron chuckled. "Yeah," he said with an evil grin. "But right now, I'm going to take a nice hot shower. I'll see you in about three days."

Harry laughed and watched his friend disappear up the stairs to the dorms. Then he looked around the room to see what was going on. It was early in the term and there was little in the way of homework yet, especially as most of the professors were spending the first week on reviews of matter covered in previous years to get the fifth years up to speed for their O.W.L.s at the end of the year.

Hermione, of course, wasn't there, but up in the library. Seamus and Dean were playing exploding snap and talking quietly. Lavender and Parvati were deep in conversation in the corner. But Neville was alone on a couch along the back wall, reading with a puzzled expression.

Suddenly, Snape's lecture of a few days before hit Harry. He rarely talked to Neville one-to-one. He never ignored the boy when it came to group activities, but never paid him much personal attention.

Harry wandered over and sat down next to his clumsy roommate. "Hey, Neville. What's up?"

Neville looked up and smiled. "Oh, hi, Harry. Just going over our Potions assignment."

Harry looked over at Neville's text. Nearly every other sentence was underlined and there were notes that nearly filled the margins. Harry took a deep breath. "I hate Potions."

Neville colored. "Me, too. I don't mind the studying. I like Herbology and this is just an extension of a lot of Herbology. But I get so flustered in class that I always mess up."

Harry noticed that Neville was staring at the page in his text without seeing. He leaned back and sighed. "I guess Snape just likes to pick on us."

Neville nodded.

Harry thought furiously about what to say. Finally, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Why do you let Snape get to you?"

Neville head came up and gave Harry a sharp look. "What do you mean?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "Well, you seem to do well in most of your other classes and you do great in Herbology. So why do you let Snape intimidate you?"

Neville blinked and looked down again. He gave a vague shrug. "I don't know. I guess I feel he's out to get me. And I get...I don't know...flustered."

Harry nodded. "So, instead of concentrating on the potion you're preparing, you're thinking about how Snape will react to it."

Neville looked up again, this time directly at Harry. "Yeah. I guess."

Harry continued to concentrate on what he should say. "You're not making potions to please Snape. You're making them to learn how to do it."

"I don't get it?"

"If you're worrying how people, like Snape, will react to what you're doing, you can't concentrate on what you should be doing. You're letting him distract you from making your potion. So next class, ignore him and just focus on making the potion."

Neville was concentrating now. "But....what if...what if he calls on me to recite?"

Harry sighed. "You know, during the summer, I learned about the martial arts. It's a sort of oriental form of Muggle self defense."

Neville looked at him blankly. "What does that have to do with Potions?"

Harry looked at his friend intently. "It taught me to focus, to discipline my mind to concentrate on what's important. Like, if you're in a fight, you concentrate on what your opponent is doing. You don't look around and admire the scenery or the onlookers. Soon, you become able to focus on your opponent without trying. Then you can worry about using a small piece of your mind on other things, like other potential opponents who might be sneaking up on you."

Neville nodded, then shook his head. "I still don't get it."

Harry took another deep breath. "Concentrate on your potion. If Snape asks you a question and you're too focused to notice, I'm sure that Hermione or whoever else is nearby will let you know. But practice concentrating at the matter at hand first. Once you master that, then you can start practicing keeping your ear open for other things."

Neville fidgeted. "How do I practice this concentration?"

Harry frowned. "Well, you can start just by reading your text. Just focus solely on what you're reading. Don't think about what you have to know in class, or what Snape wants, or whether the Slytherins will laugh...they prefer to laugh at me anyway. Just concentrate on what you are reading. Try to understand how the ingredients are prepared and used and what the potion is used for. Nothing else."

Neville nodded. "That works for anything?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess. It works for me in Quidditch. I'm getting a little better in spotting the snitch...in practice anyway. We'll see what happens in a match," he said with a chuckle.

"You do this all the time?" Neville asked with eyebrows arched.

Harry giggled. "Well, not really. I'm not that disciplined. But I'm trying to do it more and more. Like at the stonecutter's test."

Neville's face split into a grin. "Now I think I know what you're talking about. Professor Flitwick was funny and so nice. And he explained about what I had to do and I just did it. And I did pretty good. That's what Professor Flitwick said."

Harry nodded. "I heard him say that about you, too," he said with a smile.

Neville's eyes lit up. "Really?"

Harry nodded, still smiling. "Just shows what we can do when we concentrate."

Neville closed his eyes. "My parents would have been happy."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "Ahhh...Neville. I know about your parents," he said in a soft, tentative voice.

Neville slowly looked up in surprise. "You do?" he said in an equally soft voice.

Harry nodded, looking down. "Dumbledore told me right after Barty Crouch Jr. almost killed me and was given the dementor's kiss. Right after the TriWizard Tournament."

Neville lowered his head. "He did it to my parents. He almost did it to me."

Harry reached over to grab Neville's shoulder and gave it a friendly squeeze. "If you ever need to talk about it, you can talk to me."

Neville shrugged. "I don't mind talking about it. It's just that I never thought anyone was all that interested," he said in a shaky voice.

Harry nodded. "Like me and the Dursleys. It's a pretty nasty story, so I never thought anyone wanted to hear it. I didn't want to talk about it because I thought they would think I was just whining," he said with a dry, mirthless laugh.

Neville continued to nod. "So you know how it is."

Harry nodded again. "I don't know what's worse. Growing up not knowing anything about your parents, even what they looked like, or growing up knowing they're alive but can't talk to you or anything like real parents."

Neville slumped down on the couch. "They're real skinny, now. The nurses at St. Mungo's feed them and turn them and everything, but they look so tiny. And my dad was so big. My mum, too, although I was real small when it happened."

"You were there," Harry said in a distant voice.

Neville nodded. "I was very little at the time. I remember him coming out of the darkness and hitting them both with a curse. I jumped out between him and them. I remember screaming at him and then he hit me with a curse. And I remember the pain. Then nothing. I woke up the next day with my grandma and a bunch of strangers. I didn't see my mum and dad for months and when I did, I cried when they wouldn't wake up for me. I still feel like crying sometimes now, but my grandma says crying does no good. So I don't do it much anymore."

Harry sighed. He was a little upset at how flat Neville's recitation was. Clearly, the boy had so much bottled up inside that one of these days he might burst. "Neville. Your grandma is wrong. Crying won't bring your parents back. But it will help you. I used to think it was bad to cry. The Dursleys, particularly my uncle, would yell at me if I cried over something. And my aunt would tell me it's a sign of my mental instability. But at the end of my first year here, Hagrid gave me a photo album of my folks and me when I was first born. I took it home and looked at it often. And I cried a lot in my cupboard, then in my own room when I finally got one. And I always felt better after I cried when I was at the Dursleys during summers. And my foster parents, Tony and Mae, told me I shouldn't hold back when feel the need to cry. Tony's a priest, so he should know about these things. So I think it's good to cry every once in a while."

Neville looked at Harry with glistening eyes. "You think so?" he said in a breaking voice.

Harry nodded. "And you know what else might help? I saw on the Muggle tele about how talking to people in comas was good for them, and good for the people doing the talking. So maybe we can find a way for you to talk to your Mum and Dad, even if they can't hear you. You know, through a recording charm or something."

Neville sighed. "I'd like that. You know, you can do that through your wand. Talk for as long as the charm works and then you can listen to it later by activating the charm on the wand again. My grandma used to do that with me all the time. She always said that I didn't get things the first time I heard it so she would give me her wand and make me listen to her lectures over and over again."

Harry's eyes took on a new life. "Well, maybe we can do that. You can do the charm and tell your parents all about school and your friends and what's going on and anything on your mind and then owl it to St. Mungo's and ask a nurse to activate the charm so your parents can listen."

Neville tilted his head in disappointment. "But they can't hear anything."

Harry looked at Neville. "Nobody knows if people in a coma can hear anything or not. There have been rare cases..." but Harry stopped. He didn't know if the Longbottom's had suffered irreversible brain damage from their prolonged exposure to Barty Crouch's *cruciatus* curse, so he felt it would be cruel to get Neville's hopes up. "Well, there've been cases where the people talking to friends or relatives in a coma have found peace...I think they call it closure. It might help."

Neville's eyes became brighter. "That would be nice. I still think of them all the time. And it would be nice to be able to send them messages, to tell them things, even if they can't hear it. My grandma doesn't usually let me just talk to them when I visit. She says it's foolishness. But I think I'd like that," he said with a sigh. Then his face fell. "But I don't have a spare wand. My grandma got me this one, and I need it for school."

Harry leaned back and blew a deep breath out of his cheeks and looked around the common room. He looked back at Neville. "I don't know. Maybe there's a spare wand around. Or we can get you another."

Parvati, who was passing by the two boys with Lavender on her way up to their dorm, suddenly stopped. "Did I hear you need a wand?" she asked quietly, looking at Harry.

Harry glanced up in surprise. "What?"

Parvati, who was now rejoined by Lavender, looked around the common room to see if anyone was listening. She then sat down on the couch next to Harry, and Lavender joined her, sitting on the arm of the couch. She leaned forward. "I was just passing by and I heard you saying that you needed a spare wand," she said in a soft whisper.

Neville was now leaning forward toward Parvati, who he watched with a wary eye. "Not Harry. Me," he said in a low tone.

Parvati gave Neville an understanding smile. "Finally giving up on that hunk of wood you're now using?"

Harry leaned forward. "No, Parvati," he said firmly.

The pretty girl in the long braid eyed Harry. "Well, what's this about?"

Harry gave her a speculative look. "You have a spare wand?"

Parvati leaned back and gave Lavender a quick glance. Lavender gave a half shrug and nodded. Parvati turned back to Harry. "I might. What for?"

Harry looked at Neville, who gave him a nod. Harry turned back to Parvati. "Look. I don't want this to go any farther than the three...I mean the four of us, okay?"

Parvati gave Harry a speculative look of her own, and then nodded. "Sure."

Harry nodded. "Neville would like to have a spare wand to send his parents voice messages. You know, using a recording charm."

Parvati's eyes widened in shock and looked at Neville. "I thought your parents were dead," she whispered in an urgent voice.

Neville shook his head. "They're in a coma. Have been for eleven years. But Harry says that people in comas might be able to hear voices. It may comfort them...or at least give me a chance to talk to them about what's on my mind," he said, a tear suddenly appearing on his left cheek.

Suddenly, Parvati's eyes filled. "Uhhhh...I've got a spare wand if you need it, Neville."

Neville's eyes took on a new life. "Really? I can pay you a little now and maybe I can get the rest from my grandma soon."

Parvati got up and grabbed Neville's hand. "I'm not selling it to you. I'd be glad to give it to you. As a friend. It's not a top quality one, but it is perfectly usable for recording charms and basic spells."

Neville blinked. "Really?"

Parvati squeezed Neville's hand. "Of course. I've got it in my dorm. I can go get it now, if you'd like."

"I'll get one," Lavender said abruptly, and suddenly ran up the stairs to their dorm.

Harry moved over on the couch to make room for Parvati between him and Neville. She smiled and sat down and turned to Harry. "And look, you. Not a word of this to anyone," she said with a smile and gave Harry a playful pinch.

Harry squirmed and laughed. "Don't tell me. You two run a black market ring out of your dorm room. Under the nose of your prefect, no less," he said chuckling,

He got another pinch for his trouble. "Listen, Potter. I'm doing this as a friend of Neville's. But you. You owe me for this. Next time I need a date for the Yule Ball, you're taking me. And this time, you're going to dance with me," she said with an evil grin.

"I don't know. Getting stuck with an old maid like you again..." Harry said with a laugh.

Parvati blushed. "Listen, you prat. The only reason I went to the Ball with you last year was because I just tossed that jerk Kevin Entwhistle in the dustbin the week before you asked. Apparently, word hadn't got out that the prettiest witch in fourth year was available, or you would have had to go with your thick-headed mate, Ron."

Harry laughed. "No way. We'd never have found a gown to fit him in time."

Neville began laughing at the by-play. Parvati turned to Neville and then back to Harry. "No, I wouldn't think that would have been necessary. You could have borrowed one of mine...for you!"

Lavender returned with a small box wrapped in a scarf to find the three somber housemates she had left moments before convulsed in laughter.

CHAPTER 15 Prefects

Ron, Hermione and Harry walked casually into the Great Hall for lunch. Harry gave a glance around the table as he approached and got an idea. "Hey, I think I'm going to take lunch with the firsties today."

Ron started. "Why?"

Hermione gave him a speculative look. "Should I come, too?" she said in a concerned voice.

Harry smiled. "If you want. I just thought it would be nice to talk to them informally. Just to chat. I guess they treat my little get-togethers with them in the common room like meetings or something. All stiff and formal. It would be nice to sit down with them informally and just chat. And somebody's got to teach them table manners," he said with a chuckle.

Hermione laughed. "And who's going to teach you table manners."

"I don't need any more training. I've learned all I know from Ron."

Both Hermione and Harry burst into laughter, but Ron blushed and sulked.

Hermione looked at Harry. "Well, if it's not prefect business, I guess I really should settle down and review my notes for this afternoon's History of Magic class during lunch. You don't mind, do you?"

Harry shook his head. "No problem, I guess." Actually, Harry would have liked Hermione along just to be near her. But he also understood that the firsties were more reserved around Hermione than around him, so maybe it was for the best. He wandered over to the front of the Gryffindor table and slid into an empty chair between Violet Brown and Willie Peters.

"Are we all here?" he said with a smile.

Violet looked at Harry, startled. "Well, Pat should be here any minute."

Pat McGrady came sauntering up and then stopped to see Harry in his usual chair. He then looked at Tom Richardson, who nodded and moved over one to make room next to Violet. Harry chuckled inwardly at the silent by-play and at the smug look Genie Beauvoir was giving Tom from across the table.

"Well, now that I've managed to disrupt all your carefully planned seating arrangements, I just thought I'd ask how classes are going with everyone," Harry said with a smile.

There were noncommittal mumbles coming from the first years. Harry shook his head. "Okay, who's your favorite teacher?"

Again, there were noncommittal responses, when suddenly Samantha from across the table piped in. "I like Professor Moody."

Harry started. Of all the professors he had, he would have thought Moody would be the most intimidating, especially to a muggle-raised girl like Samantha.

Samantha gave him a quizzical look. "Well, he is. He reminds me of my grandpa George. He has a peg leg, too, and is all scarred up from wrestling a shark once. And he's all gruff and stern, but underneath he's sweet. And Professor Moody is teaching us all this stuff just like I thought about when I found out I was a witch. You know, hexes and battling scary creatures and evil wizards. He's really good."

Harry saw several other first years giving Samantha an amazed expression and had to smile. "How about you, Cassandra?"

She gave a small smile. "I like Professor Sprout. I like learning about plants and raising them. And she's really nice. And I like Professor Flitwick, too."

There were several nods around the table. Then he turned to Mike and Steve, who were sitting next to Samantha on the other side. "How about you guys? Who's your favorite? Madame Hooch?"

Steve made a face but Mike quietly spoke. "Nah. She doesn't let us do anything. It's like we're on training brooms again."

Willie snorted in agreement.

Harry smiled. "Well, not everybody is as experienced on a broom as you are."

Mike shrugged, and Steve spoke. "Flitwick." Mike nodded.

Harry turned to Willie. "Well, what about you," he said as the food magically appeared.

"Professor Hagrid," he said with a smile. "He's cool."

Maura smiled. "I think he's sweet. He's my favorite, too."

Violet snorted. Harry turned to her. "And who's your favorite, Violet?"

She gave him a sidelong look. "Well, I like Madame Trelawney..." and several of the girls nodded, including Samantha and Cassandra, while the boys seemed to roll their eyes as a group. She then gave the rest of the table a stern glance. "And I like Professor Snape."

There suddenly were groans from the rest of the first years.

Violet glared at the rest of the firsties. "I think he's very mysterious...and kind of sexy."

"Vampire," Willie said under his breath, feigning a sneeze, as Mike, Steve and Maura giggled. Violet continued to glare at that end of the table.

Samantha made a face. "He's kind of mean, but I think it's interesting, brewing up magic potions and all."

Harry nodded. "But remember. You're not just learning recipes. You are trying to understand how potions are going to be part of your lives when you grow up. Like, a way of life," he said, looking her in the eye. Hermione had gotten annoyed when Harry had told her about Snape's lecture to him. But at least in this case, he thought maybe Snape was right.

Harry looked past Violet. "Pat?"

The Irish boy frowned and pondered. "Hagrid. He understands animals. He's a good man, I'm thinking."

Finally, he turned to the last two firsties, The Beaver and The Toad. "And you?"

"Charms," Genie said.

"Flitwick," Tom agreed.

Harry smiled. "He is nice, isn't he?"

Genie nodded. "But it's more than that. I see my parents and relatives using charms all the time in the hotels. I always wanted to be able to do that. My parents let me try a few at home. But I really always wanted to be good in charms."

Tom nodded. "My father and, especially, my grandfather, are really good in charms. That's why their clothing business does so well. Everything that comes out of the factories is thoroughly charmed against wear and tear. And their assistant charmers are the best. They don't let anything go out the door unless it has a top quality charm."

Harry was busy ladling more vegetable soup into his bowl as he looked up and down the table. "No votes for Professor McGonagall? Or...Professor Binns?"

There was some more groaning among the first years.

"Professor McGonagall is okay. She's a little strict and can be boring, even when she's trying to be interesting," Samantha said.

Mike frowned. "She docked me five house points for not paying attention in class."

Harry shook his head. "Well..."

"Binns is the worst," Genie said.

Steve grunted. "At least he doesn't dock you points," he said sullenly.

"I like Peeves," said Willie, brightly. Suddenly, Maura elbowed him.

Harry gave Willie a sharp look. "And where have you met Peeves?"

Willie looked abashed. "Uhh...around."

Harry shook his head. "Around at night, after curfew, no doubt."

Willie looked nervous and Maura shifted uncomfortably.

Harry sighed. "Look, if you get caught out after curfew, it could mean house points. But it also could mean detention. In my first year, Hermione, Ron and I got caught out visiting Hagrid after curfew and got detention. We were sent into the Forbidden Forest to help Hagrid and Voldemort almost killed me. I don't think they would do that to you, but whatever detention you serve won't be pleasant, let me assure you."

Violet sat up a little straighter in surprise. "You got detention?"

Harry nodded. "Normally, I'm perfect in every way--except when I get caught," he said with a chuckle.

The group began to relax a little. As they ate, Harry would throw out questions or comments and listen to complaints or observations by his group. However, at one point, he noticed what seemed to be silent communication going on across the table from him between Samantha and Cassandra. Finally, Cassandra shook her head and the two went back to eating. Harry was going to ask what was going on, but merely shrugged.

As the meal ended, Harry rose and bade his farewells to his people. "Well, that was fun. But I promise you all that I won't be coming over here very often. So tonight at dinner you can go back to plotting the overthrow of Hogwarts in peace," he said with a smile.

The first years all gave him a smile and Harry was off to History of Magic class.

* * *

It was the second Wednesday of the term, and the last class had just ended. This meant that Harry and Hermione would be attending their first formal prefects meeting. The previous Wednesday, the heads of the various houses had met with their prefects to go over rule changes and department of prefects, as well a schedules and assignments.

Harry wasn't sure what to expect. He had heard from some of the other prefects that he should be expecting to be bored for anywhere up to an hour, although they admitted that the meetings usually lasted no more than a half hour.

But Harry approached the meeting with some trepidation. Draco Malfoy would be there.

Harry's confrontation with Malfoy on the Hogwarts Express had made the rounds. And he was

aware that Malfoy had heard the occasional reference to 'House Elf' from people in the hallways, usually from unidentifiable voices. He had heard them, himself.

But Malfoy had been strangely quiet. He still had his trademark smirk, particularly in Potions class, where Professor Snape continued to be tough on the Gryffindors, although not as bad as in the past. But Harry had heard that Malfoy had been disappearing for an hour or two at a time, without Crabbe and Goyle. He didn't know what to make of it, but he wasn't looking forward to any further confrontation with the Slytherin.

As he entered the meeting room, he was interested to see that several tables were arranged in a square and that there were nameplates in front of each chair. And he was doubly interested to see that the seating arrangements were not by house, but by year. He wandered over and found that the near side of the table was where the fifth years sat. The first two names were Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan, followed by Mandy Brocklehurst and Terry Boot, then Hermione and Harry, then Millicent Bulstrode and Malfoy.

He would be between Millicent and Hermione. He smiled. Good. He didn't have to sit next to Malfoy. And Hermione didn't have to sit next to Millicent. Hermione still didn't like Millicent from second year, when she and the Slytherin girl ended up in a wrestling match during Gilderoy Lockhart's ill-fated dueling club. And he harbored suspicions that Hermione still held it against Millicent that she almost turned into Millicent's cat after her fiasco over the polyjuice potion.

Hermione was taking her seat as several other prefects wandered in. Suddenly, Mandy strode in and, taking a quick look around, went straight to her seat, saying a brief hello to Harry and Hermione. Terry Boot ambled in and examined the room in a detached manner, before sitting down next to Hermione.

Harry leaned back in his chair, when the chair next to his was yanked out. He turned to see Millicent dump her satchel on the table in front of her. She turned to give Harry a speculative look. Harry suddenly got an evil grin. He recalled her teasing him on the Hogwarts Express about his 'favorite Potions professor.'

"Hello, Millie," he said with a cocked eyebrow.

Millicent paused as she was about to sit. Harry knew nobody called her Millie and he wondered what her reaction would be.

Her face split into a wide grin. "Hello, Pottier," she said, chuckling.

Harry joined her. She was all right, for a Slytherin.

Then the chair next to her moved and Malfoy sat down. Harry looked at him until Draco turned to acknowledge the look. Harry nodded. All he got in response was a narrow-eyed look before Malfoy pulled a notebook out and started perusing its contents.

* * *

The meeting went by quickly. Professor McGonagall asked the fifth year prefects to introduce themselves and made some brief remarks about not taking house points away for merely minor infractions of rules, looking pointedly at Hermione, and not using house points to settle interhouse rivalries, looking at Harry and Malfoy, then Ernie and Mandy. Then she introduced Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor as Head Girl and Roger Davies of Ravenclaw as Head Boy.

Davies immediately took the center chair at head of the table as McGonagall left, much to Angelina's wide-eyed annoyance. The meeting simply covered basic issues of responsibilities. No one seemed to have any questions, concerns or new business, although he saw Hermione biting her lip as if she wanted to say something, and Mandy grabbed Terry's arm to keep him from starting. So, in less than a half hour, the meeting was over.

Draco left immediately.

Harry quickly got his carry-all and picked it up, turning to leave.

"In a hurry to go off snogging, Pottier?" Millicent said with a smile.

Harry chuckled. "Only if you're coming along, Millie," he said with a smile.

She returned the smile. "You have a minute?"

Harry looked at her, then nodded.

They watched as the others left. Hermione gave Harry a quick, concerned look, then shrugged and left, as well.

He turned again to Millicent in expectation. "You didn't hold me back here just to seduce me," he said with only a half-humorous tone.

She shook her head. "It's Draco. You know he hates you."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "Since when is that news?"

She shook her head. "Look, we all heard about what happened between you two on the train. It's not that he ever much liked you. But he always seemed to feel that whenever he ran into you, he would be in control. I'm not so sure he feels that way anymore. And I know he hates that feeling."

Harry pursed his lips and nodded vaguely.

She continued. "Look, ever since we got here, he's been brooding. And he's been disappearing. Not that that's all that unusual. But Gregory and Vincent usually know what's going on. Now, half the time they're in a panic, not knowing where he is."

Harry looked thoughtful. "Something to do with Voldemort?"

He saw her right eye twitch slightly at his use of the name. "I...don't think so. I don't know what you think of us, but we're not exactly Death Eater headquarters in Slytherin House."

Harry lowered his head, thinking furiously. "So you think it's personal. Maybe what I said about his father?"

Millicent sighed. "Listen, the Malfoys are a little different in that sense. It's like...he's loyal to the name. The House of Malfoy. I don't know how to explain it."

Harry nodded. "The Malfoy clan."

Millicent blinked. "The Malfoys aren't a clan," she said in a firm voice.

Harry looked at her and shrugged. "Same difference."

She tilted her head with a quizzical look. "You don't understand, do you?"

Harry gave her a puzzled look. "Well, I know about clans. The Browns. The Adairs. The Macnairs. Whatever."

Millicent leaned back and shook her head. "You really are a Muggle, aren't you," she said.

Harry gave her a suspicious frown.

Millicent sighed. "You want to know about wizarding society? You want to know about my world?"

Harry's frown faded and he became intrigued. "Sure."

Millicent pursed her lips, lost in thought. Finally, she began.

"For most of our history, the real power in the wizarding world rested in the clans. You know, big

land-owning families. They maintained and extended their power and holdings by alliances through marriages. And occasionally by going to war with each other."

Harry shrugged. "Sounds like the Malfoys."

Millicent shook her head. "No. The clans basically kept the peace. Marriage alliances and blood ties kept the warfare to a minimum. But some families resisted this approach. Families like the Malfoys. Most were eventually swallowed up by the clans. Like the Keith family. You should know about them. Your classmate, Lavender Brown is a Keith. The Brown clan absorbed them about two hundred years ago through a series of marriages. That's why there's a Northern Branch and a Southern Branch of the Brown clan."

Harry looked at her, both puzzled and curious. "But the Malfoys weren't absorbed?"

Millicent shook her head. "A few families resisted the clans. Some through luck or shrewdness or less formal alliances than as with the clans. Like your family."

Harry blinked in surprise. "My family?"

She nodded. "Your family's holdings were up against the Welsh border and the mountains on one side and it had a series of alliances with other strong families on the other side. And the Potters were always smart. I guess you are the exception."

Harry nodded, then started at Millicent's joke. He gave her a cocked eyebrow and a half smile in acknowledgement.

Suddenly, his face clouded. "But the Malfoys...?"

"The Malfoys carefully cultivated a vicious reputation. They were a big land-owning family. So neighboring clans always had their eye on them. But the Malfoys nurtured their reputation as a defense against the clans. And anyone who they perceived as a threat, or who they perceived to be a opportunity for exploitation, were potential targets. There are stories of assassinations or poisonings whenever a neighboring clan started to stir near the Malfoy borders. After a while, the clans left the Malfoys alone. But they've always maintained that closed, hostile reputation. And they've always put the interests of the family above the those of the individual family members. That's the way they were raised. Draco has always been a Malfoy first, and Draco second."

Harry stared at her. "What does that mean?"

Millicent sighed. "It means an attack on one, and insult to one, is an attack or insult to the entire family."

Harry sighed.

Millicent nodded. "So when you insulted Draco's father, and insulted him, you insulted everything Draco was raised to believe in. You struck at the core of his existence, his identity."

Harry looked up at the tall, stocky girl, who was looking at him intently. "You seem to know all about him. You know all this from living in Slytherin House?"

Millicent shook her head sadly. "No, Harry. There's one other thing you should know about the Malfoys. They do make marriage alliances, of sorts, especially where they think they can gain money or power from them."

Harry watched her closely. "And..."

"Lucius Malfoy approached my father about a possible match. Between him and me," she said quietly.

Harry started. "You and Draco?"

She shook her head sadly. "My father said no. I was a little put out at first. I was only twelve. I didn't know any better. Or didn't until my father explained to me about the Malfoys," she said, giving him a sad, wistful smile.

Harry reached out and gave her hand a friendly squeeze. "You're better than that," he whispered softly.

Millicent nodded. "Thanks, Harry."

The Slytherin and the Gryffindor sat in companionable silence for several minutes. Finally, Harry closed his eyes and lowered his head and spoke. "So you think he's planning something against me? Or the people I'm close to?"

She made a face. "I don't know, Harry. I really don't know. I just thought I should let you know."

Harry waited, but that seemed to be it. Finally, He nodded. "Thanks, Millicent."

She smiled softly. "Oh, you can call me Millie."

Harry gave her a smile, and she turned to pack her satchel. Then he got another devilish grin. "You sure you won't reconsider about snogging?"

She looked at him, her face now brighter than it had been. "I don't think so. I've got my reputation to think of."

Harry chuckled. "Your reputation?"

"Yes, my reputation for having good taste," she said with a grin and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER 16 Lavender Blue

The Ravenclaw Quidditch tryouts were far from over, but Harry had seen enough. He looked around the bleachers surrounding the pitch. There was a smattering of onlookers, including a large contingent from Ravenclaw. But, unlike team practices, which were closed, or at least as closed off as you can get for a sport played at an average of 40 feet off the ground, House tryouts were open. So there were also interested representatives from all the other houses, including most of the members of the rival Quidditch teams.

Harry got up and made his way over to Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet, the Gryffindor chaser line, who were watching with interest. "What do you think?"

Angelina looked up. "Their chaser line sucks. I mean really. Kevin Entwhistle? Come on," she said with a chuckle.

Harry shared her chuckle.

Alicia shook her head. "Cho is really the heart of that team. But watch out for Morag MacDougal. He looks like a pretty good keeper."

Harry smiled. "Nothing you ladies can't handle, I'm sure."

The girls all smiled, and Harry nodded as he continued to make his way toward the exit.

"Harry!"

Harry turned and saw Parvati in an upper row, sitting by herself. She waved him up.

As he sat down beside her, she grabbed his arm. "What do you think of Padma?"

Harry shrugged. "Sorry, Parvati. No chance."

Parvati nodded. "I thought so. I don't think she even wanted to try out, but I guess some of her housemates talked her into it."

Harry leaned back. "Look, she's a strong flier, but her reaction time is poor and it's like she's not paying attention half the time. If she'd work at it, I'm sure she could beat out Entwhistle. But, as it is, I don't think she has a prayer of making the team."

Parvati nodded. "I was always better at Quidditch than she was. I don't think she enjoys the game as much as I do."

Harry looked at her in surprise. "Well, why don't you try out. We're holding tryouts on Friday. And I talked Angelina into fielding a full reserve team so we can have full-strength simulated matches in practice. The Hufflepuffs have been doing that for years. They say their practices are more fun than their matches. Come Patil. Go for it."

Parvati snorted. "What? And risk breaking a nail?"

The two of them laughed at her self-effacing humor. Harry gave her shoulder a squeeze and got up to leave. But Parvati grabbed his sleeve. "Talk to Ron, will you," she said with a smile. "I'm not going to wait for him forever."

Harry nodded. "Sure thing," he said and left.

As Harry mounted the stairs up to the castle entrance, he noticed Lavender sitting on one of the stone benches, her head buried in a transfiguration text. "Hey Lavender," he called out. "The library is inside, not out here."

She raised her head and made a face at him. "I hate the library. You can't discuss things or ask

questions or explain things without old Pince rushing up and shushing you. If I don't understand something, I want to be able to ask someone for an explanation without that old bag of bones throwing me dirty looks all the time."

Harry chuckled.

"Is it almost over?" she asked.

"What, the tryouts?"

Lavender nodded.

Harry shook his head. "At least another half hour. More likely an hour. They'll be lucky to get to supper on time the way things are going."

Lavender heaved a sigh. "I told Parvati I'd would meet her out here if the tryouts didn't go on too long. But I've had enough. It'll be dark soon."

Harry nodded again, then got an evil grin. "Why don't you try out for the team?"

Lavender rolled her eyes. "Puh-lease. I took a bludger in the face when I was a kid. That was it. No more Quidditch for me. Ever."

Harry laughed. "Oh, is that how your face got all..." and he made an ugly face.

Lavender smacked him in the arm, then started laughing. "Yeah. I was on my way to being a hag until the bludger knocked all the warts off," she said, giggling.

"Going in?" he asked, joining her laughter.

She nodded with a smile. "Up to the House?"

Harry nodded.

"Good. Then you can carry my books for me," she said, draping her carry-all over his shoulder.

As they walked in companionable silence into the castle and down the corridor to the staircase entrance, he noticed Malfoy in the distance, skulking up the corridor and then turning through the staircase entrance. He made a face, then chuckled to himself. There was nothing down that corridor except the chapel, a few storage closets and the entrance to Ravenclaw House. 'So that's where he's sneaking off to. He's got a Ravenclaw girl. Or maybe a Ravenclaw boy,' he thought with an evil grin.

Lavender paused. "What's so funny," she asked with a curious expression.

Harry shrugged. "Oh, nothing."

Lavender looked down, then suddenly looked at him with a frown. "Harry, tell me something. What's wrong with the boys in this place?"

Harry, who was about to resume walking, stopped in mid-step to look at her. "What do you mean?"

Lavender shook her head sadly. "Look. There are 53 boys in fifth through seventh years here. At least half of them are trolls or oafs. Then there are a few real thugs, like Malfoy and his friends or that Smythe guy in Ravenclaw. And of the rest, about half are spoken for like Ernie MacMillan. And you're crushing on Hermione and Ron...well, Ron just sits there like a lump, watching Parvati and then running for his life whenever she looks at him. That doesn't leave a girl much of a choice."

"Me? Hermione?" Harry gasped.

Lavender rolled her eyes again and grabbed his arm to lead him to the staircases. "Oh, come on, now. As if..."

Harry hung his head and nodded as they mounted the first of many steps of stairs to the Gryffindor Tower. "Well, I do like her, sort of..."

Lavender shook her head. "And she's the only one who hasn't seemed to have gotten the message. I swear, she is the thickest girl I've ever met."

Harry sighed. "Maybe she doesn't like me that way."

Lavender snorted. "Oh, she probably does," she said in exasperation. "Only you'd probably have to hex from here to Halloween and back to get her to realize it. Not that she'd ever say anything to Parvati or me. We're merely the house elves in her castles in the air."

Harry paused. "That's not nice," he muttered.

Lavender shot him a look. "Oh, and ignoring her roommates half the time is? Disappearing every year on Potions' Day when there's work to be done is? Not telling us about all the adventures you guys have had is? I've heard more about the three of you from Fred and George than I have from her, and she's my roommate, for Circe's sake."

Harry made a face.

Lavender sighed and began walking up the stairs again, pulling Harry along. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to insult her, or you. But she gets me so annoyed sometimes."

Harry tilted his head in acknowledgement. Hermione annoyed him at times, too, never giving him a hint about her feelings toward him. He sighed. "What about Neville?"

"Neville?"

Harry grinned. "Sure. He's available."

Now it was Lavender's turn to sigh. "Neville's the sweetest boy there is. But he's definitely in the oaf category. Look, if he'd lose a little weight, he'd be pretty good looking. But I really don't want to spend all my time cleaning up after the disasters that seem to follow him around. I'm the first to admit I'm not that patient. Maybe Parvati might be, but not me."

Harry was a little annoyed, but he gave an internal shrug. 'At least she's honest,' he thought.

She sighed. "Anyway, I think Moira likes him."

Harry blinked. "Moira Duffy? In fourth year?"

Lavender nodded.

"But...but she's so...high spirited."

Lavender shrugged. "Opposites attract. I don't know. We heard Rachel and Ginny teasing her about 'her teddy bear' Neville. Whatever."

Harry chuckled, then looked at her.

"Dean?"

Lavender shook her head. "He's dull as dishwater. The only one he really talks to is Seamus. I suppose he's kind of broodingly romantic, with his painting and stuff. But he's not very interesting. Plus, I think he's kind of prejudiced. I think he only wants to date black girls. Not like Lee."

Harry nodded. Dean had grown up in Muggle London and had seen racial prejudice first hand and seemed reluctant to date white or Asian girls. The only girls Dean had dated so far was Sandy Williams, the fourth year Hufflepuff who he took to the Yule Ball, and Megan Jones, a fifth year Ravenclaw. Sandy had been a self-absorbed disaster who had screamed at him in front of everyone at the Castle entryway after last Christmas' break when he didn't ask her out on a follow-up date.

But Harry thought Megan was bubbly and funny and nice and couldn't figure out why Dean wasn't seeing her more often.

Harry shook his head. "Well, if you want interesting and fun, why not Seamus? After all, you two seemed to have fun at the Yule Ball together."

Lavender sighed for about the eighth time. "Well, he is fun and funny. But maybe too funny. I don't want to go out with him only to become the butt of some of his jokes and funny stories. Maybe if I knew he really liked me, I'd feel more comfortable going out with him."

Harry shrugged as they mounted the last stairway up to the Tower. "Okay, you want a good looking, nonmessy, fun guy who really likes you," Harry said with an evil grin growing on his face. "That leaves you with one choice. The obvious choice: Colin Creevey!"

Lavender shrieked. "That bloody pest!" she said, suddenly bursting into laughter as she passed through the door to the corridor leading to the common room. "I swear, I'm going to have to learn stronger hexes. He'd drive me crazy except that he follows Parvati around even more than me. And don't get me started on his little brother Dennis, who is even worse."

Harry and Lavender laughed merrily as they walked arm in arm down the corridor toward the common room entrance, not noticing that Hermione had been following them up the staircases and was watching them in annoyance now.

* * *

Ginny was leaning forward, her head resting on her right palm as she gazed with a bored expression at her Transfiguration text. She casually blew away a tendril of red hair that had fallen over her face. She gazed apathetically across the common room.

"I don't know why we have to read about all these spells. You learn them. You do them. That's it."

Moira Duffy, on her left, sat there, her hands in her lap, a similar expression on her face. Only Moira had her hair tied in a quirky topknot, making her look like an artist's paintbrush with freckles. "Tell me about it."

Rachel Weiss, Ginny's best friend among the fourth year girls, leaned over from Ginny's right. "Come on. You don't think we're learning every charm we're going to need in life in class, do you?"

Ginny shifted her gaze to Rachel. "Oh, please. You're starting to sound like Hermione," she drawled.

Rachel shook her head in exasperation. She had short, dark brown hair and glasses and, although not particularly pretty, always looked fresh and well-groomed. "Ginny, how many times will you be transfiguring a button into a bug, or a hedgehog into a pincushion, or a cat into a footstool?"

Ginny sighed. "You're right. I don't do those charms more than three or four times a week," she said in an extremely bored tone.

Rachel shook her head. "Look, most of what we do in class has no use in real life. It just shows us how to transfigure in general. It's the books that prepare us for real life transfigurations. The stuff our mums and dads do without thinking every day. If we don't study the underlying theory and practice, we'll have to go running to a reference book every time we want to try something we've never done before."

Ginny turned to Moira and shrugged. "Hermione?"

"They must be twins," Moira said with a lazy grin.

The door to the common room suddenly opened and Lavender and Harry walked in, arm-in-arm, laughing.

Rachel turned to face her best friend and involuntarily murmured quietly. "Uhhhhh ohhhhh."

Ginny's head snapped up and her eyes went wide as the couple passed by without a glance.

"I'll see you at supper," Harry said brightly, as Lavender gave him a wink and mounted the stairs to the girls' dorm.

Ginny turned and gave Rachel a wide-eyed, stricken look. Then she turned to Moira, who was looking at her in sympathy.

Ginny then looked down at her hands in her lap.

Rachel gently touched Ginny's shoulder. "I think we should go upstairs and talk." She then looked over at Moira, who nodded. The girls calmly put their books away and the three slowly made their way up to their dorm.

* * *

Ginny lay in her bed, frowning off in the distance as Rachel sat at the end of the bed leaning against one post and Moira against the other.

None of them had ever seen Harry laughing and joking with a girl like that before. Maybe he would tease Hermione and had been known to tease Ginny as well, usually at the Burrow.

But this was Harry. And yet he seemed so relaxed. And carefree. And happy. Ginny leaned back against her pillows. 'Oh, God,' she thought.

Rachel sighed. "Ginny. You always anticipated this, didn't you?"

Ginny's gaze didn't waver. "I kind of figured he would end up with someone else. But I thought it would be Hermione. He even wrote Ron this summer about how he was crushing on her. Somehow, I kept hoping that she would end up with Ron and I would have a chance with Harry. But then I saw how she looked at him when we picked him up and I knew..." She heaved a sigh.

Moira fidgeted. "So...you knew it was coming."

Ginny closed her eyes in sorrow. She nodded slowly. Finally, she looked at her friends. "I guess I knew that he and Hermione would get together. I could deal with that. But Lavender? Lavender?"

Moira continued to fidget. "Lavender's not that bad," she whispered. "After all, she helped me with...those warts on my neck."

Rachel gave her a look. "They were just skin tags and I could have taken care of them with a razor blade and some alcohol."

Moira lowered her head. "Still..."

Ginny looked up at Moira with narrowed eyes. "She's a gossip. And she's mean. I don't trust her. And look at the way she dresses and wears makeup. All torted up," Ginny spat.

Rachel shook her head. "Look, she's insecure. I think all the southern Browns feel like second class citizens compared to their northern cousins."

Ginny now turned her glare at Rachel. "Oh, and I'm supposed to feel sorry for her. Only a princess. Not a queen. They're the richest clan in England, and I've got to shed tears over the fact that she's only wealthy, not filthy rich."

Rachel shook her head. "Come on, Ginny. That's not like you. We don't even know if they are a couple. Maybe they were just talking."

Moira chuckled. "Yeah, Ginny. And you know how quickly she goes through boyfriends. I give them until...4:00 tomorrow afternoon."

Ginny suddenly giggled. "I don't know. Harry's pretty special. I'd say...7:00."

Rachel smiled and moved up the bed to Ginny. Moira followed. As they embraced their friend, she cried.

* * *

Hermione could not seem to concentrate on her arithmancy assignment. She gave Harry, who was sitting across from her at the table in the library, a surreptitious glance. She was glad to see he was taking his studies more seriously, following her without protest up to the library on a regular basis. But she was furious at him for flirting outrageously with Lavender in the stairwell the day before.

'So Harry likes Lavender,' Hermione thought. 'It was Ron who was supposed to like Lavender. Isn't that what Harry had said. But it was really Harry who liked Lavender all along.' She glanced up at Harry, who was now looking at her. He looked like he was about to say something. 'Oh, bugger Harry,' she thought stormily.

She cut Harry off before he had a chance to speak. "I'm leaving. I can't seem to get anything accomplished here," she said as she slammed her arithmancy book closed and stood up.

Harry looked startled. "I...I'll walk you back up," he stammered.

"Oh, don't bother. You stay here and keep working," she snapped as she threw her books and papers messily into her bookbag and, without another word, stalked out.

* * *

Harry flushed and took a deep breath. He shook his head sadly. 'Hermione looked like she was in a bad mood,' he thought. 'Maybe this was the ideal time for an unexpected compliment.' Harry had been working up the courage to say something nice to her for the last fifteen minutes and he was just about to take the plunge Hermione abruptly packed up and left.

He slowly lowered his head into his arms on the desk. He had to say something to her or he would burst. Why was this so hard? He found he could now talk to other girls. Even tease them, like Sara had taught him. Like Millie Bulstrode. Maybe there was some other way. Maybe some elaborate birthday present at the end of the month.

No. He couldn't wait that long. And he'd feel stupid if she rejected his grand gesture. No, he would follow Sara's advice and the advice from those Muggle girls' magazines and do something small but romantic. Yes. The unexpected compliment. That was the best way to go.

* * *

Harry walked listlessly up the stairs and was approaching the Fat Lady in Pink guarding the Gryffindor House entrance when the painting swung open and he was sent sprawling by a blond streak.

"Damn you, Potter..." and suddenly Lavender, who had been knocked on her seat, burst into tears, causing her already makeup-smudged eyes to run.

"Lavender! I'm sorry! Are you all right?"

She looked up at him, hiccuping between her sobs. "No, I'm not all right! Does it look like I'm all right!" she snapped.

Harry scrambled to her side. "Are you hurt? Do you need help? I can get you down to the hospital wing if you can't walk."

Lavender looked up, her face now a mess with running eye makeup. "No! I'm fine! I..." then she burst into sobs again.

Harry grabbed her shoulders gently. "Are you sure? Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head morosely, still crying.

Harry took a clean handkerchief out of his robe and gently began wiping some of the mess off Lavender's face. "Lavender, what's wrong?"

Lavender pushed Harry's hand away and turned away from him. "Nothing...I..."

Harry grabbed her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "You want to talk about it?" he murmured quietly.

"I've...oh, bugger...I've got to...get to a ladies' room...wash off..."

Harry sighed. "Not the one in the House?"

Lavender shook her head sorrowfully. "I don't want to go back in there...ever," she said, beginning to sob again. "Where's Parvati? I need Parvati," she cried.

"Shhhhhh," Harry said soothingly, continuing to squeeze her shoulder reassuringly like Tony and Mae Strowbridge would do for him when he was upset. "I saw Parvati with Padma. They were on their way to the Ravenclaw common room."

Lavender continued to sit on the floor, her legs splayed out under her robes. "I need Parvati. I..."

Harry lowered his head. "Maybe I can help," he said quietly. "Here, get up and we'll take a walk."

Lavender slowly took his hand as he helped her up. He grabbed her waist and began leading her down the corridor, past the stairwell entrance to a quiet corner. The two sat down on the pedestal where one of several statues of lions in the corridor stood.

"Now, what happened?" he asked quietly as he began to daub away more of the running makeup from her face.

"I...I...overheard that jerk Turley making fun of the way I look...I was going to get up and break his nose like Parvati did...but Cassie...Cassie stopped me," she said in heaving gasps.

Harry put his arm around her shoulder to reassure her. "Dan Turley is a prat of the first magnitude. You shouldn't pay any attention to what he says," he said quietly.

"No...you don't understand...It's not Turley...It's Cassie...and Sam," she blurted out between sobs.

Harry started. "Cassandra and Samantha?"

Lavender nodded vigorously, loosening strands of blond hair from the clip that was holding it back from her face.

"What did they do...or say?"

Lavender hung her head. "Cassie said...I wear too much eye makeup...I'm not subtle. And Sam said her brother hated Muggle girls who wore too much makeup."

Harry tightened his hold on her. "They were only trying to tell you that you don't need makeup," he said softly.

She looked up and gave him a glare. "What...you, too? You're going to make fun of me, too?"

"No!" he said firmly. "Do you have a mirror?"

She continued to give him a poisonous look. "Yeah?"

Harry nodded. "Take it out and look in it."

She reached into her robe and pulled out a compact.

"Tell me what you see?" he said softly.

"A mess," she said, bursting into a new round of tears.

Harry grabbed her wrist to keep her from bolting. "No. Look at your eyes."

She looked up at him and then back into the small mirror. "They're bloodshot."

Harry sighed in exasperation. "Okay, take away the red. What do you see?"

Lavender looked again. "I don't know...they're blue. So what?"

Harry closed his eyes. "They're cornflower blue. And very pretty. But you don't notice them with all the eye shadow and other dark stuff. I never noticed how pretty your eyes were until just now when I was wiping all the makeup off."

Lavender looked up at him in surprise. "You think I have pretty eyes?"

Harry gave her another exasperated look. "Of course. Now what do you want people to notice? Your pretty eyes, or your makeup?"

Lavender blinked rapidly. "Uhhh...my eyes."

Harry nodded.

Lavender looked down, pondering. "But...but this is how my sister and my cousins taught me to put on makeup," she said quietly. "I'm not sure...Teen Witch Weekly has these columns, but...I don't know. I just don't know the charms or...Parvati said she could get Muggle makeup for me, but...I don't know what to do."

Harry paused and pondered, struggling with a thought. "Uhhhh...maybe I can help you," he said quietly.

She jerked up her head in surprise and suspicion. "What do you know about makeup?"

Harry blinked at her, then smiled. "Oh, lots. I wear it all the time. But it's very subtle. You never noticed, right? Without it, I actually could pass as Vincent Crabbe's twin brother. But with a dab here and a daub there..."

Lavender burst into giggles. "No really, you're just teasing me."

Harry took a deep breath. "You promise not to tell anyone?"

Lavender smiled. "What, that you're Crabbe with a glamour charm?"

Harry smiled. "No. First you have to promise not to tell anyone...well, I suppose Parvati as long as you make her promise not to tell."

Lavender was now looking at him with real curiosity. "What am I promising?"

Harry widened his eyes in exasperation. "Promise me that if I give you something, you swear never to tell anyone where you got it."

Lavender gave Harry a sly look. "Depends on what you give me. If you give me a kiss, I may be forced to tell people where I got it from," she said, flirting outrageously.

Harry got up, looking down his nose in his best Snape impersonation. "Okay. If you don't want them," and slowly turned to walk away.

Lavender grabbed his robe and pulled him back, laughing. "Okay, okay. I promise."

Harry gave her a broad smile, then reddened a little. "Well, during the summer, I met this girl..."

Lavender's eyes widened. "It's true! I heard you had a Muggle girlfriend! Several, in fact! What's her name! What's she like!"

Harry threw up his hands. "Okay. I'm leaving."

Lavender gasped and grabbed his robe again. "Okay, I'm sorry. Tell me about this girl."

Harry got a sudden smirk. He remembered all the funny stories Peter Boyd used to tell him. He lowered his head. "Well, she was very beautiful. And we fell in love. And got married. And had a couple kids. But it didn't work out, so we split up. The divorce became final last week. But at least I get visitation rights to Congolia and Raul on Hogsmeade weekends."

Harry looked up to see Lavender staring at him, open-mouthed. Suddenly, she burst out laughing. "Harry! Where'd you come up with a story like that!" she exclaimed, practically falling off the pedestal.

Harry joined her laughter. "It's not original. A Muggle friend of mine was planning to break off his relationship with his girlfriend at his school. I asked him what he was going to tell her. And he told me he that story. I laughed so hard that my drink sprayed out of my nose."

Lavender continued to laugh and grabbed a hold of him to keep from falling out of her seat.

They sat there companionably for a few moments before Lavender looked up at him. "That's not really what you were going to tell me about, was it? You're not turning into another Seamus?"

Harry chuckled. "No. What I was saying is that I met this girl over the summer--an older girl--who decided to help me, well...to know how to act around girls. And she gave me all these Muggle girls' magazines to read to understand how girls think and what to do. But I was thinking. All these magazines have lots of stuff about makeup and how to wear it. I brought them along with me to study. But I didn't tell anyone. I'd never hear the end of it. You can borrow them if you like. They might help."

Lavender leaned back and looked at him. "You'd do that...for me?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure. Why not?" Then he turned to look at her with wide eyes. "Hey. You know what? There are a couple articles in those magazines that I wanted to show to Ron. You know, to encourage him with Parvati. But I couldn't figure out how to show them to him without him laughing at me. I'd never hear the end of it. But if *you* were to pass them along to him, maybe I could actually get him to read them without have to suffer a lot of abuse."

Lavender giggled. "What kind of magazines?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, about half of them are teen-type magazines, but there's some adult ones, too. And believe me, they're a lot more sophisticated than Witch Weekly. Really glamour oriented."

Lavender suddenly grabbed his arm and gave him a kiss. "Oh, Harry! You are the sweetest thing!"

Harry laughed and blushed. "Here's my handkerchief. Maybe you can clean off the rest of your face and we can go back and I can get them for you. And if anyone notices, just say we were working on some homework and I'm giving you some books and notes to help you."

Lavender quickly cleaned off as much of her running makeup as she could and jumped down from the pedestal. "I can show them to Parvati?"

Harry nodded. "As long as she doesn't say where you got them," he said with a smile. Then his face got more serious. "Oh, and try not to be mad at Cassandra and Samantha. I'm sure they were only trying to be helpful."

Lavender nodded. "I think you're right."

As the two walked back toward the common room, Lavender stopped. "Uhhh, Harry?"

Harry turned to her.

"Well..." she said shyly. "I think you're too good for Hermione. If things don't work out..."

Harry gave her a small smile. "Sure. It'll give me something to think about."

And once again, they walked arm and arm back to the common room. This time, nobody noticed.

CHAPTER 17 "I Decide"

"Ron, get up!"

A muffled moan came from beneath the covers.

Harry smiled at Seamus and Dean. "I talked to Dobby. They're having your favorites this morning. Batwing omelets and monkey brain soup with a nice cup of hot, steaming dragon bile."

Seamus and Dean snickered and made gagging sounds.

Suddenly, the grinning Seamus brought out his wand. Harry shook his head vigorously. Seamus was one of the funniest people he knew. But sometimes, Seamus could be a little overzealous and heavy-handed in his pranks. Once, Harry got up out of bed only to fall eight feet to the floor after Seamus decided it might be fun to levitate the beds. And Seamus had gotten a serious set of hexes when he hit Parvati with a charm as she was walking out of the common room on her way to a date. Parvati's plaits unraveled and her hair frizzed up into a huge ball of tight curls. Seamus couldn't sit down for hours after that little stunt.

So Harry managed to restrain Seamus this time. Instead, he tried to pitch his voice up an octave as he gently shook Ron's shoulder. "Ron, honey. It's me. Parvati," Harry whispered, trying to mimic her voice. "You were wonderful last night. But could I please have my bra back."

Ron stirred, then rolled over with a groggy half-smile on his face. "HmMMM?" he said sleepily. Suddenly, his eyes came into focus. "Whaaaa?" he said, sitting up quickly and looking around in confusion as Seamus and Dean began laughing hysterically. "What's going on?" he said in grumpy confusion.

Neville walked in from his shower and looked around at his three laughing roommates. He gave a small smile. "What's going on?"

Dean looked at Neville, gasping for breath. "Ron won't give Parvati her bra back," he managed to choke out.

Neville looked at Dean, then at Ron. "Ron," he said quietly, the smallest of smiles playing around the corners of his mouth. "Give Parvati her bra back. I don't think it will fit you," he said evenly, and walked over to his bed.

At this point, Seamus and Dean and Harry and Ron looked at each other in shock, then collapsed in laughter.

* * *

It was a beautiful late summer day. It was warm and there were few clouds in the sky. Harry looked over at Hermione, who was reaching for another piece of toast before Ron finished off the entire plate. She looked so cute, Harry thought. He sighed. Then he looked up at the charmed ceiling and got an idea.

"You know what would be fun, today?"

Hermione turned and looked at Harry with a smile. "What?"

"A picnic. Instead of coming here for lunch, I could go down to the kitchens and get Dobby to prepare some sandwiches and some flasks of pumpkin juice or iced tea and we could go out and eat on the Great Lawn," he said.

Ron's eyes lit up. "That would be great. It's real nice out and maybe we could get a little broomwork afterwards." But then Ron looked at his friend, who was looking with an anxious smile at

Hermione. "Oh, wait," he said suddenly. "I promised to get together with Fred and George over some of the stuff they're working on. Sorry, Harry."

Harry looked up suddenly at Ron, who gave him a wink. Harry was surprised. He had made the suggestion innocently. But maybe this was a way to talk to Hermione alone. Maybe...to tell her how he felt. He gave Ron a grateful nod. He looked back at Hermione. She was still smiling but there was something in her eyes that was different.

She tilted her head at Harry and her smile broadened. "Oh, Harry. That sounds like such a wonderful idea," she said in a voice that seemed a little strange. "But I really do have to work on our History of Magic essay. You should, too, Harry. Oh, do come up to the library with me. It'll be fun."

Harry blinked at her. "Hermione. That essay isn't due until Friday. It's Sunday. Come on. It's a day of rest!"

Hermione gave him an almost pleading look. "But...lessons are beginning in earnest this week. No more reviews. And if we get behind at the start, we'll never catch up. Come on. We can spend the day in the library together," she said, now sounding like she was pleading.

Harry closed his eyes in disappointment. "Maybe."

* * *

Harry was strangely quiet as they made their way back to Gryffindor House.

But so was Hermione.

Quiet and preoccupied.

She didn't know what to do. If it were she and Harry and Ron, that would be fine. But just she and Harry. She didn't know if she was ready to deal with that. Not just right now.

It was different in the library. That was her home ground. She felt in control there. She knew she wouldn't say something foolish. Something she would regret. Something that would change everything.

She sighed quietly. Hermione hated thinking about all this. It was so nice now. Harry was almost always with her. He came to the library almost every night. He was always there as a comfort.

And Ron seemed a little calmer this year. He still argued with her over studies or her supposed bossiness. But he seemed strangely calm at times, as if he were preoccupied about something. Maybe he was the one who liked Lavender after all, she thought.

She had been upset and furious when he saw Harry and Lavender walking arm-in-arm, laughing earlier in the week. But, except for exchanging a few words in the common room, he and Lavender didn't seem to be acting any different from before. And Lavender wasn't one for secret romances. If she and Harry were a couple, she'd be on his lap or hanging all over him in the hallways, marking Harry as hers like some she-wolf marking her territory.

So things were back to normal. But Hermione knew they wouldn't be for long if she were to go picnicking alone with Harry. She knew she would say something stupid. She would tell him how she felt. Or burst into tears. Or maybe jump into his arms. And she knew that would ruin everything.

* * *

Harry was troubled about Hermione during chapel services. 'When will Hermione stop hiding in the library all the time?' he thought. 'It's a beautiful day. It's a day to dance.'

Then he turned to his firsties. He was surprised that there were no dropouts among his first years. He had reassured him that they were under no obligation to attend Sunday services, but they were there ready for him before he came down from his dorm for the third Sunday in a row. He hoped that they were not going simply to please him. But he had to admit that he found a sense of satisfaction that they all seemed to be deriving as much value from this quiet hour on Sunday as he was.

The services were about over when he noticed some shuffling off to the side. He turned to see Seamus and Dean quickly leave their seats and start toward the exit ahead of everyone else. He frowned. He didn't like the look on their faces, and decided to follow them.

As he entered the corridor, he saw Seamus and Dean scurry down the corridor, following the Gray Ghost--the figure in the gray hooded monk's robe. Suddenly Seamus stopped. "*Ventus Mihi*," he said with a wave of his wand.

A sudden gust of wind came rushing down the corridor at them. The Gray Ghost's hood suddenly billowed in the wind and was blown back, revealing a silver blond head of hair. The figure turned, showing a face that was a mixture of fear and fury.

It was Malfoy.

Malfoy reached into the heavy robes but Harry was quicker. "*Expelliarmus*," Harry said quietly. The wand, which Malfoy still was fumbling with, flew out of his hands as he rocked slightly on his heels. Harry caught it in mid air. The fury on Malfoy's face only seemed to increase as he quickly threw the hood over his head and dashed down the corridor, turning into closet near the end of the hall.

Harry turned with his own fury on his roommates. "Not a word of this. Not one word. If I hear anything about this, you won't have to worry about house points. There'll be nothing left of you to deduct from." Harry turned on his heel and strode toward the closet at the end of the corridor as the rest of the Sunday worshippers started exiting the chapel.

As Harry opened the door and almost was hit by a tin of metal polish being swung by its handle. Harry's reflexes were just good enough to avoid the blow. He caught Malfoy's arm on the follow through with his left hand and pushed the Slytherin against the wall, his wand pressed against Malfoy's throat.

Malfoy struggled a couple times, but Harry was surprised that he was now taller than his rival, and stronger.

Finally, Malfoy stopped struggling and simply glared, nose-to-nose, at Harry. "My wand," he growled.

"What were you doing there? In the chapel," Harry growled back.

"Give me back my wand," Malfoy snarled back.

"Not until you tell me what you were doing."

"Go to hell, Potter."

Harry narrowed his eyes as Malfoy made another sudden move to try to break loose. Harry's grip tightened and he pressed his wand against Malfoy's throat. "Don't try it. You know what a hex to the throat can do."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed even further. "I'll go wherever I please, you filthy bastard."

Harry was breathing hard. "Spying for your master? Taking names of those who worship someone other than your Dark Lord, eh Malfoy."

Malfoy seemed to cringe. Then a new fierceness appeared in his eyes. And a touch of fear. "I have as much right to be there as you, Potter," he growled.

"Chapel isn't for Death Eater scum doing their master's bidding."

Malfoy was now seething. "I..." he snarled, but with a note of uncertainty. "I do no one's bidding. Not Voldemort's...Not Dumbledore's...Not...my father's. And certainly not yours, you bloody bastard. I decide...what's best for me," he growled through clenched teeth.

Harry blinked. He slowly eased his grip on Malfoy and pushed him down on the bench along the side of the closet. Harry stepped back and sat down on a crate against the wall on the other side of the closet. "Why the disguise?" Harry said warily.

Malfoy continued to watch Harry with an angry expression. "What do you care?"

Harry glared at the Slytherin. "Going to services isn't some costume party. It's something we take seriously. Or wouldn't you know about that?"

Malfoy shook his head slowly. "You could never understand, you smug bastard."

"So why?"

Malfoy closed his eyes in resignation. "You'll know soon enough once you and all your pals get done telling everyone and chuckling over it."

Harry blinked in surprise. "What was he saying? What was going to happen?"

You've been sneaking off to see Meacham, haven't you," Harry said quietly.

"None of your bloody business," Malfoy said sullenly.

Harry paused to ponder as the he eyed his enemy, who had leaned his head back against the closet wall, his eyes still closed.

"Malfoy!" Harry said, suddenly.

The Slytherin opened his eyes in time to see Harry toss him his wand. He fumbled, then caught it.

Harry looked into Malfoy's eyes to see what he could read. Fear. Resignation. Anger.

"No one is going to talk about this to anyone," he said in a low voice.

Malfoy looked at him with suspicion.

Harry watched Malfoy. Then, as if of it's own accord, his hand came out with an offer to shake.

Malfoy looked down at the outstretched hand, then looked up at Harry.

"Go to hell, Potter," he snapped and abruptly turned to the back wall of the closet. He uttered a charm and a door opened up. Malfoy passed through and was gone.

Harry sat there in a daze. Could it be...?

As he sat there, he smelled the odd smells in the closet. The smell of potions and ingredients. Of old mops and dirt. Of sweat. And something else.

Possibly the smell of bridges being burned.

CHAPTER 18 "Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!"

Harry's mind was a jumble of thoughts. It was nearly three weeks into the term, September was rapidly passing, and he still hadn't found a way to tell Hermione how he felt.

He had considered a grand gesture--an elaborate gift or some outrageously romantic act--but Snape's lecture about foolish Gryffindor theatrics earlier in the term had made him reconsider. His first impulse at buying her a birthday present, a gold chain with intertwined hearts like Sara's, was discarded. That would be too much, he decided. If he knew she liked him, he could always sneak off to Hogsmeade and purchase one. Instead, he had bought her a beautiful, leather-bound book of wizard poetry.

He had sat and pondered endlessly. Something as mundane as asking her to Hogsmeade during the next free weekend would be taken, he had no doubt, as merely an invitation to a gang date no different from any other Hogsmeade weekend.

No, there had to be some way to tell Hermione he liked her as more than just a pal. But as he sat there in the library next to her, trying desperately to finish his potions' assignment while stealing glances at the face that had stolen his heart, he was at a loss.

Then, unbidden, came the words of Sara this past summer, which he had thought of over and over again since returning to Hogwarts: 'A perfect boyfriend will always strive to surprise and delight his lady with an unexpected compliment.'

Harry smiled at the memory of Sara, so intent on instructing Harry on the intricate ways to a woman's heart, often taking an intense and pedantic tone like a younger Professor McGonagall hammering away at some knotty transfiguration problem. Harry had tried to remember all the lessons she had tried to teach him. 'A perfect red rose to your lover is worth more than a handful of diamonds if you've been true to her, but a handful of diamonds will not be enough if you've been untrue.' Harry shook his head at that one. 'Meet her anger with gentleness as a willow that bends before the storm.' That one was even worse, like a Zen version of a Witch Weekly serial. He giggled softly, and Hermione raised her head from her book to frown at him.

He looked around the library. It was almost closing time, and the library was emptying out. He sighed softly. He had to find a way to let her know his feelings or he would just explode. He had seen how crazy Ron had become over Parvati. Ron had actually gotten up the nerve to try the 'unexpected compliment' approach and that had definitely gotten her attention. But now Ron was tearing himself apart in indecision about what to do next. And he was becoming more and more ornery and snappish whenever Harry tried to offer advice or encouragement.

Harry vowed he would not go that route with Hermione. After all, he had risked, and thought he had lost, Ron's friendship by confiding his feelings about Hermione. If he was willing to take such risks with Ron, he owed it to Ron to follow up with Hermione.

He took a deep breath and tried to think. He propped his elbow on the potions book he had been reading and leaned his head on his hand, and glanced over at Hermione. She was so adorable, her face a mask of concentration, scribbling notes furiously without even a glance to her notebook, and biting her bottom lip as she turned the page of her text. He had to smile.

As if sensing his gaze, she turned. "Harry, what are you looking at?"

Harry was a little startled, but his smile broadened. He gave a small shrug, and colored slightly. "I was just thinking what a git I'd been for not noticing how pretty you were until last year's Yule Ball," he said.

Suddenly, Harry realized he had spoken aloud what he'd been thinking at the moment. He sensed he was really blushing now, and gave her another quick smile and turned to get his books and papers in order to return to the Gryffindor common room.

"It's closing time, Hermione," he said in a small, husky voice. "It's time to go."

Harry's head was truly whirling now. Had he done the right thing? How could he say such a thing? Did she like it? Why wasn't she reacting?

He stood, but Hermione still hadn't reacted. He took a deep breath. 'In for a penny, in for a pound,' he thought. He bent over her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

* * *

'What did he just say?' Hermione thought. 'How pretty I am?' She was stunned. Cute, sweet Harry, the boy she'd had a crush on since the Yule Ball and, if she were honest with herself, probably since she had first noticed boys at all, had called her pretty and...and...he had kissed her.

She had to think. She had tried to picture scenarios where he might notice her. She had tried to analyze her feelings about him. She'd even asked her mother about what to do if a boy liked her or she liked a boy. But her mum just told her she would know what to do when it happened.

But somehow, didn't know. She wasn't prepared. It was like a test she hadn't studied for. She had to formulate her response, but this was too quick.

She had virtually no experience with boys. She'd gone to the Yule Ball with and kissed Viktor Crum, but she had been prepared well in advance. And he didn't really know her and had no right to have expectations from her. She knew her escape routes, both physical and emotional. And she didn't have any emotional bond to Viktor.

But there was no plan, no map, no study guide for her emotions with Harry. She would be working without a net. What was she supposed to do? Should she hold his hand? What would Ron think? Was she expected to go snogging with him now? Would they fall in love? What if they didn't like each other? What if they broke up? Would they sleep together? Would they...? What if...? How do I ...?

She could sense it out of the corner of her eye as Harry looked down at her. "Come on, Hermione," he said gently with a slight strain in his voice. "I'll walk you back to the dorms."

Hermione found she couldn't turn her head to meet his eyes. She needed time to think. How could this be happening? She had dreamed of this, but she knew it was just a fantasy. Now that it was a reality, and she didn't know what to do.

She heard him shuffle, nervously. She couldn't leave him there shuffling, could she. But she didn't have the string in her legs to rise and couldn't face him for fear of bursting into tears, of making a fool of herself in front of him.

"No, you go ahead. I've got a couple things to take care of," she heard herself say, still not turning to face him.

She heard him grunt like someone had hit him in the midsection. She saw out of the corner of her eye Harry turn and walk quickly out of the library. He was almost running. She didn't know what to do. Maybe if she thought about it overnight, she would know what to do.

* * *

Harry raced down the hall and up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. His breathing was harsh and shallow, but somehow, he was just able to force enough air into his lungs to keep going. He could barely see through the tears. Even with all the work and exercise he'd done over the summer, his

thighs burned from the pounding they were taking going up the various staircases.

He arrived at the portrait of the Lady in Pink and paused, his hands on his knees, to catch his breath and to regain his composure. He wiped away the tears and took a deep breath. "Carpe Diem," he spoke to the Fat Lady in Pink, whose face was showing her concern for the boy. The door swung open.

There was the usual hubbub in the common room. He walked swiftly through the room, waving absently at Ron and Colin Creevey, who were playing wizard's chess. He raced up the stairs to his dorm.

Tossing his books and papers into his trunk and his glasses on the night stand, Harry flopped in his bed face first. He buried his face in a pillow and screamed.

"Stupid!!! Stupid!!! Stupid!!! Stupid!!!" he screamed into the pillow over and over again. He paused only when he was exhausted. Then he turned back to his pillow, punching it over and over again.

His mind was a mass of agonized self-recrimination. 'How could I ever think Hermione cared about me? I'm just a pal. She can't love me. Nobody has ever loved me. And nobody ever will.' He kept punching the pillow over and over again until he was physically and emotionally spent. About a half hour later, Ron came up to check on Harry. He sat on the corner of Harry's bed.

"Harry?" he asked quietly. "Are you all right?"

Harry had the pillow over his head. He shook his head.

"Are you sick or something?"

Harry nodded.

"You need anything? You need to go to the hospital wing? Something to eat or drink?"

Harry shook his head, miserably. "I'm okay, Ron. I just need to rest," he said in a strained voice, not looking up.

Ron nodded absently. "Listen, if you need anything, just let me know, Okay?"

Harry nodded, the pillow still over his head.

Ron turned to leave, when he heard Harry's small strained voice. "Ron?"

Ron paused and turned back to the bed. "Yeah, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Thanks." He paused. "Thanks for being my friend."

Ron gave a small smile at the beat-up pillow covering his friend. "Don't mention it, mate."

When Harry heard Ron leave, he gave a choking sigh. Then Harry began to cry. He cried for a long time that night. He cried as much that night as he'd ever cried in his life.

* * *

Hermione gathered up her books absentmindedly shortly after Harry left. She was so confused, she didn't know what to do. Madame Pince had passed by to see that Hermione was on her way out and promptly forgot about her favorite student.

But Hermione stopped before she reached the exit, and doubled back. She couldn't go back yet. She couldn't face Harry. She didn't know what to do, to say. Should she jump into his arms? Should she hide from him? Should she ignore him? Or just pretend nothing ever had happened?

Maybe she should go back and talk to Parvati and Lavender. No, she thought firmly. They would laugh at her. Or they would yell at her. Or call her stupid or immature or naïve. Or they would tell

everybody, and she would become the laughing stock of Hogwarts.

She would not let them rob her of her dignity. She would work it out. She had always worked out things in the past, hadn't she?

Hermione found herself in a corner of the library, which now was dark except for a few candles in the reading room area. She leaned against the wall of the little alcove she loved to come to when she needed to think. She could see down several rows of bookshelves, the few remaining lit candles throwing the book spines into sharp relief. Maybe there was a book, or a treatise, or a pamphlet, that could tell her what to do. She felt her knees go, and she slowly slid down the wall until she was on the floor, her knees up against her chin and her arms around her shins. She looked at the flickering lights, throwing dancing shadows on the books, and she cried.

* * *

Over the next few days, Harry was seen in classes, but no where else. He was seldom hungry, but when he was, he would sneak down to the dungeon, where he would tickle the pear on the painting of the bowl of fruit down there and gain entrance to the kitchens and get something to eat from Dobby and the house elves, who were always eager to please.

When he went to class, he nodded at Hermione, but didn't speak to her except as needed for the class. And when classes were over, he was the first one out, and was almost instantly lost in the crowds of students changing classes. At the end of classes, Harry would retire to his dorm room, reading and doing his school work in his bed.

Or he would run. After the last class of the day, he would run to the dorm, and change into running shorts and sneakers and go out to the great lawn and begin running. Sometimes, he would run for hours. Sometimes he would barely make a circuit of the Great Lawn.

Hermione, for her part, became withdrawn, spending most of her time in the library. She, too, tried to avoid Harry when she could. She was still confused about her feelings and now realized she had hurt him and was embarrassed to face him. She hoped that Harry would eventually come around and things would return to normal.

* * *

It was Sunday afternoon. Sweat was dripping from Harry's unruly hair and he was out of breath. He had made the run out and around the Quidditch pitch, then to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, which he followed back to the castle. Then he continued, looping around the womping willow and back to the edge of the Forbidden Forest until he got to Hagrid's place. He stopped and jogged in place a little to cool down before walking up to his friend's door and knocking.

"Harry!" The half giant exclaimed in surprise and concern. "You look like...is someone after yeh?" Hagrid said with alarm and grabbing his huge crossbow.

Harry gave his friend and professor a weary smile. "No, Hagrid. I was just out running and thought I'd stop by to say hello."

Hagrid lowered his crossbow and looked at Harry with concern. "Running? What for?" Suddenly, he smiled. "Well, let's get yer inside afore you catch yer death. It's a mite chilly," Hagrid said, putting his huge hand on Harry's back and roughly ushering him in.

Harry stepped into the circular stone cabin, marveling at the cages, traps and other paraphernalia of the Care of Magical Creatures teacher. Harry ran his hand over Hagrid's huge but cowardly dog Fang's muzzle, coming away with a healthy dollop of dog drool for his trouble, and sat in one of Hagrid's oversized visitor's chairs.

"So. Nice to see you, Harry. What can I get you. Tea? Ale? Firewhiskey? Uhhh...no, that wouldn't be right. Yer a student. Forget I said that. Okay?"

Harry chuckled with a tired smile. "A little water, maybe. Or some tea."

Hagrid grabbed his pink parasol wand and waved it at the potbellied stove, which suddenly lit. Then he went to the basin and promptly filled a huge tankard full of water from the hand pump.

"Ere yeh go, Harry," Hagrid said, placing the tankard, which easily held three pints, if not more, in front of Harry.

Harry drank with great thirst, but couldn't finish half of the huge tankard. He leaned back into the chair, relaxing for the first time in nearly a week. He looked around the hut casually and noticed a huge piece of furniture in the shadows. "Hagrid, what's that?"

Harry noticed Hagrid's cheeks blush under the mass of beard covering his face. "Ahh...it's sumpin I kinda cobbled together. In case of visitors," he mumbled. "It's sumpin called an arm-oo-ar."

Harry blinked a couple times, trying to figure out what Hagrid had just said. Then he realized. "An armoire? Like, a closet?"

Hagrid pursed his mouth, or at least appeared to through his beard. "Ahhh...Yeah. Like I said."

Harry got a mischievous smile on his face. "What visitors? Are you expecting company?"

Hagrid shifted uncomfortably, leading the massively solid chair he was sitting in to squeak in protest. "Well, now...yeh never know..."

Harry leaned his head back against the cushions in his chair. "A certain headmistress from an exotic foreign land?"

"Ah...uh...well...I did just happen ta run into Madame Maxime over the summer. After all, I was just in the neighborhood...in the Ukraine, which is practically next door ta France, yeh know." Hagrid stopped. "I shouldn't'a told yeh that."

Harry gave a knowing nod. "I won't tell anybody. You know that."

Hagrid nodded, his eyes suddenly taking a new interest. "But what are yeh running about for? There's only two reasons to run. Yer either running from sumpin, or running to sumpin. Which was you doin'?" he asked.

Harry sunk his chin down in his chest, practically disappearing into the cushions of the massive chair. "Well...it's just something Muggles like to do. For exercise, to keep in shape."

Hagrid shook his head. "Let em do a little real work. That'a be exercise enough for any man, I'm thinking."

Harry gave a half shrug. "Well, I'm in training. Mad Eye...I mean, Professor Moody has got me working on my stamina and reaction time in case...well, in case I even need it."

Hagrid nodded. "Yeah, I heard 'bout yeh being a blockbreaker and all. Always knew yeh had it in yeh. An' Professor Moody's a right chap, even if half the people here think he's around the bend."

Harry nodded, then jumped at a strange voice from the armoire. "FOOD!!!" the voice squeaked.

Harry's eyes went wide. "What was that?" he exclaimed in alarm.

The door to the closet banged. Then banged again. "FOOD!!!" came the insistent squeak again.

Hagrid sighed as he finished pouring Harry's tea. "Brownies."

Harry looked puzzled, concerned now not just about the sounds from the armoire but of Hagrid's cooking, recalling his brick-like treacle fudge. "No thanks, Hagrid. I'm not hungry. But what about

the noise from the cabinet?"

Hagrid looked over his shoulder in puzzlement at Harry. "Oh. Not brownies. Brownies."

Harry blinked in confusion as Hagrid walked over to his larder and pulled out a sizeable joint of meat. He threw open the cabinet door and Harry saw the ugliest creatures he had ever seen.

They looked a little like the goblins of Gringotts, but smaller and fatter. And their faces were nut brown and gnarled. And, instead of long sharp noses like elves or goblins, they had what looked like large warts in the middle of their faces.

The largest of the brownies, who couldn't be more than 18 inches tall, gave Harry a disinterested look through Hagrid's legs and turned to look greedily at the joint the half giant was offering.

"Food!!! Good!!!" he squeaked and grabbed the meat, whose weight nearly toppled him.

"GOOD!!!" the four other brownies exclaimed, and immediately went to work tearing into the meat.

Hagrid carefully closed the door, shaking his head. "Some business, those," he said quietly.

"Brownies?" Harry said in amazement.

Hagrid nodded. "The Helluos family. They come visit once a year so I can show them to the class. They're fine as long as yeh keep them fed. But when they're hungry, they can be...well, unpleasant," he said with a frown.

Harry looked up at his friend. "What are they like?"

Hagrid shrugged. "Well, they live in family groups in forests, like the Forbidden Forest. And all they do is eat, from what I can see. And they've got magic, so you got ta watch em. Not like elves, or even goblins, mind yeh. Mostly just hexing magic. But as long as they're well fed, they can be awright. And they like dark caves and such. That's why I let them stay in the Arm-oo-ar."

Harry chuckled. "Must be pleasant."

Hagrid shrugged. "They're awright. I'll be showing 'em this week in class. Don't let their looks put yeh off," he said with a sigh. "But I know now I'd never want ta run an inn," he said with a chuckle.

Harry chuckled, as well, finishing his tea. He looked up fondly at his professor and friend. He began to think about how much fun it would be to tease Lavender Brown about 'her relatives, the Brownies.'

"Well, I best be getting back. Thanks for the tea, Hagrid," he said with a smile.

Hagrid smiled at Harry. "Give my regards to Hermione and Ron. I have seen yeh all down here together for a while. Be good to see yeh all down here soon, eh?"

It was then he realized this was the first time in nearly a week he felt a little better about himself, the first time he wasn't dwelling on Hermione and his humiliation from the library. His spirits sagged and his face fell as he let out a sigh. He walked up to Hagrid and gave him a quick hug.

"Yeah. See you, Hagrid."

Hagrid nodded and then turned to the armoire, which was now shaking again. "WATER!!!" came the squeak inside.

CHAPTER 19 Monday

The thunder rumbled ominously in the distance as Ron walked into the dorm room. "What the hell is wrong with you," Ron asked mildly as he sat on the edge of Harry's bed.

It had been nearly a week since the incident in the library, and Ron had noticed how miserable Harry was and Hermione's near total absence from the common room. He had figured that he would give them both time to work things out before intervening. Harry had missed every meal and, although Ron had noticed the remnants in the dorm from sandwiches that Harry had brought up from the kitchens, he was worried about Harry's physical, as well as mental, health. Ron, being Ron, let the gloom go on until he started to panic. That panic was only increased when Ginny began nagging him. When the nagging began to get loud on the fourth day of Harry's self-imposed exile, Ron finally resolved to act. It took him another day to put this resolve into action. But act he finally did.

Harry turned away from Ron. "Leave me alone."

Ron leaned back against one of the posts on Harry's four-poster bed. He sighed, using the post to scratch his back. "Hmmm, this is pretty comfortable right here. Since all I have to work on tonight is our history assignment, and Colin is doing that as payment for me beating him in wizard's chess, I guess I can stretch out here all night," he said casually. "Or at least until you tell me what's wrong." Ron started using the post to scratch the back of his shoulder.

Harry didn't stir.

Ron moved his neck back and forth, eliciting tiny creaks from neck joints. "You know, they had fresh ham and mashed potatoes for dinner tonight. Isn't that one of your favorites? Too bad you missed it."

Harry grunted, pulling the blanket over his head.

Ron sighed again and leaned back, lost in thought. His eyes suddenly widened and he got an evil grin. Then, recomposing his face into a serious mien, he took a deep breath.

Ron grabbed the blanket and ripped it off Harry's body. Harry started and looked up to see a furious Ron. "This is about Hermione, isn't it!!!" Ron screamed. "I know just what happened, you son-of-a-bitch!!! You screwed her and then walked away, leaving her broken hearted, didn't you!!! You filthy..."

Harry looked up at Ron in horror. Ron's face looked purple with rage. Harry tried scrambling back as his friend loomed over him with fists balled.

"No, Ron!!! I didn't do anything!!! I just kissed her!!! On the cheek...not even on the lips!!! I didn't know she hated me!!! I didn't know....!!! Is that what she's saying?!?"

Ron instantly calmed down and smiled. "So that's what this is all about," he said mildly.

Harry's eyes went wide as saucers. "Whaaa....???"

Ron smiled, contritely. "Well, you weren't saying anything when I just asked you as a friend, so I figured I'd try the fear of instant death, to see if that would work."

Harry's eyes narrowed angrily. He turned quickly to reach for his wand, but Ron's hand clamped on his wrist, twisting it until he had Harry's hand behind Harry's back in a wrist lock. Ron leaned over, putting his weight on Harry's back, pinning him.

"Harry, I'm your friend," he whispered in Harry's ear. "We can talk face-to-face as friends, or we

can talk like this. But we are going to talk. I'm tired of seeing you torturing yourself. I'm worried about you and Hermione. And, if this doesn't work, I'll grab you both by the ankles and dangle you out the window if I have to."

Harry grunted a couple times and then did something Ron didn't expect. He began to cry.

"Harry, mate. Are you all right?" Ron said, turning Harry around and grabbing him by the shoulders, holding him at arm's length, looking closely at his friend's miserable face.

Harry tried to recover, humiliated in front of his best friend. He sniffed a few more times and took a series of deep breaths. "She hates me, Ron. I've loved her forever and she hates me," he said, looking down, tears once again forming.

Ron continued to stare at Harry. "Tell me, Harry. Tell me what happened," he said soothingly.

Harry took several more deep breaths before returning to his normal breathing. "We were in the library ..." He paused.

Ron nodded. "You were in the library...then what?"

Harry continued to look down, not wanting to meet his friend's gaze. "I don't know...I just wanted to tell her I liked her." His chest was beginning to heave again but he brought it under control again. "So when she caught me staring at her, I told her she was pretty and how stupid I was for not noticing it before last year..."

Ron nodded again. "And then you kissed her...?"

Harry nodded miserably. He shrugged. "It was only a quick peck on the cheek...you know, something affectionate to show her I liked her...nothing passionate." He was breathing rapidly again.

"What happened then?"

For the first time, Harry looked up into Ron's eyes. "She acted like I slapped her," he said pleadingly. "She wouldn't look at me. She wouldn't talk to me. She didn't react at all." Tears were reforming in his eyes. "I asked to walk with her back here. But she refused. Even though the library was closing. She didn't want to be near me. I wasn't going to do anything to her. I just wanted to walk with her. Maybe just hold her hand. Like Hannah and Ernie. But she didn't want to be near me. She doesn't want to be near me now. She hates me."

Ron leaned back against the bed post again and looked up, blowing air out of his cheeks. "I'm sure she doesn't hate you, mate." He paused and pondered. "You know Hermione. She probably was just surprised. She's not the most spontaneous person in the world. She probably hadn't done her homework in girl-boy relationships and felt she hadn't researched enough to get the correct answer," he said with a faint smile.

Harry looked up at Ron. "This isn't funny, Ron," he said miserably.

"No it isn't, mate. What I'm saying is for you to give her some time."

Harry lowered his head and shook it sadly. "I don't know."

Ron leaned forward to look at Harry. "Listen, Harry. You're not the first guy to get hurt by a girl. And I'm sure it does hurt...a lot. But you're strong. The strongest guy I know. You'll get over it."

Harry again lowered his head and shook it. Then he shrugged. "After this, how can I take any kind of chance on someone. I've known Hermione as long as I've known you. We've been through so much together. We've talked together through all sorts of stuff. I thought I knew her. If she said thanks but no thanks, I would have been disappointed, but I would have been able to take it. But I never expected to be treated like I didn't even exist, that I was something not worth even looking

at." He began crying again.

Ron grunted, not knowing what to say. "Harry...?"

Harry looked up through his tears. "You don't understand. Thinking of her was the only thing that got me through the summer. All I could think about was her. All I could talk about was her. Here I was spending a lot of time with a really beautiful girl--Sara--and all I could do was talk about Hermione. I even risked our friendship over her when I wrote to you about the way I felt."

Harry took a deep breath. "Since the beginning of the term, since you guys picked me up to go to Diagon Alley, I've been trying to find a way, an opportunity to tell her I cared about her. I knew it was a long shot, and I was prepared for her to say she wasn't interested. Hell, I even told you that if she liked you that way, I could accept that. But I didn't expect her to turn around and hate me for it, to treat me like something she couldn't even look at. I didn't expect it to cost me her friendship."

"I know. But it's Hermione. She wouldn't go out of her way to hurt you. I'm sure that things will work out. But you can't spend the rest of your life up here in the dorms. Harry, it's time for you to return to the land of the living."

Harry sniffed. "But I can't face Hermione."

Ron looked serious at Harry. "Sure you can. Just tell her you're sorry you upset her and let it be. Things will work themselves out eventually."

"It's not just that...You don't understand. During the summer, I had so much fun. People liked me. Girls liked me. I felt like, I don't know. Like I was okay. For the first time, I felt like I was worth something to people. That I was important to them not just because of the scar, but because I was a good person. Then Hermione..." he began weeping again.

"Hey, mate. It's okay. You are worth something. Everyone who knows you thinks so. I think so. My whole family thinks so. Hell, you're as much a brother to me as Fred or George or Percy or Bill or Charlie. I mean it."

Harry looked up and grabbed Ron's arm and gave it a squeeze. He heaved a sigh. "But you don't understand. Everything I did or was during the summer was aimed toward being close to Hermione. If she didn't love me...okay. But she...I wasn't worth a response...I thought she cared. All that during the summer...it was all for nothing...all a delusion."

"Okay, Harry. If you want to be pig headed and feel sorry for yourself, fine. Maybe she'll come around. And if she doesn't, bugger her. You came back here smarter, stronger, funnier. You came back after this summer knowing that you'd kissed Sara and gotten kisses from all those other girls. You are special Harry. And it doesn't have anything to do with your fame or your battles with You-Know-Who. And you're special enough to be my best friend."

Harry gave a resigned shrug and wiped away the tears. "Thanks, Ron. You won't tell anyone about me...you know..."

Ron did a quick cross-your-heart movement. Then he very obviously peered over at Harry's alarm clock. "Harry, is that the time? I'm late for my weekly appointment with Rita Skeeter" and made to rise.

Harry looked blankly at Ron. Suddenly Ron's joke registered, and Harry burst into a fit of giggles and threw his pillow at Ron, who dodged it and settled back into the foot of Harry's bed. "See, there's life in the old boy, yet," he said with a smile

Harry lay back in the bed and stared blankly at the ceiling. He smiled ruefully. "Well, if nothing else, I found out when I went out running, I was so worn out when I went to bed that I would fall asleep immediately and not have any dreams...at least none that I remembered."

Ron looked seriously at Harry. "You know, you've got to get over that. You are not responsible for Cedric's death. Hell, if his family can accept that, if Cho can accept that, why can't you?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe I've got a screw loose."

Ron laughed. "Probably more than one, mate. Now look, it's early. Go wash your face and come down to the common room, will you? Your children are worried about you."

Harry's eyes widened. "Oh, my God! The first years! I've been so preoccupied, I forgot about them."

"So we'll have to add child neglect to your list of sins," Ron said with a grin.

Harry winced, remembering the past summer's problems with the Dursleys.

Ron's face fell as he realized his mistake, but Harry smiled again. "Thanks, Ron. Thanks for being the best friend I could ever hope for."

Ron blushed, but nodded his appreciation for Harry's remark.

Harry took a deep breath and headed for the boy's bathroom to prepare to face the world again.

CHAPTER 20 Tuesday

Ron had been right, Harry thought. He had been neglecting his children. Hermione had been no better, vanishing into the library or up in her dorm room, out of sight. In the three weeks leading up to the library fiasco, as Harry was now thinking of it, he had been a regular presence in the lives of the first years, sitting in with them in their little corner of the common room to answer questions and hear complaints. But the past week, the first years rarely saw him, and a few were a little resentful or upset.

No one was more upset than Samantha. She had come to look at Harry as the next best thing to her big brother Mickey. Harry might be a two or three years younger than Mickey, but he brought the same sympathetic ear to her concerns as her big brother and Harry's sudden absence in her life, even for just a week, worried her.

"Harry, are you all right?" she said with a sympathetic expression as Harry finally reappeared in the common room the night of his tearful conversation with Ron. "Ron said you were sick."

Harry gave her a wan smile. "I'm much better now," he said quietly. Then he noticed Cassandra also looking at him with anxious eyes. "Thank you for your concern, Samantha. And you too, Cassandra."

Samantha smiled. "It's all right, Harry. You can call me Sam. And you can call Cassandra Cassie."

Harry smiled back. "Well, Sam and Cassie. The dynamic duo," he said chuckling.

The two girls laughed, but he noticed that the laughter didn't reach Cassie's eyes. "So what have I missed? Any problems?"

Sam and Cassie shrugged. "Everything's okay, I guess," Sam said flatly.

Harry frowned. "No guessing allowed," he said in a firm but friendly manner. "If you've got any problems, let me know. Cassie?"

Cassie shrugged, noncommittally.

Harry became even more serious. "Listen. If there's something bothering you, either of you, I want to know. I'm not just a prefect, I'm your friend...or I hope I am."

Cassie shrugged again, but Sam turned serious now. "Boys can be real jerks, sometimes."

Harry leaned back. He almost smiled, but saw Cassie's frown deepen. "Has somebody been bothering you...either of you? One of the other first years?"

Cassie shook her head. "An older boy, from another house," she said with the first words he'd heard from her.

Harry started. "Not one of the Slytherins?" he said angrily.

Sam jumped in. "No. He's a Quidditch player from Ravenclaw. John Smith?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Smythe." He knew Smythe to be a tough fifth year beater with an arrogant attitude. "What's he been doing?" Harry said, his tone now low and deadly serious.

Sam leaned forward. "He keeps saying things to Cassie...about how he wants to get her alone to show her something. And he grabs her," she whispered.

Harry stared in shock. Cassie was eleven years old. How could a fifth year be so interested as to harass and intimidate such a young girl like that in so vulgar a manner. Harry's eyes clouded.

"Where does this usually happen?" he said in a growl.

Cassie looked up at Harry with a frightened look. But Sam was the first to speak. "In the dungeons. They have Defense Against the Dark Arts at the same time we have Potions. So he's usually there when we are."

Harry was absolutely furious. "Have you told any of the professors about this? McGonagall, maybe?"

The two girls shook their heads slowly. "We thought we would tell you first," Sam said.

Harry's eyes clouded. He made to rise, but reconsidered. It was now past curfew and he had no way of getting into Ravenclaw House. He could owl Terry Boot or Mandy Brocklehurst, the two Ravenclaw fifth year prefects, but at this hour, little would be accomplished other than getting himself caught out after curfew. And Terry was something of a blockhead, for all his intelligence, and would probably hem and haw. Mandy, on the other hand, at least showed some backbone in their few prefect meetings. He would wait until tomorrow morning.

He turned to the girls. "When is your Potions class?" he asked

"First thing in the morning, right after breakfast," Sam replied.

Harry nodded. He had Charms class two flights up before heading down to the dungeons for his Defense Against the Dark Arts class in the morning. "I'll get down there as soon as I can after your Potions class and try to have a word with Mr. Smythe. A very serious word," he said sternly.

* * *

The next day, he talked briefly to Professor Flitwick about leaving class early. Flitwick agreed reluctantly to allow Harry out five minutes early after Harry refused to tell him the specific reason for his early departure other than to say he had to check on something regarding his prefect duties. "I'll let you go only because I trust you, Mister Potter. But don't let this become a habit," the tiny professor said with a speculative eye.

So Harry was at the natural convergence point for Potions and DADA students when classes let out. But he didn't see Sam or Cassie, or Smythe, for that matter, at first. Then he heard Sam's voice.

"You get your hands off of her," she roared in a high-pitched voice.

Harry was on the move instantly. He saw Smythe in an alcove, where he had Cassie cornered with Sam pushing to get between the two. Suddenly he heard a smack and Smythe reeled back momentarily.

In an instant, Harry had a handful of Smythe's hair, yanking it back, with his wand jammed in the soft tissue under Smythe's chin. "If you as much as look at any of my first years again, Smythe, I'll quarter you and leave the pieces in Dumbledore's office," he growled.

Smythe tried to struggle, but Harry only jammed his wand deeper into Smythe's flesh. "Do you understand, you son-of-a-bitch?" he growled in a low voice, poking Smythe again with his wand.

"Freeze!!!" the students heard a gruff, accented voice command.

Harry, never taking his eyes off Smythe, growled again. "Not until this piece of shyte agrees to leave my girls alone.

"Let him go, Harry," Moody commanded again, this time in a calmer voice.

Harry shut his eyes. Then, with a quick movement, removed the wand from under Smythe's chin and slammed the boy into a wall. "You heard me, Smythe. I'll kill you if you ever touch any of them again," he growled.

By this time Moody had grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him away from Smythe, feeling a chill. "Now what in holy hell was that all about, Mister Potter."

But Sam had already grabbed Moody, herself. "You leave Harry alone!" she yelled. "He's just protecting us from that arsehole! That bastard's lucky I'm not a little stronger. I'd'a cut his balls off," she screamed.

By this time, a crowd had gathered. Cassie, who was in tears, slowly removed her wand and started to point it at Smythe. Mike Burwasher, who, along with his mate Steve Shaunessy, had returned to see what the commotion was about, quickly grabbed Cassie's arm and deflected the elementary hex she had tried to use on Smythe.

Amid the chaos, Mandy Brocklehurst came running to find out what the problem was with Terry Boot in her wake. She looked down at her stunned house mate. "John. What the hell have you done now?"

Moody, who had only seen Harry move against Smythe with unbelievable speed and fury, was at a loss. "All right, everybody. Get to your classrooms. Now!!!" he yelled as, by this time, the corridor was clogged with third year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs arriving for their Potions class, fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins arriving for their DADA classes, first year Gryffindors and Slytherins who had slowly returned to the dungeons after leaving Potions as had the fifth year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs who had just left their DADA classes.

"Get to your classrooms!!! NOW!!!" Moody yelled again, pulling out his wand threateningly. "Now you, Potter, and you two, Bauman and Young. Into my office now. And Boot. Help Smythe up and bring him along," he commanded. He turned to the rest of the students milling around in the hallways. "I said, get to your classrooms! DADA students, review your texts. I'll be along shortly!"

"But his nose is all bloody," Boot complained.

Moody rolled his normal eye. "Brocklehurst! Help Boot. And don't let Smythe bleed all over you."

* * *

"What in holy hell was that all about!!!" Moody roared when he got the six students into his office.

"He grabbed me," Cassie said in a small but determined voice. "We told Harry last night and he came to protect us," she said, a tear rolling down her cheek as she looked at Harry with reverence.

"That's not true..." a groggy Smythe muttered.

"It certainly is true, you sodding pervert," Sam screamed at him. "My brother Mickey would gut you like a herring..."

"Shut up, all of you!!!" Moody screamed, his magic eye seeming to spin in its socket. "Now...one at a time. Miss Young. What happened."

Cassie suddenly raised her chin and stared at the professor. "For the past week or so, that person..." she said, pointing to Smythe, "...has been saying things to me. Bad things. And trying to grab me a couple times down here in the dungeons. So last night, we told Harry," she said, smiling her protector. "And Harry said he would take care of the problem. And this morning, when this person..." again nodding at Smythe, "grabbed me and pulled me into the doorway, my friend Sam slapped him and then Harry came to rescue us." She gave a curt nod.

Moody turned to Smythe. "Mister Smythe?"

Smythe looked panicked. "I...just wanted to ask the girls something about Harry...you know, they're all in Gryffindor House...I don't understand what happened after that. I was beat up," he stammered.

Moody glared at Smythe. "And what would you be wanting to know about Harry that you couldn't

ask him direct?"

Smythe's panic seemed to increase. "Well...I...uh...wanted to know about their Quidditch team...you know...about when they planned to practice..."

Moody nodded. "And two first year girls would be able to tell you that...in a dark alcove, no less...that you couldn't discover by asking anyone else??"

Smythe shifted uncomfortably.

"Potter? What do you have to say?"

Harry was sunk down in a side chair, a furious expression on his face. He was quiet for a few moments. "Sam and Cassie told me last night that he'd been bothering them...making inappropriate comments...maybe even lewd ones. I should have known about this from the start, but I wasn't paying attention. I don't know why I should be a prefect, letting this go on without knowing about it." Then he turned and gave Moody an angry stare. "But nobody is going to mistreat my people. Nobody!"

Moody then looked up at Terry and Mandy. "Anything to add?"

Terry shrugged. "I don't know. I wasn't there. I didn't see anything."

Mandy gave Terry a dirty look and turned to Moody. "John has been having some problems in Ravenclaw with a couple of the girls. Nothing serious from what I can tell, but a few of the girls have been avoiding him lately. Nothing specific. At least I haven't heard anything specific."

Moody nodded, understanding too well. "All righty. This is something for the headmaster to handle. Boot? Brocklehurst? Please take Smythe up to the headmaster's office. I'll write you a note for Professor Dumbledore. And one for whosoever class you are now missing." He then turned to Sam and Cassie. "Miss Bauman. Miss Young. If you feel up to it, I'll write you a note to your professor for being late for class. However, if you wish to return to your quarters, I'll understand and write a note for that."

Sam and Cassie exchanged glances and nodded. "We'll go to class," Cassie said. "I like Professor Sprout," she said with a half smile.

Moody nodded. Then he turned to Harry. "Mister Potter. I admire what you did. But I think I would have handled it quite differently. I'd like a few words with you before we return to class."

With that, Moody wrote out the appropriate notes to give to Terry, Mandy, Sam and Cassie and dismissed them. "Paperwork," Moody muttered. "Bad as the Ministry."

When the door was closed, Moody turned to Harry. Suddenly, his face split into an evil-looking gap-toothed grin. "Yer damned right, I would have handled it differently. I'd'a killed the bugger."

Harry started and a smile slowly spread across his face. But the smile just as slowly faded. "I should have been there for them earlier," he said with a mournful smile. "I guess I was a bit preoccupied."

Moody gave Harry his version of a fatherly grin. "Girl trouble?"

Harry ruefully shook his head. "I guess so."

Moody began his cackling laugh again. "And what's with the mouth on the young gel, there. She swears like a fish-monger."

Harry chuckled mildly. "Well, she is a fisherman's daughter..."

Moody cackled again. "I'll nae be continuing the ditty that starts with that line."

Harry shook his head.

Moody nodded in understanding. "Listen, Potter. We've been going over some of your hexes together these past few weeks, but I never saw anyone move like you did out there. Where'd you pick that up? That's nothing you learned playing Quidditch and it ain't anything you learned from our private lessons."

Harry shrugged. "It's something I picked up over the summer. A Muggle thing. It's called karate."

Moody's eyebrows, such as they were, rose. "What discipline? Tae Kwan do? Hapkido?"

Harry shook his head. "No...no formal discipline. I'm learning on my own. One of my Muggle neighbors from this summer learned from a master in Hong Kong years ago and he gave me a basic training regimen and some guidance. Maybe some day I'll get a chance for some formal training. But right now, I just train for speed, agility and focus."

Moody nodded. "I know a couple aurors who might be able to help you. Ever think of becoming an auror?"

Harry shook his head. "Maybe if Voldemort is still out there...and I'm still around. Otherwise, I'd like to work with kids...like Sam and Cassie and the rest of my firsties. I'd like to be able to help Muggle-born witches and wizards adjust to this world."

Moody sighed and nodded. "Don't worry, Potter. I do believe that you will outlive Voldemort by a good long while. Well, we better gettin' to class. Tell you what. I'll write you a note if you write me one."

Harry chuckled as the two got up to go to DADA class together.

* * *

Harry, Sam and Cassie were called into Dumbledore's office at lunchtime and had a long chat over sandwiches with the headmaster. The aged headmaster was visibly shaken by Sam and Cassie's description of what had been going on. Finally, he dismissed the girls, but asked Harry to stay behind.

"Harry, this is an extremely unpleasant situation for all of us," he said solemnly. "We all appreciate your efforts to protect your young people."

Harry hung his head. "I deserve no credit. I should have known this was going on as soon as it started. I saw that Cassie was concerned about something over a week ago when I had lunch with my firsties. But I didn't press her on it. I'm a fool. And a bad friend to them," he said sadly.

Dumbledore sighed. "You did all you could. More than almost anyone. Thanks goodness nothing serious happened. I would never have forgiven myself."

Harry sighed, nodding his head in sorrow.

"Harry," Dumbledore said mildly. "You did right. But did you have to hurt him?"

Harry looked up. He didn't know what to say. "I suppose not. But I didn't exactly feel like mulling the issue over at the time. He was bothering one of my children. An innocent little girl. Someone I care about. And if someone does something like that to someone I love, I will not hesitate."

Dumbledore sighed again. "Harry, you have a great power. But uncontrolled, that power can be dangerous. I just don't want to see you hurt anyone. Or get hurt yourself."

Harry now felt ashamed. He hung his head. "I know Professor," he said quietly.

"Harry," the Headmaster said quietly. "If it is sin to get angry, there will be no one to talk to in heaven. All I am saying is do not let your anger rule you. Or push you to do things that will hurt others. You need only understand that."

Harry nodded again, his head still down.

Dumbledore smiled. "You did little to be ashamed of today. You acted in a way you thought was right. I would have done it differently. But do not dwell on it. Just remember, we are here, the Professors and I, to help where we can. Come to us next time."

Harry nodded.

"Very well, I will not keep you. There is much to be done today, for both of us, I am sure."

With that, Harry rose and left.

* * *

Harry's confrontation with Smythe had encouraged several of the younger girls from Ravenclaw to complain of Smythe's questionable behavior, often tearfully. Dumbledore shook his head. There but for the grace of God there were no molestations, no assaults, but Dumbledore felt it was in everybody's best interest that Smythe spend some time away before being considered for readmittance.

By suppertime, word of Harry's confrontation with Smythe had spread throughout the school. Several students, particularly from Ravenclaw, quietly thanked Harry for making a stand, including Padma Patil who, with her sister Parvati, gave Harry a kiss on the cheek. Even Millicent Bulstrode, one of the Slytherin fifth year prefects gave him a quick and strong handshake in the corridor outside the Great Hall before supper. Draco Malfoy, the other Slytherin fifth year prefect, said nothing as he passed which, by Harry's reckoning, was the Malfoy equivalent of a handshake.

Hermione, on the other hand, was tearful. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said quickly. "I should have been there for them. Thanks."

Harry just managed to get his own brief apology for whatever grief she was feeling over the library incident as she fled.

Harry was staring at Hermione's back as she scurried off when he felt a familiar arm over his shoulder. "Jeez, Harry. You always get to have all the fun," Ron said with a laugh. "To tell the truth, I would have killed the bastard had I known."

Harry turned to Ron. "Don't tell anyone, but Moody told me the same thing," he said with a crooked smile.

Ron leaned his head back and laughed. "Aye, thar's a man af't me own heart," he said in a reasonable impersonation of Moody's accent. "Now. let's see what new mischief your children have gotten themselves into."

The two friends walked off together.

CHAPTER 21 Wednesday

It had been raining for three days straight, and Harry was restless. It was a cold late September rain and on Monday when he had tried to run, he found himself slipping on the mud or the wet grass, falling twice before he was half way to the lake. Even Quidditch practice had been called off due to lightning.

Harry now understood, from the extraordinary emotional roller coaster he had ridden first during the summer and now in his first month at Hogwarts that running and exercise was more than just a physical outlet for him. It also served an emotional one, providing release from the frustrations and anger, the sorrow and the pain.

So he was used to physical activity. He didn't realize how much of release it provided him, how much he craved strenuous exertion until Hermione had broken his heart. That was why he had taken off running in shame. And he had continued to run every night; not a job or a fitness exercise but a hard, pounding, driving run both to blow off steam and to keep his distance from Hermione.

And now he also discovered that the harder he worked his body, the less chance he had of another nightmare. Less chance of seeing Cedric's lifeless, accusing eyes, and the ghostly pointing fingers of friends and acquaintances who haunted his sleep.

But now it was Wednesday. After three days of inactivity, he was not only restless. He was frightened. He had had his first nightmare in weeks last night after spending a sedentary evening sitting around doing homework and playing chess with Ron. Now he found himself tossing and turning in bed. It was after 1:00 am on this Wednesday night, and sleep was still elusive.

He slowly rose from his bed and wandered aimlessly into the boys' bathroom, then down to a deserted common room, where he sat down in front of the embers of a dying fire. But after a few minutes, he got up again and began pacing. But the restlessness and anxiety would not go away. Finally, he simply walked up to his dorm room, changed into a pair of running shorts, a tee-shirt and his running shoes and, grabbing a towel, made his way back to the common room.

He started by doing a series of stretching exercises to warm up, as his Muggle neighbor, Mr. Nichol, taught him. Harry held no illusions about his hobby. Early on in the summer, Voldemort visited him in a dream, showing him that, no matter how skilled the fighter, no matter how artful the move, no matter how fluid the motion, a quarter ounce of yew wood enclosing a Phoenix feather, an thirteen-and-a-half-inch piece of wood, would overcome such Muggle pretensions.

Harry awoke from that visit by Voldemort not with a pain in his head, but a cramp, and the realization in his heart that his new hobby was just that: a hobby. He would have to look elsewhere for answers to the Dark Lord.

He rose from the floor of the common room, his muscles now warm and limber, and began doing simple movements. Within a short time, he found that the warmth of the fireplace coupled with the fact that the tower had been closed up tight against the weather had caused a sheen of sweat to cover his body. He tossed aside his tee-shirt, began to go through a series of more elaborate and strenuous moves, including kicks and spins, both alone and in series.

He was in mid-air, doing a spinning kick when he noticed something move. He came down in a crouch, his body ready to defend against attack. But it was not an enemy or intruder. It was Parvati Patil sitting on the stairs, watching him wide-eyed. Parvati, cleansed of her makeup and newly awakened from her sleep, still looked very pretty in her pink and white pajamas, her long braid hung over her right shoulder.

He quickly grabbed his tee-shirt and donned it, blushing furiously.

Parvati was the first to speak. "Were you just dancing? I've never seen dancing like that," she said with a trace of wonder in her tone.

"Uh...no. It's called karate. It's a form of Muggle self-defense," he stammered.

Parvati was still wide-eyed. "But it looked like a dance...you know, a combination of...like...ballet and modern dance."

Harry just stood there, not knowing what to say.

Parvati shook her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you. I just get so dry when the weather's bad and we have to close all the windows. I just went to refill the water pitcher by my bed and heard something down here and came to check. And I saw you doing that. It was so beautiful."

Harry shrugged, holding his towel up to his chest.

Parvati suddenly broke into giggles. "Harry you don't have to try to hide. I won't bite. You look like some young virgin fearing she's about to be ravished."

Harry looked shocked, then began to giggle himself.

"Could you teach me some of that...you know, some of those moves?" she asked shyly.

Harry looked puzzled. "You want to learn karate? Self-defense stuff?"

"Well...I guess," she said tentatively. "I just thought maybe some of the kicks and pirouettes. I don't know what else you do for this ... karate?"

Harry nodded. "Sure. But why? Do you want to learn self-defense?"

Parvati sighed. "Well, given some of the trolls here at Hogwarts--the human kind, I mean--I suppose that might come in handy. But what I would really like to learn are some of the dance aspects of what you were doing. You were so graceful, but you also had such power and elevation. It was amazing," she said dreamily.

Harry shrugged and smiled. "Sure, if you'd like."

Parvati's face broke into a wide smile, showing her perfect teeth. She stood up. "Great! But first you have to turn around."

Harry gave her a puzzled look and obeyed.

"By the way, you've sure changed since last year," she said. "Okay, you can turn around now."

Harry turned around and stared. Parvati had transfigured her pink and white cotton pajamas into what looked to be a black leotard, covered by pink satin running shorts and a loose thin red jumper cinched at the waist by a loose black sash.

"Wha...what do you mean...I've changed?" he stammered.

She looked him up and down. "Harry, last year at the Yule Ball, you were basically and skinny, gangly boy. Sure you had some shoulders, probably from Quidditch, but the few times we danced I could tell you were basically a skinny boy."

Harry flushed at her frank assessment.

As she continued down the stairs, she continued. "Well, first of all, you're taller. What are you, five-foot-ten?"

Harry shrugged nervously.

"And you're cut like a dancer. Harry, you've grown some muscle. And it looks good," she said flirtatiously.

Now Harry was really blushing and getting a little uncomfortable. 'Was she trying to seduce me?' he thought.

"I don't know what you mean, cut?" he said nervously.

Parvati laughed. "You've got that young virgin look again. Don't worry, Harry. I promise I won't try to take advantage of you."

Her face took on a more serious tone and shrugged. "Being cut simply means you've got larger, more defined muscles. Not big like a weight lifter or anything, but long lean muscles. They look good on you."

Parvati was now on the floor, doing leg extensions, shifting into splits, to languid twists, then to additional extensions.

"You seem to know a lot about dancing," Harry ventured.

She looked up at him with a smile. "If there is one thing I love to do more than anything else in the world, it's dancing," she said, as she started to back arches and sending Harry's mind into a whirl. She finished and held her hand out for Harry to pull her up. She was surprisingly light and agile and Harry was a little disappointed that his pull didn't bring her up into his arms.

"Ever since I was little, all I wanted to do was be a dancer. I nagged my parents to send me to dancing school. But there weren't many decent dancing schools in the wizarding world, so I convinced them to send me to a Muggle school for a while."

"Padma also went to dancing school for a while, but she was so reserved that she really could never enjoy it like I did. So after a while she quit. And it caused a bit of a problem with just one of us going out among the Muggles, so eventually, my lessons ended. But I never lost my love for the dance."

Harry smiled in sympathy.

"No loss, I guess," Parvati said ruefully. "I'm getting a little big to be a real ballerina. I'm already five-foot-seven and that's pretty much beyond the pale. We wouldn't want one of our precious male dancers getting a rupture hoisting my carcass around the stage," she said with a laugh.

"I think you have a very nice figure," Harry said, admiring her willowy shape and blushing.

Parvati laughed and kissed Harry on the cheek. "You're pretty hot yourself," she said smiling. "But you were going to show me some moves."

* * *

Harry was amazed at how quickly Parvati picked up on some of the karate moves. But he had to laugh at how, where his moves were all speed and power, hers were all of style and grace. "Parvati, you're supposed to be fending off an attacker, not tickle him," he said with a laugh.

And Harry was amazed that she could not only do a side kick, but she could hold the elevation of her leg seemingly effortlessly. "Here, Harry. This is quarter to six," she said, raising her right leg parallel to the ground and holding it. "And this is ten of six."

Harry's eyes widened in amazement as Parvati seemed to bend slowly at the waist as her left leg rose higher and higher behind her.

"And this is five of six. And this is six o'clock," she said, holding her leg in a vertical split, her torso parallel to the ground with her head down, her braid nearly brushing the floor. Harry's jaw dropped. He had never seen anything like it. It was erotic, but he couldn't help but admire Parvati's athletic and aesthetic skills.

Then she tried showing Harry some basic ballet jumps and spins. He found himself actually enjoying himself. And the strain on his muscles made him forget any preconceptions of men in ballet.

It was well after 2:30 am when they both collapsed on the couch in front of the fireplace, exhausted.

Finally, Parvati turned to Harry. "That was fun. But Harry, why were you down here in the first place?"

Harry sighed. He didn't want to burden his new friend with his troubles, but Parvati persisted. Eventually, he gave her a brief description of his experiences at the TriWizard tournament and the nightmares and how wearing himself out before bed tended to keep the nightmares at bay.

She sighed and put her arm around his shoulder, pulling him close. They rested there for a while, with Harry nestled comfortably against her, but wondering if he should be doing something more.

Finally Parvati spoke. "Harry, what's with you and Hermione?"

Harry's mood darkened. "She doesn't like me," he said tentatively. "But at least we're talking again, sort of," he added quickly.

Parvati looked down at Harry. "Oh...I think you're wrong there. She's been absolutely miserable for the past few weeks. A royal pain--even more so than usual--if you ask me. And I'm sure it's over you."

Harry made a face as he watched the embers of the fire burn themselves out. "I doubt that," he said sullenly. "If she liked me, she wouldn't have...ignored me the way she has," he said with a pout, sinking deeper into the couch against her. "The only reason we're even talking is I ended up apologizing for trying to be nice to her...for telling her I kind of liked her."

Parvati waited patiently, anxious to hear more. But Harry simply stared off into space, and she didn't feel it would be wise to press him. She simply sighed. "Harry," she said softly. "Hermione may be a great one for academics, but she's one of the most immature girls I know when it comes to people, especially boys. Maybe it's because you and Ron are the only ones she treats as friends and she takes her cues from you two. And, between you and me, you aren't exactly the most worldly wizard out there. But you're a regular Gildroy Lockhart compared to your mate Ron."

Harry scowled at the mention of Lockhart and looked up at Parvati, who now had a faraway look in her eyes. They sat there for a long time, watching the dying fire. Finally Harry spoke. "You really like Ron, don't you?" he said quietly.

She gave a little shrug. "I thought I did. After all, he's grown so tall, and he's not bad to look at. And when we met on the train on the way here, he was so sweet. He told how nice I looked and how I seemed to have grown up over the summer. I thought he'd finally matured...maybe gotten over his shyness...that he would stop acting like an overgrown kid now," she said with a sigh.

She played absently with Harry's hair and continued. "And I always thought we might be a good fit. We've got so much in common. He's the youngest boy in a large and crazy family. Padma and I are the youngest children in a large and crazy family. He's Quidditch crazy, and I'm from a Quidditch crazy family," she said. "And a lot of that rubbed off on me. I'm one of the few girls I know who doesn't glaze over when Quidditch comes up."

Parvati then turned to Harry. "But the thing I most like about him is that he's a steadfast guy, someone who stuck by you and Hermione when the chips were down, even when his life was on the line. A girl likes it if she knows she can count on her man. I think Ron can be that kind of guy."

Now it was Harry's turn to sigh. "You know, Ron really does like you a lot," he said. "He just has trouble expressing himself."

Parvati shrugged. "Well, he better get over his trouble pretty soon," she said distantly. "I've already turned down a date with a perfectly nice boy from Ravenclaw waiting for Ron, but that's not going to happen many more times."

Harry nodded, surprised that he could be so comfortable with this girl who he never really knew before tonight. "I guess I know what you mean. I gave Hermione a try but got hurt really bad. You think she likes me? So does Ron. But I'm not going through that again. I'll just sit back and wait to see what happens."

Parvati gave Harry a poke in the ribs. "It must be past your bedtime. You're getting cranky and whiney."

The two giggled.

Then Parvati looked down at Harry with a serious expression. "I'll tell you what. You see what you can do with Ron, and I'll see what I can do with Hermione. Maybe it's meant to be. Maybe not. But the Yule Ball is coming up in a couple months. Things didn't exactly work out last year between us, but I suppose neither of us expected it to. But if we can't knock some sense into those two dopes in that time, what do you say we give it another try? You're not so bad, and bet you're a hell of a dancer if you put your mind to it," she said with a smile.

Harry looked up at Parvati. He smiled. There could be worse things in life than to end up with such a nice, straight-forward, uncomplicated girl. And such a pretty one. And one who could do a vertical split. Harry started laughing softly. "It's a date. And at least I can waltz."

CHAPTER 22 Thursday

It was a Thursday night and the weather hadn't improved. The heavy rains had passed, but the temperatures dropped. Harry debated running, but the cold and mud, coupled with the fact that he hadn't gotten a full night's sleep the night before, convinced him not to bother. So he concentrated on his homework. Fortunately, there was no tests scheduled for his Friday classes and, thankfully, no potions classes, so he was able to get everything out of the way early.

He looked around the common room to see what was going on. Ron, Dean and Seamus were playing a listless game of exploding snap, a game Harry was thoroughly bored with. Ginny and Rachel, her best friend among the Fourth Year girls, were working on Divination problems. Neville was huddled over a book with Moira Duffy, the spunky little fourth year who he'd taken a liking to. The Weasley twins were chatting up Angelina and Katie. The first years looked like they were studying...for a change. And Hermione was playing house ghost up in the library, as usual.

Harry walked over to Lavender, who was sitting crossways in an armchair, reading the features section of the latest Daily Prophet. "Where's your partner in crime?" Harry asked.

Lavender looked up and shrugged. "Knackered." She gestured to the girls' dorm.

"Sounds like a good idea," Harry said, stifling a yawn.

Lavender arched an eyebrow mischievously. "Thinking of joining her?"

"I didn't know that was an option," he said and they both laughed. "Good night, Brownie," he said as he walked away.

"Don't call me that," Lavender called out in an annoyed voice, throwing a section of the newspaper at him.

Harry turned and gave her a wink and went up to his dorm.

* * *

Harry woke with a start. He looked at the clock. It was 1:40 am. At least this time there were no dreams. Or at least none that he could remember. But for some reason, he thought he had been late to get up for classes and woke up in a panic. He'd been asleep for over four hours and now felt wide awake.

"Bloody hell," he muttered softly, although he had no doubt that, between Ron's and Neville's snoring, he could have shouted and not be heard by his roommates. Oh, well, he thought. Might just as well go down to the common room again and get in a little exercise. Last night was a pleasant experience, anyway. But he held out little hope for a repeat dancing lesson. He changed and went into the boys bathroom, then quietly crept down the stairs.

He was doing his warm-up stretches when he was startled by a head rising over the edge of the couch in front of the fire. It was Parvati.

Harry blinked in surprise. "Parvati, what are you doing up?"

She blinked a few times, then smiled a weak and groggy smile. "Hi, Harry," she said through a yawn. Then she blushed a little. "I just...well, I went to bed early, and woke up at about 12:30. I didn't feel like going back to sleep and...well...I don't know. I thought that...well...we had so much fun last night, I thought I'd come down here and see if I could catch you again. Instead, I guess you caught me."

Harry chuckled softly. "Actually, the same thing happened to me. I woke up about 15 minutes ago

and was wide awake. So I figured I'd come down here for another workout. I didn't expect to see you down here again, although..."

Parvati gave him a sweet smile. "Although...what?"

Harry smiled shyly. "Although I thought that might be nice."

Parvati stretched out on the couch, raising her arms above her head and arching to stretch her back left and right. "You know, I'm too comfortable here to do anything. Mind if I just watch?"

Harry chuckled. "I most certainly do mind. I've heard of those Witches' Warren clubs, where hot young wizards strip down to their wands for money. If I'm going to perform for you, I'll expect you to be dropping a galleon of two into my shorts," he said with a smirk, chuckling and shocking himself at his own boldness.

Parvati started giggling, which shortly turned to muffled laughter. "Harry Potter, Boy Gigolo!" she said, still laughing quietly. "What will they think of next."

Harry joined her soft laughter, and looked down at her fondly. "To tell the truth, I wasn't all that keen on working out as much as I wanted to kill some time before feeling sleepy again," he said with a shrug. "Say, feeling like getting something to eat?"

Parvati wiggled a little on the couch to stretch some more and looked up. "Sure, I could go for a dish of ice cream. Let's call room service," she said with a smirk.

"You really want some?"

Parvati looked at Harry with a puzzled expression. "Where are we going to get some ice cream at this time of night?"

Harry smiled. "From the kitchens, of course."

Parvati looked at him strangely. "The kitchens? Is that how the twins get the snacks for the Quidditch parties?"

Harry nodded.

"But Harry, it's...what time is it, anyway?"

"I don't know. About 2:00 am, probably a little after," he replied.

Parvati frowned. "But who's going to give us ice cream at this time of night? And how would we get down there? And how do we get in?"

Harry smiled again. "I've got friends in high places. And stay right there. I'll show you how we'll get there." Harry turned to go up to his dorm, but stopped and turned back to Parvati. "Oh, promise me you won't breath a word of this...anything I show you tonight. Okay?"

Parvati nodded, her eyes wide in curiosity.

Harry dashed up to his dorm and returned less than a minute later with his invisibility cloak. He was surprised that Parvati had transformed her pajamas into jeans, sneakers and a pullover sweater.

Parvati looked at him with a quizzical expression. "What's that, a cloak?"

Harry nodded. "First, promise again you won't breath a word of this to anyone...not even Lavender."

Parvati smiled. "You mean, 'especially Lavender,' don't you?"

Harry smiled a little guiltily and shrugged.

Parvati returned the smile. "Okay, I promise."

Harry swept the cloak over his head and around his shoulders, eliciting a gasp from Parvati.

"That's an invisibility cloak, isn't it? I'd heard that they existed, but I didn't know if I believed it. I guess I do now," she said with a chuckle.

Harry popped his head out of the cloak. "Come on. There's plenty of room for two." Parvati got off the couch and ducked under the cloak. Her close proximity had Harry's cheeks flush a little.

"Harry, are you sure no one can see us?"

"Sure. Come on. I'll show you."

Harry felt Parvati grab his arm as he walked her over to a corner of the common room where there was a full length mirror. "First thing you've got to remember when walking in this thing is to watch the hem in front. You don't want to step on it and trip."

But when they got to the mirror, Harry noticed that the hem no longer dragged on the ground in front of them. He'd obviously grown. Fortunately, it was still long enough to cover both of them completely.

"See?" Harry said.

"So nobody can see us?"

Harry paused. "Well, I think Mad Eye Moody can with his magic eye, but I don't think anyone else can. Nobody's caught us yet."

Parvati giggled. "I don't think I'll ever feel quite the same taking a shower knowing you're on the loose with this thing."

Harry turned to her with a shocked expression. "I would never even think of such a thing. By the way, did you know that you've got the cutest little mole on the back of..."

Parvati pinched him and started giggling.

* * *

Harry and Parvati quietly made their way out of Gryffindor Tower and, except for a brief detour when they heard the distant sounds of Filch stalking the halls, made it to the dungeons where the picture of the fruit basket hung. Harry tickled the pear, which giggled softly and opened the secret door.

Once in the kitchens, Harry removed the cloak. A nearby house elf bowed to them and disappeared with a pop. Moments later, Dobby popped in, wearing a pink tea cozy and what looked like an infant's checkered jumper in red and white with socks that were mauve and electric orange, respectively.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Dobby is so pleased that Harry Potter has come to visit his good friend Dobby! And he has brought his new lady to see Dobby! Dobby is very honored, Miss," Dobby said, smiling broadly and bowing several times.

Parvati started laughing and bowed gracefully. "Miss Parvati Patil is very pleased to meet Harry Potter's good friend Dobby. Very pleased indeed."

Dobby bowed several more times, smiling ecstatically. "How may we help you, Harry Potter and Miss Potty Pastel."

Harry smiled at Dobby. "It's Miss Parvati Patil, Dobby. Par-Va-Tee Pah-Till."

Dobby bowed several more times, still smiling. "Dobby is very sorry, Miss Parvati Patil. How may Dobby help you. We have plenty of pork chops, if that may please you."

Parvati, who was still giggling, smiled at Dobby. "Just a dish of ice cream, Dobby, if that is not too much trouble. Strawberry ice cream, if you have it."

Harry smiled. "I would like a dish of strawberry ice cream too, Dobby, if you don't mind."

Dobby beamed. "Yes, Harry Potter. Yes, Miss Parvati Patil," and Dobby winked out of sight.

Within moments, Dobby popped back with two dishes of strawberry ice cream as well as a full five gallon container of additional ice cream. Parvati laughed with delight and they thanked Dobby. "I am very pleased to see you are enjoying the socks I sent you," Harry said with a smile.

Dobby's eyes lit up. "Oh, yes, Harry Potter. Dobby loves the socks his good friend gives him." Dobby bowed several more times and vanished with a pop.

Parvati burst into laughter, leaning against Harry's shoulder. "Harry Potter sure has an eye for fashion statements."

Harry chuckled. "Dobby likes bright colors and, as his fashion consultant, I aim to please."

The two settled in enjoy their ice cream, chatting amiably about their classes and about house gossip. Once they had finished and thanked and bid a farewell to Dobby, the pair donned Harry's invisibility cloak and reentered the corridor. Harry was surprised, pleasantly, that Parvati put her arm around his waist, and her returned the gesture, as they made their way back up to the Gryffindor tower.

Having arrived without incident, except in dealing with a grumpy fat lady at the entranceway who didn't appreciate being awakened 'at ungodly hours by students who should know better,' they sat down together on the couch in front of the fire.

Parvati swiveled to lie down on the couch and shifted her legs to lay across Harry's lap. She smiled up at him.

"You know, Harry. I had a lot of fun last night, dancing and learning those...karate moves. I came down here tonight hoping to see you again, but not really expecting to. But tonight was even more fun. You are just full of surprises, aren't you."

Harry smiled down at her and shrugged. "You're pretty surprising yourself."

Parvati looked up with an appraising smile this time. "No, Harry, you are the surprising one. I've seen you enjoy the Quidditch matches and have some fun here or there. But mostly I see you serious or brooding...some sort of Peter Waring of Hogwarts. I had no idea you could be so much fun. And I had no idea you were so easy to be with."

Harry didn't know how to respond. "Who's Peter Waring?" he asked idly, as he played with Parvati's sneakers and cast his own appraising glance at her.

Suddenly, she flushed. "Oh, I can't believe I told you that," she shrieked, burying her face in the couch's throw pillows, blushing and giggling.

He smiled at her. "No, really. Who is Peter Waring?"

"Peter Waring is the brooding but sexy auror who is always saving Tamara Trueheart from dark wizards or evil goblins at the end of each of the Tamara Trueheart romance novels," she said as she peeked out from between the cushions.

Harry let go a quiet but hearty laugh. "So he always gets his witch in the end?" he say with sparkling eyes.

"Oh, no," Parvati said, looking up. "That would end the series. No. He and Tamara share a brief, smoldering kiss, and then he has to rush off to save someone else in distress, leaving Tamara happy, but wanting more."

Harry was breathless in mirth. "No. Don't tell me. You're Tamara Trueheart."

Parvati laughed. "No. Lavender is always Tamara Trueheart. I am Darla O'Brien."

"And who is Darla O'Brien?" he asked with a devilish grin.

Parvati was smiling with glittering eyes. "Darla is the glamorous young witch who works for Morgana House, the fashion empire. She is always saving the company from unscrupulous competitors, smugglers, gangster wizards and the like in the Darla O'Brien Romance series."

"But no Peter Waring?"

"No...Darla is secretly in love with Jack Morgana, the young and sexy wizard who is the head of the company. Of course, he is forever grateful to Darla for saving his firm. But he is under the thumb of his domineering father, who owns the company and wants Jack to marry the daughter of his chief rival to help affect a merger. So Jack flirts with her but never can bring himself to tell her his true feelings."

"And who gets to be Jack Morgana?" Harry asked in a teasing voice.

Parvati pouted. "I used to think Ron could be Jack. But maybe he really is Wesley Stoaat."

"Wesley Stoaat?"

Parvati sighed. "He's the bumbling fashion editor of the Witches Wear Weekly who is always trying to win Darla's love, but is never there when she needs help...I swear, Harry Potter, your Muggle upbringing has left you no appreciation for fine literature."

The two shared a hearty laugh.

Harry had by now removed Parvati's sneakers and was absently massaging her feet.

Suddenly, he felt her shiver.

"Are you okay?"

Parvati seemed to be breathing a little faster as the two stared at each other. She sat up and pulled her feet off Harry's lap. "Uhh...Harry. I think I better be getting to bed. It's kinda late."

Harry nodded, a little disappointed. "You're right. It must be getting close to 4:00 am." He got up as soon as she did and reached over the couch to grab his towel and his invisibility cloak as she quickly skirted around him to go to the stairs to the girls' dorms. He started towards the stairs to the boys' dorms and looked up at her and smiled. Parvati stopped and turned. She then stepped off the stairs, her face flushed, and ran over to give him a quick, but tight, hug. "Good night, Harry. Maybe we can do this again...soon." She then scurried back up the stairs and out of sight.

This time it was Harry who felt a shiver and a quickening of his breathing. 'Wow, that was nice,' he thought and turned to the stairs to his dorm.

CHAPTER 23 Friday

Sleep had not come easy to Harry last night. So he was a little groggy when he woke up on Friday morning. Suddenly, the events of the past two nights came crashing into his mind. And he didn't like the images that were forming. All he seemed to see was Parvati. Her lovely face, her laugh, the fierce look of concentration as he taught her karate spins and kicks. And, most of all, the vulnerable, almost desperate, look on her face when she hugged him before retiring last night.

The images scared him. Then he looked over at Ron, who was groggily assembling his toiletries before heading to the showers.

Harry got up and strode over to his best friend. "Ron, we've got to talk."

Ron waved him away listlessly. "No talk. Shower," he grunted, his eyes barely open.

Harry took a deep breath. "Go. Take your shower. Then we'll talk."

Harry followed Ron into the boys' bathroom and took a cold shower to wake himself up and cool his imagination. He had to talk to Ron as soon as possible. He had to get him to act on Parvati before it was too late. He had already risked Ron's friendship by confessing to him that he had feelings for Hermione during the summer. It took three weeks and several owls before Ron had responded to Harry's original confession, and Harry had been in agony for the entire time. So now he couldn't do anything with Parvati. Not with Ron liking her. That would be the last straw. He couldn't betray his friend like that.

Harry was already in the dorm and dressed when Ron sauntered in wearing a blue hand-me-down terrycloth bathrobe that he'd already outgrown last year.

Harry walked over to Ron's bed and sat down as his friend started to dress. "Ron. You've got to ask Parvati out and you've got to do it quick."

Ron lifted his head and gave Harry an unfocused stare. "Whaaat?" he asked absently.

Harry took a couple deep breaths. "Look, you know those nightmares I've been having?"

Ron nodded, looking a little more focused.

"Well, I haven't been having any lately. Not since I've been running. I've been wearing myself out and have gone out like a light as soon as I hit the pillows. I sleep right through the night."

Ron nodded. "Good." Then he looked at Harry and shrugged. "I thought that running stuff was some Muggle thing you picked up during the summer. You know, like a disease."

Harry gave a wry smile. "No."

Ron was now dressed except for his robes. He shrugged again. "So?"

Harry sighed. "Look, I had another nightmare on Tuesday night."

"Yeah?" Ron said with some concern, unconsciously touching his forehead.

"No, not one of those dreams." Harry looked down at his feet. "Woke me up in the middle of the night. And I couldn't get back to sleep. So Wednesday night, I couldn't sleep again and just got up and wandered around the tower for a while. I couldn't run that night, so I was restless."

Ron nodded.

"So I put on my gym shorts and a tee-shirt and went down to try a workout. I thought I might wear myself out so I could sleep."

"Okay," Ron said uncertainly.

Harry paused, trying to think how best to tell the story. He shrugged. "I guess I woke up Parvati. She came down and thought I was dancing by myself."

Ron snorted and tried to stifle a chuckle.

"Don't laugh, you prat. Did you know she was a dancer?"

Ron's face took on a new interest.

Harry nodded. "She loves to dance. So I showed her some of my karate moves, you know, the kicks and spins I showed you."

Ron's face took on a concerned look. "And..."

Harry gave a small shrug. "She showed me some dance moves. It was fun. Then we talked."

Ron frowned. "Let me get this straight. You and Parvati were dancing around in the dark alone in your underwear," he growled.

Harry leaned back, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, Ron. Oh...and she's great in the sack." He gave his friend a playful smack on the shoulder, but Ron continued to scowl.

"Listen you stupid prat. We danced and did kicks and stuff for a while. Then we talked."

Ron's face remained cloudy. "About what?"

Harry leaned in. "About Hermione and me. And about you and her."

Ron blinked a few times, a look of panic crossing his face. "You talked to her about me?"

"Yes, Ron. We talked about you. She told me she liked you. But she said she was tired of waiting for you to do something. She actually turned down a date because she was hoping you would ask her out."

Ron's eyes widened. "She said that?"

"Yes, Ron. But she also said that it wouldn't happen again. She's pretty and popular. But she hasn't gone out on a date since the beginning of the term, waiting for you. That's probably as long as she's gone without a date since she hit puberty. And she's not going to wait any longer."

Ron was upset and restless. He got up and put his robe on, and started pacing. "I don't know what to do...what to say to her. I don't know..."

Harry grabbed his friend and pulled him down on the bed. Putting his face in Ron's face, he lowered his voice. "It's a Hogsmeade weekend starting tonight. Just go up to her at breakfast and tell her she looks nice and ask her to go to dinner at the Three Broomsticks...or wherever. And make it clear that you'd like it to be just the two of you. And don't look to me or Hermione to be a chaperone. Just the two of you."

"At breakfast? With everybody around?" Ron whined.

Harry rolled his eyes again. "No. Go up to Dumbledore's podium do a *sonorus* charm and simply announce it to everyone in the hall." Harry snacked Ron playfully on the back of head.

Ron shuffled his feet. "Gee, I don't know...It's awful sudden."

Harry blew a deep breath out. "Yea, Ron. It's only been about a month. I've seen glaciers move faster than you."

Harry grabbed Ron's arm. "Listen, I talked to her. She was really nice. And interesting to talk to. And the one of the prettiest girls in the school. And she actually likes Quidditch."

Ron nodded absently.

Harry's eyes took on an evil gleam. "Oh...and Ron. While she was dancing and showing me ballet moves, she showed me that she could do a split."

Ron's head jerked up and he turned to Harry. "A ...a..split?" he stammered.

"Yes," Harry said with a gleam in his eye. "And not just any split. A vertical split."

Ron looked puzzled.

"You know, where a girl is standing straight up and lifts one leg up until she's standing on one leg and the other leg is pointing straight at the ceiling."

Ron's gulped, his eyes like saucers.

"Go get her, big boy. Before she does her split for some other guy," Harry said with a wink.

Harry got up and walked out of the dorm with Ron still pondering the wonders of ballet.

* * *

Evening

* * *

Harry sighed when he found that Hermione wasn't in the common room. It was the first Hogsmeade weekend. And it was her birthday. He shook his head. He hoped at least that she was doing something pleasant. Not up in the library again. Hiding. He gave Lavender the book of wizarding poetry he bought Hermione as a birthday present to put on Hermione's bed when she came back. And he left for Hogsmeade.

Harry spent the evening listlessly wandering around Hogsmeade, waving or nodding at friends but declining to join them. He paid his respects at Zonko's but didn't buy anything. He did buy a large sack of candy at Honeydukes just to have some in stock at the dorm to share with Ron and the firsties.

But mostly, he wandered, thinking. Ron had taken the plunge and Parvati agreed to go out with him. Harry felt a little jealous, but in his heart, he was rooting for his friends to take to each other. It would be nice to see Ron happy, even if he and Hermione weren't.

Eventually, he called it an early evening and wandered back to Hogwarts.

It was only a little past 11:00 when Ron came in, a sour expression on his face.

Harry jumped up to greet him. "How did it go?" he asked, full of hope.

Ron scowled at Harry. "Horribly," he said and flopped in his bed.

"What?" Harry was dumbfounded. "What happened?"

Ron turned to face away from Harry, sulking. "I thought you said she was nice," he muttered.

Harry walked to the other side of Ron's bed. "Of course she's nice. Ron, what happened?"

Ron turned away from Harry again. "She's stupid."

Harry leaned against the one of Ron's bedposts. "Ron, she's not stupid. She's not as smart as Hermione, I'll grant you. But she was interesting and fun to talk to when I was with her."

"Well, if she's so great, why don't you go out with her," Ron sulked.

Harry felt his heart flutter, but he shrugged it off.

"No. You're going to tell me what happened."

Ron was quiet for a while. Finally, he began to talk. "You said she liked Quidditch. She doesn't know anything about Quidditch."

"What? She's got four brothers who are as Quidditch crazy as you are. She even told me she goes to matches here just to enjoy the match, even when Gryffindor isn't playing. How many girls who don't actually play do you think do that?"

Ron sniffed. "She said that the Chudley Cannons are permanently second-tier. She said they would have a better record if they called in forfeits. And she laughed at them."

Harry banged his head against Ron's bedpost a couple times in exasperation. "You broke up over the Chudley Cannons? Ron, was she wrong about the Cannons?"

Ron turned to face Harry angrily. "Don't you start!" he snapped.

Harry shook his head. "Ron, when was the last time the Cannons were in the first tier?"

Ron snapped his head toward Harry. "In 1984! They were in third place in the league in 1983 and would have been in the Quidditch Association finals if it wasn't for lousy refereeing in that game."

"And you were how old at the time? Three? Four?"

Ron shifted in bed again, sulkily. "She also insulted me," he grunted.

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. "What did she say, Ron," Harry said, a note of concern in his voice.

Ron turned on his side, an upset expression on his face. "I unbuttoned my robe because it was hot in the Three Broomsticks. She saw my jumper and told me I shouldn't wear orange. She told me it looked terrible on me. That orange was awful for me."

Harry made an exaggerated roll of his eyes. "Ron, you git. She's right. Orange is a horrible color for you with your freckles and red hair."

Ron shifted to look Harry square in the face. "Now you're doing it. Orange is my favorite color. It makes a statement."

Harry started to chuckle. "You always say that. And you know my response."

Ron turned away petulantly.

"It makes you look like..." Harry prompted.

"...a pumpkin. But I don't care. I like orange. And it's one thing for you to tease me, but quite another for a total stranger to insult me."

Harry threw his hands in the air. "Didn't you at least talk to her about her interests? Didn't you at least tell her she looked nice? Or ask her about her family? Or her dancing? Or anything like that?"

"She knows I think she's pretty. I told her on the Hogwarts Express just last month. Why did she think I wanted to go out with her? Because she was ugly?"

Harry snapped his head around. "Ron, that's a horrible thing to say. Is that the only reason you went out with her? Because she's pretty? Doesn't liking a girl have anything to do with going out? If pretty is all you're interested in, maybe you should date Draco Malfoy. He's got a pretty face."

"Go to hell," Ron muttered. "You just said I should have told her she was pretty."

"You don't get it, do you, Ron," Harry said in frustration. "Girls need reassurance that the boy they're with appreciates their efforts to look nice. But they also want to know that you like them for themselves, not just how they look. And a part of that is being able to listen to what they are interested in as well as telling them what you're interested in. Didn't you ask her about her interests? About her family? Her dancing?"

Ron grunted. "You said she was interested in Quidditch, so I talked about Quidditch. I wasn't going to ask her about dancing. I don't like dancing. I'm not interested in dancing. Why should I talk about dancing?"

Harry was beginning to get annoyed with Ron. "Maybe someday when you're old and gray and haven't had a date in about 50 years, you'll start to realize that talking with a girl means more than just talking about what you like. Can you imagine what would happen if you went out on a date with Hermione and all she talked about were Goblin Rebellions? Boy, wouldn't that be fun."

"I don't want to talk about it any more. I just want to go to sleep," Ron said in a sulk.

Harry sighed. He didn't know what else to say. He knew his friend was too upset and annoyed for anything more to be accomplished that night. Well, maybe over the course of the next few days, he could give Ron a few of the 'charm school' lessons he'd learned during the summer from Sara.

"Ron, try not to go to sleep in your robes. Not unless your anti-wrinkle charm has improved over the past few weeks," Harry said as he got dressed for bed.

Ron grunted. "Sorry for messing up about Parvati, and being such a prat," he said in a small voice.

Harry smiled. "No problem, Ron."

Ron started undressing.

Harry got under the covers. "Oh, and Ron..."

"What, Harry?"

"Orange really isn't your color."

"Go to hell, Potter," Ron said chuckling.

* * *

Night

* * *

"Harry?"

Harry wasn't sure that the dreamlike voice was real. His mind was struggling just beyond consciousness when he heard it again.

"Harry? Are you awake?" came the urgent whispered voice.

Harry's eyes fluttered. He could just make out the worried large almond-shaped brown eyes staring into his.

"Parvati?"

She was dressed in her pajamas and a quilted dressing gown. "I waited for you downstairs, but you didn't come. Can you come downstairs?"

Parvati was now looking nervously around, knowing she wasn't supposed to be in the boys' dorms.

Harry nodded quickly and rose to a sitting position, grabbing his glasses. Parvati was tiptoeing out of the dorm. He looked himself over and satisfied he was reasonably presentable, given the hour--it

was 2:45--and the fact that he was in his pajamas. He grabbed his cotton dressing gown and slippers and made his way downstairs.

Parvati was sitting on the same couch as the night before. And she was clearly upset.

"Parvati, do you know what time it is?"

She nodded. "I was hoping you would come down tonight. I needed someone to talk to," she said in a tiny voice. She took a deep breath. "But after about two hours, I figured you weren't going to, so I went up there to get you."

Harry came over to the couch and sat at the opposite end and watched her. She continued to stare sadly into the embers of the fireplace. "I put a couple more logs on the fire, but they're just about burned down by now."

Harry continued to watch her. After a couple minutes of silence, he spoke. "This is about Ron, isn't it."

She nodded slowly.

"It was pretty bad, then?"

She nodded again.

"How bad?"

She turned to him with sad eyes. "He was boorish and inconsiderate," she said and turned back to the fire.

"He was scared, Parvati. He was unsure of how to handle himself," Harry said soothingly. "He's not always like that. He's a really nice guy."

Parvati gave what sounded like a cough. "Boorish or inconsiderate I can handle," she said listlessly. She turned to look at Harry. "Don't take this the wrong way, Harry, but boys can be trained to act almost like human beings."

Harry chuckled. "And pigs can be trained to fly."

Parvati joined his chuckling. "Well, they can be charmed to fly...if the witch is charming enough," she said, batting her eyes playfully.

But the smile quickly faded and she turned back to the fire. "It's not just that," she said with a sigh. "He was boring. I don't know if someone can be cured of that."

Harry looked at her in surprise. "Ron is anything but boring. He and I have been through a lot together. He's got a lot to talk about. That and his family, and he could probably have enough stories for a dozen dates."

Parvati turned again to Harry. "That's just it. He won't. He only wants to talk about what he's interested in. I mean, I like Quidditch, but enough is enough. I ended up resorting to conversation stoppers and still he wouldn't shut up."

It was Harry's turn to sigh and stare into the fireplace. "Like I said, he was nervous and didn't know how to act. I'm trying to work on that with him. Give him a chance and next time he'll be better. He'll be another successful graduate of the Harry Potter Charm School," he said with a hopeful look.

Parvati sighed. "There isn't going to be a next time, Harry," she said quietly.

Harry's face fell. He felt sorry for Ron. Here was a really nice young girl, and a pretty one, too. And Harry had pushed her at Ron and it failed. He had failed.

"Ron is at an awkward age," he said in a murmur. "Maybe down the road, he'll find his stride."

"Harry, you're our age, and you're not awkward," she said tentatively.

Harry smiled to himself. "Just give me a chance...I'll show you my two left feet."

Parvati chuckled. "I don't think so."

The two sat there for a while in silence. Finally, Parvati spoke. "What happened between you and Hermione?"

Harry stirred uncomfortably at the sudden shift in the conversation. "I don't know..."

Parvati turned to him. "No, what actually happened?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess I was a little too forward."

Parvati now looked at him with a more serious look. "What did you do to her?"

Harry began to squirm. "Look, I really don't want to talk about it, okay?"

Parvati gazed intently at him. "No, it's not okay. What did you do to her?"

Harry continued to stare into the fire.

"Look Harry, we're friends. At least I hope we're friends. And friends help each other. I know you tried to help me with Ron. And I don't hold you responsible for what happened tonight. You were trying to help Ron and me. Maybe I can help you and Hermione. Now tell me. What did you do to Hermione?"

Harry shifted again. "I kissed her," he said in a faraway voice.

Parvati started. "You kissed her," she said in a flat voice.

Harry nodded.

Parvati turned back to the fireplace with a puzzled expression on her face. "That doesn't make sense to me. Tell me exactly what happened. Did you corner her or something, grab her, make a pass or something?"

Harry shrugged. "No, nothing like that."

Parvati looked at him again. She moved over on the couch and took his hand. "Harry. Tell me exactly what happened. And start from the beginning. Maybe we can repair the damage."

Harry looked down. He took a deep breath. "Well, last year, as we got off the Hogwarts Express at the end of the year, I turned to say goodbye to her, and she reached up and kissed me on the cheek," he said taking another deep breath. "I thought about that kiss all summer long. I had some really bad times this summer and that kiss helped me get through everything."

Parvati was now looking into his eyes. "And what happened?"

Harry looked away uncomfortably and took another deep breath. "All summer long I tried to think of a good way to show her that I liked her...you know, like a girlfriend. But I couldn't figure out how. But this girl I met in the neighborhood...she was much older and more experienced...told me that a good boyfriend should surprise and delight his lady with an unexpected compliment."

Parvati chuckled. "I read that same thing in an article in Teen Witch Weekly. But what about the kiss?"

Harry leaned back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. "Well, we were in the library studying together and it was about closing time. So I started packing up and turned to Hermione. She looked so cute, sitting there concentrating on her studies. I guess I was staring and she caught me. She

asked me what was wrong. And Sara's words came to me. 'An unexpected compliment.' So I told her I was sorry that I hadn't noticed how pretty she was until the Yule Ball last year. I got up to leave, but she didn't react. I thought maybe it didn't register. So I bent down and kissed her on the cheek."

Parvati was staring at him. "Oh, Harry! That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard. What did she do?"

Harry fought to contain the tears that were beginning to form in his eyes. "Nothing. I asked her if she wanted to walk back to the Tower with me. She refused. Said she had other things to do." Suddenly, like a dam breaking, the tears began to flow. "Oh, Parvati. She wouldn't even look at me. It was like I wasn't even there. Or like I was some horrible creature that she couldn't bear to look at. I don't know. She's hasn't really spoken to me since."

Parvati now had a horrified look on her face. "That's it? That's it?"

Harry nodded miserably.

"That bitch!!! Here I was thinking something horrible happened between you two, that you'd done something horrible to her and were doing some sort of adolescent boy penance for your sins. Instead, you did the sweetest thing I've ever heard a boy do for a girl and...and she treats you like that?"

Harry started to get panicky. "Please Parvati, don't do anything," he said in a rush. "Ron thinks she maybe feels confused, or scared, or embarrassed about the whole thing, or is sorting out her feelings...or something."

Parvati's face was livid. "Bugger Hermione's feelings!!!" she exclaimed. "And while we're at it, bugger Hermione!!!"

Harry was shocked at Parvati's outburst, and felt his panic rise. "Parvati, he whispered urgently. "You'll wake the whole house!"

Parvati stared at him with a furious expression. "So what if we do?"

Harry was in a full-blown panic. "But...but..."

Parvati grabbed him by the shoulders. " 'But..but..' nothing! What about your feelings, Harry? You've been wandering around like the walking dead for what, a month?"

Harry hung his head. "Ten days," he choked out.

"And all this time, while she's wandering around sorting out her 'feelings,' she's left you out there hanging!" she said angrily. "You don't do that to any boy...unless his committed some sort of unforgivable act...I wouldn't do that to that pest Colin Creevey, much less somebody as nice as you!"

"Don't say anything. I don't want to be hurt any more, for her to be hurt any more," he managed to choke out.

Parvati grabbed Harry and pulled him into her arms, letting him cry on her shoulder, stroking his hair. "Harry, I won't do anything or say anything, but only because you asked me not to. But if I had my way, that story would be a flea in the ear of every witch at Hogwarts inside of 24 hours!"

Harry managed to get control of himself. Parvati pulled him up to arm's length and looked him in the eyes. "Harry, you did nothing wrong. In fact, from what I can see, you did everything right. So I'm going to tell you this for your own good. Forget Hermione. She doesn't deserve you. No witch who does that to a boy deserves to have him as a boyfriend...or a friend. Forget her."

Harry hung his head, ashamed for being so weak. He rarely cried, and only when he was alone. Of all his friends at Hogwarts, only Ron had seen him weep. He knew he could trust Ron and that Ron

understood. But now he was doing it in front of Parvati. And she seemed to understand, he thought. And just by being there with him, getting him to talk about it, she was helping him through his pain. Somehow, this young witch who he had always thought of as a silly young girl was easing his burden, helping to make the pain go away.

'Maybe she's right,' Harry thought. He couldn't bring himself to hate Hermione. Or even be angry with her. But he felt a sense of loss, a huge sense of disappointment. He realized that he had invested four years of emotion in Hermione, and had spent the last eight months doing little else but think of her--as a potential girlfriend, as a romantic partner. But he began to realize that not all hopes are realized and not all dreams come true. It was time to move on. He let out a big sigh and slowly relaxed on Parvati's shoulder.

Parvati, sensing the wave had crested, poked him. "Come on, Harry. You're probably the most eligible young wizard in all of Hogwarts. Don't let this get you down."

Harry shook his head and shrugged. "That's the problem. There are probably a lot of girls who are interested in 'The Boy Who Lived.' But they just see the scar. To me, it's something that happened to me as a baby. I didn't have anything to do with it. I don't even remember it. All I want is for somebody, for once, to care about me. Not 'The Boy Who Lived,' but 'just Harry.'"

Parvati, who was now breathing hard, grabbed him and turned him to look him in the eyes. "Look, Mister Harry Potter. I had a big crush on 'The Boy Who Lived' and was delighted to be his date at the Yule Ball last year. You know something? That 'Boy Who Lived' turned out to be a real prat. But recently, I met 'just Harry,' and you know what? He seems to be a wonderful guy. So don't you worry."

Harry found he was rapidly calming down and relaxing now. Parvati had managed to have such a nice effect on him. His heartache over Hermione now seemed less painful. It was like she had wrung him out until there was hardly any hurt left.

In the meantime, Parvati sat back, deep in thought. "Hmmm...who should we set you up with..."

Harry began to squirm uncomfortably, and Parvati gave him a playful swat. "Oh, hush up and sit still. We're only deciding your entire future."

"Hmmm...", she continued to ponder. She turned to Harry. "You know, Katie Bell would be just right for you, except she's too old and she's seeing Fred...or is it George."

Harry looked up. "She and George are a couple?"

Parvati rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You boys are so thick. They are a couple whenever she can pry him loose from that brother of his and can get him to sit still long enough for a snog. Harry, you're just going to have to learn to pay attention to these things," she said in mock exasperation.

She went back to her musings. "Susan Bones from Hufflepuff is cute, but I think she's a little flaky. She's a brooder and you don't need a brooding woman, do you, Peter Waring?" she said, teasingly.

Parvati had, by now, put her arm companionably around Harry's shoulder and had pulled him against her. "You know who would be perfect for you...?"

"Millicent Bulstrode..." he offered jokingly.

Parvati threw back her head in laughter. "Harry, she's a lot of woman," she said chuckling. "There'd be nothing left of you but a grease spot after your first snogging session."

The two sat chuckling together.

"No," Parvati said, catching her breath. "Actually, Hannah Abbott would be perfect for you. She's very pretty and sweet and warm and loyal...everything I hate in a woman," she said with a giggle.

"But she's seeing Ernie MacMillan. And she's not the type of girl to toss aside a nice boy when she sees another one she likes. Not even for you, Harry. Too bad, though," she said thoughtfully. "But I'll keep my eyes open for you in case something happens between them."

Harry was now thinking. "How about Ginny Weasley?" he offered.

Parvati looked at Harry, her face now becoming serious. "Do you like her, Harry?"

He shrugged. "She's very sweet. And she's had a crush on me forever."

Parvati continued to shake her head. "She's absolutely the wrong kind of person for you, Harry. At least right now, anyway," she said with a sigh. "She's very young, Harry. Not just because she's a year behind us. But she really is still just a girl, with a lot of girlish notions. If you were to go out with her, you would end up spending all your time trying to live up to her image of you. It would make you miserable, and you would wind up disappointing her...or hurting her...in the end. And that's not what you need right now." She looked at him. "Listen, if you really like her, give her a chance to grow up a little first. You're still young, Harry. But she's very young."

Harry nodded. "What about Cho...?" he whispered.

"No, Harry," she said softly. "Not Cho."

"No?"

"No, Harry," she said, looking into his eyes. "I know you had a crush on her last year. I know she's pretty. But there's just too much that's gone on since last year. You would never be able to relax together, never be happy. Too much baggage. Too many ghosts."

Harry felt a lump in his throat and sank back into the cushions.

Parvati watched him. 'The poor dear boy,' she thought. 'So sweet. And he's gotten cute. But he's been through so much. And he's so unhappy.' Her heart went out to him. She put her head down, trying to think of a way to perk him up. Then she smiled.

"You know, Harry, my sister Padma might just be available. She and Terry Boot have been dancing around each other, trying to sort out their feelings. But knowing Padma, that may turn into a marathon dance. And Terry's not much better. He's a little on the thick side."

Harry sat up a little straighter and looked at Parvati. "Padma?"

Parvati started laughing. "And why not Padma? After all, there are some very discerning people here at Hogwarts who happen to think that Padma is the *second* prettiest girl in school," she said in an arch tone that rapidly disintegrated into giggles.

Harry joined her laughter, but suddenly took a long appraising look at Parvati. She didn't seem to notice, and reached over to grab a lock of hair from the back of his head, shaking it gently.

"Now listen here, Harry Potter. It's not that funny," she said with a playful pout. Then she leaned back into the cushions of the couch. "No, Padma isn't right for you. She's too reserved. Too...I don't know." She turned to Harry, her eyes lighting up with mirth. "You know, I think she's adopted," Parvati whispered conspiratorially of her twin. "She's nothing like me."

The two collapsed in laughter.

Parvati stared up at the ceiling, still chuckling with a bemused expression on her face. "No, Harry, you need a real woman."

Harry glanced at her with a mischievous look on his face. "Lavender?" he said with a smile.

Parvati burst into laughter. "Oh, Harry, I sincerely hope not...for your sake," she said in glee.

"Listen, she's my very best friend and I love her like a sister..." she turned to Harry with a twinkle in

her eye "...and sometimes a lot more than my sisters...but I think she might be a little too much for you. She is...how should I say this?...a little on the 'high maintenance' side."

Harry looked at Parvati, a puzzled smile on his face.

She turned to Harry. "Look, I love reading romance novels...the Tamara Trueheart and Darla O'Brien stuff...but Lavender's been raised on them. She takes them as gospel. She expects boys to dote on her, to swoon over her. And that doesn't happen. Not, at least, among 15-year-old boys with any spark of life in them. That's why she's been through so many boyfriends. She wants some strong, handsome, popular, self-sufficient boy to suddenly melt whenever he sees her. And let me tell you, it's been my experience that strong, handsome, popular, self-sufficient boys have a tendency not to melt very easily...at least after the first snogging session, when they start getting all possessive and territorial. If she wants someone to melt whenever he sees her, she'd be better off trying Colin Creevey, or better yet, his little brother Dennis."

Harry found they were laughing together and leaning against each other. What was it about this girl? he thought. He had never laughed so much. Just minutes ago, he had been weeping against her shoulder and, somehow, she managed to chase his mood as if by a wave of her wand.

They sat quietly, leaning comfortably against each other and watching the glowing embers in the fire. His mind was working furiously behind the calm facade as the minutes ticked by. He had never been able to talk to a girl like this. And Parvati was so easy to talk with. And so pretty. Maybe...just maybe he could tell her.

Yes, she had been so easy to talk to when she was just someone from Gryffindor, someone he had no emotional stake in. But something had suddenly changed within Harry. He cursed himself internally. Why can't I tell her I like her? Why do I always have to be Peter Waring?

He turned to look at her. She turned and smiled at him and turned back to the fire.

He steeled his courage and sighed, speaking in a small, tentative voice. "Maybe Peter Waring never stuck around with Tamara Trueheart because there was someplace he'd rather be..."

Parvati's head jerked up and she stared at Harry, who was now himself staring into the fire.

"Tell me, Harry. Tell me about Peter Waring," she whispered.

Harry gave a painful sigh. Could he do this? Could he tell her in a way that she would understand...if she chose to?

"Maybe it was a real complicated story. That Muggle girl I met over the summer told me that all great love affairs are complicated--that's what makes them great."

Parvati was now staring at Harry in wide-eyed anticipation. "Tell me about this complicated love affair. I love a good love story."

Harry's brain was racing. He took a deep breath. "Well, maybe Peter Waring and Jack Morgana were best friends, but they both liked Tamara Trueheart, and...and both were afraid to admit it to her, or each other, for fear of harming their friendship." He paused, thinking furiously. "Ah...then Jack sensed Peter's love for Tamara and...um...after much anguish, gave his blessing to his best friend to try to win Tamara's love."

Harry was breathing heavily now, his face a mask of anxiety and concentration. Parvati reached over and stroked his hair. "Go on," she whispered.

Harry took another deep breath. "Well, Peter knew the risks. But he put a brave face on things, and confessed his love to Tamara. But she rejected him, leaving him empty and alone."

Parvati's eyes were beginning to fill up with tears.

Harry concentrated, trying not to think of the warm presence of the beautiful girl leaning against him. "Then he met Jack's new love, Darla O'Brien. Peter was happy that his friend was in love with such a wonderful woman...that at least Jack would at last find the true happiness that had always eluded each of them in the past."

Harry's eyes now were filling as well. "But Peter..." and Harry's voice caught. He heaved a big sigh. 'Say it, Harry! Tell her! Tell her how you feel!' his mind screamed.

"But Peter found he was...ah...falling in love with Darla, himself. He knew he could not betray his best friend. So he kept silent, and brooded some more."

He paused, trying to catch his breath.

"Harry," Parvati said, laying her head on his shoulder. "Don't stop."

"But Jack...found he could not find true love with Darla...that he could not make her happy," he took a deep breath. "Peter was heartbroken for his friend...but he knew he loved Darla. Peter was unsure what to do."

Harry turned his beautiful, tortured green eyes to Parvati and she felt her insides melting. "Di...Did Peter ever decide...what to...what to do?" she said breathlessly.

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. "He gave Darla a long, smoldering kiss." Harry gazed at Parvati and gently took her into his arms and kissed her. They kissed long into the night.

CHAPTER 24 Saturday

* * *

Morning

* * *

Hermione awoke early on Saturday morning. Something was poking her in her ribs. She reached down and pulled out a book. And she smiled.

Poetry: A Collection of the

Best Poems of

the Wizarding World

By Lapis Lazuli

She turned to the inscription.

To My Best Friend Hermione on her 15th Birthday,

Love,

Harry

She hugged the book to her chest. 'Maybe Harry isn't mad at me anymore,' she thought. 'Maybe he'll forgive me. Maybe...'

'I'll tell him how I feel at breakfast. Maybe we can go on that picnic after all,' she thought.

* * *

It was a Saturday morning, so Harry fended off half-hearted attempts by Ron to get up for breakfast with a wave of his hand. It had been an exhausting, but exhilarating night. Sara had told him how to kiss a girl during the summer, but he was not prepared for the emotional impact of kissing someone you loved.

Love? he thought. Parvati Patil? He pondered this question as he drifted back to sleep.

At 11:30, he was rudely awakened by a bucket of water being tossed on him by Ron and Dean. Seamus was on the floor laughing and Neville's eyes danced in mirth from the doorway of the dorm as Harry sputtered, screaming hex threats at all present.

"Rise and shine," Ron shouted merrily. "Now that we've taken care of your morning shower, it's time to get dressed for lunch."

Harry chased his roommates out and did a quick drying charm on the bed, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs.

In the boys' bathroom, he took a close look at his face. A real shower and a thorough scrubbing left him presentable to the world. But had he changed after last night? Was there anything apparent? Was he really in love? He shook his head and made a futile attempt to tame his unruly hair and headed for the dorm to get dressed.

"It's about time," Ron exclaimed in exasperation, as Harry finally came down to the common room. "We're going to be late for lunch, you git. If we wait much longer, there'll be nothing left but a few crumbs, if I know Dean and Seamus."

Harry blinked a few times. Parvati would be there. Would anything be different? What if she had

second thoughts? They hadn't gone far--just some deep kissing and rolling around on the couch. But what if she thought he had taken advantage of her? After all, she was vulnerable after her miserable date with Ron. And what would Ron say if he knew?

Suddenly, Harry smiled. 'Uh, oh. I'm going into my Peter Waring act again.' He sighed and squared his shoulders. 'Best go down to the Great Hall and face whatever wrath Darla O'Brien has in store for me.'

* * *

Harry led Ron into the Great Hall and headed for their usual seats. He was almost there when he realized that Parvati and Lavender had supplanted Dean and Seamus from their usual seats next to where Harry always sat. Harry smiled as she looked up at him. She smiled back. Parvati was all he saw.

* * *

Hermione tried to catch Harry's attention but he passed without noticing and took a seat two seats away. Ron sat between them. Hermione kept looking past Ron but Harry seemed to be talking with Parvati about something. So Hermione went back to her lunch. 'I'll talk to him later,' she thought.

* * *

Parvati looked up as he neared her and gave a quiet, knowing smile, then turned back to Lavender, whispering. Lavender looked up at Harry with a gleeful smile and winked. Harry blushed and smiled shyly back and sat down next to Parvati, with Ron taking the seat between him and Hermione.

"Good morning, Parvati. You look nice," he said quietly.

"Looks like I'm not the only one who missed breakfast," she said in a husky voice. Suddenly, she unobtrusively took his hand in hers under the table. Harry couldn't help but smile at her, but quickly looked away when he realized he was staring. He couldn't believe he was holding hands with such a pretty girl. He gave a slight shiver, and Parvati squeezed his hand.

When lunch magically appeared on their plates, the couple gave a quick chuckle and decided that handholding at lunch didn't work when both were ravenously hungry.

When the meal was just about over, Parvati leaned over to whisper to Harry.

"Are you free this afternoon?"

Harry looked at her and nodded expectantly.

Parvati smiled softly. "I hoped so. There's someone I'd like you to meet."

As the meal ended, Harry rose and looked to Parvati uncertainly with eyebrows raised.

"Let's go find a place to stash our robes," she whispered.

Harry looked startled.

Parvati turned to look at him. "What's the matter? Aren't you wearing pants under your robes?" she asked with a mischievous grin.

Harry looked at her, shocked.

She laughed. "It's nothing. It's just that when Lavender and I were in first year, Fred and George told us that it was so hot and stuffy in the divination classroom that they never wore pants under their robes. That was the only way to keep cool, they claimed. We wondered about that for months before we had the nerve to ask Angelina about that. We heard that, during the next divination class, she did a *ventus* charm on them, blowing their robes up over their heads. Fortunately for them, they

were fully clothed." Harry and Parvati left the castle laughing.

Harry brought her down to the Quidditch changing rooms to use his locker to store their robes. Fortunately, the weather had warmed from the previous stormy week, and Harry's light pullover was enough.

Then he looked at Parvati. She had a cream-colored sweater, but she was wearing the oddest slacks he had ever seen. They were a khaki color and baggy around the hips, and they looked to have suede or leather sewn to them on her inner thighs and up her backside. His mind began to whirl. 'Was this some sort of kinky sex outfit? What did she have in mind? And what have I gotten myself into?' he thought.

"Ah...um...Parvati? Wh...where are we going? And wha...what are you wearing?" he gulped in a strangled voice.

Parvati turned and gave him a puzzled look. "Oh, these? They're riding breeches. Haven't you every seen these before?"

Harry blushed and shook his head.

"Well, they're comfortable and tough, especially for where we're going."

"Ohhhh...." he said with a mixture of disappointment and relief. "So you ride horses?" he asked.

Parvati shrugged. "We have a small estate in Hampshire...more of just a farm than an estate. But every summer, our family would stay out at the estate and enjoy the countryside. And the thing I enjoyed most was riding. Padma and I could ride almost from the time we could walk."

Parvati took Harry's hand, but he suddenly stopped. "Parvati. I just realized. I don't even know where you live. Or what your family does. Or anything like that."

She turned to him in surprise. "You don't?"

Harry hung his head in embarrassment. "No," he said softly.

Parvati cocked her head to the side in puzzlement. "Well, I guess we never really sat down and talked before. But Hermione knows. She never said anything?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess it never came up."

Parvati rolled her eyes. "Typical," she muttered. "Well, come on. I'll tell you on the way."

Parvati grabbed Harry's hand again and started to lead him across the Great Lawn.

She sighed. "Well, I live in a wizarding community just outside of Portsmouth. We have a nice house, three stories tall, with a couple acres. We needed it--there were the seven of us kids. And my father and uncle are partners in the family potions' supplies importing business." She turned to Harry with a smile. "Probably a quarter of all the ingredients we use in potions' class were imported into England by my family," she said with a chuckle.

Harry's eyes were wide. "Why don't I know all this."

"You never asked, silly," she responded with a twinkle in her eye.

Harry shook his head sadly. "I guess Snape was right."

"What has Snape got to do with anything?"

Harry looked uncomfortable. "I got mad at his picking on us...on me...in class, so I confronted him about it after class one day. He told me in no uncertain terms that I had to work twice as hard as students raised in the wizarding world. He said I was 'in the wizarding world, but not of the wizarding world.' The things other students take for granted, I had to learn from scratch. So I guess he was right. I do have a lot to learn," he said with a sigh.

Parvati gave him a broad smile. "Don't worry, Harry. If you want to know something, all you have to do is ask me," she said, giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

Harry shrugged. They were now well past Hagrid's hut. "Okay, then. Where are we going?"

"The Forbidden Forest," she said.

* * *

Harry had been in the Forbidden Forest four times. Twice it had almost cost him his life. The first time, he had been attacked by Voldemort in the body of Professor Quirrell. The second time, he and Ron had been attacked by Aroog and his family of giant spiders. He wasn't sure he wanted to go again.

"Ah, Parvati...don't you remember what Dumbledore says at the beginning of each year? 'The Forbidden Forest is, of course, strictly forbidden'," he said in a nervous voice.

Parvati squeezed Harry's hand. "I know it's risky. But it's broad daylight, and we won't be going far into it. And it's not as dark and dense where we're going." She turned to look at him. "And there are some things that are worth the risk."

Parvati was true to her word. She led him into a part of the forest that was mostly low brambles with boulders strewn about, some as big as automobiles. About a hundred yards in, they came to a clearing.

"Harry. I want you to sit on this rock right here, and don't move. No sudden movements or anything. And don't talk loud or make noises or anything that might startle her."

"Startle who?"

But Parvati was already walking into the middle of the clearing. She gave a five-note whistle and waited. After about a minute, she gave the same five-note whistle and waited some more.

Harry was about to start fidgeting when he saw it. A young unicorn, pure white and just beginning to show a heavier coat in preparation for winter. It gave a playful shake of its head as it saw Parvati and began to walk towards her. When it saw Harry, it slowed its walk and made a loop around the far side of Parvati before approaching her and nuzzling her neck.

Parvati slowly turned toward Harry, her face a vision of rapturous joy. She gently turned the unicorn to face Harry. "Her name is Snowflake," she called to Harry softly as she stroked the beautiful animal, cooing in its ear. It rubbed its muzzle against her in obvious affection.

Harry smiled. "Parvati," he called in an equally soft voice. "All unicorns are called Snowflake."

She smiled and shrugged knowingly, then bent over the animal's side, her arms around its neck.

* * *

Parvati bent over so she could talk softly to Snowflake without Harry hearing her.

"Snowflake. I'm so glad you could come to see me again. I love you so much. But I wanted you here especially today so you could meet Harry. That's Harry over there." The unicorn again raised its head to look at Harry in an appraising manner. Then it lowered its head to nuzzle Parvati again and to listen. Parvati continued to stroke the animal's silky white mane.

"I know I've come to you to tell you about boys before. How they were cute, or sexy, or how they were prats and gits. Or how I liked them or hated them. But Harry is different. He's brave and cute and sweet and caring. I've known him ever so long, but I think I've now truly gotten to know him. I think I've seen into his heart. And I think he's the one. I hope he is. I think I love him. And that's something I know you've never heard me say."

Snowflake dipped her head in assent.

Parvati took a deep breath. "Snowflake? Can you look into his heart? Just to see if there's room in there for me?"

Snowflake raised its head and gave Harry a long look. Then it broke away from Parvati's grasp and slowly and cautiously began to walk toward Harry.

Harry was shocked. He sat frozen on the rock as the magical creature, which was supposed to avoid male humans at nearly all costs, approached him. It was a few feet away when it stopped. Harry was uncertain what to do. Slowly, he raised his right hand to the beautiful creature. Snowflake, a very wary look on its face, approached the last few steps and nuzzled Harry's palm. After a few seconds, it lowered its head, allowing Harry to stroke its muzzle, then its mane. Harry found the sensation exquisite, and felt a keen sense of loss when Snowflake finally backed away and trotted back to Parvati.

When it reached her, Parvati threw her arms around the unicorn and burst into bittersweet tears. "Thank you, Snowflake. I knew he was the one," she said in a whisper out of Harry's hearing. "I know I probably won't be able to come back and do this again with you. But please, please always remember me. And remember how much I love you."

As Parvati stood, Snowflake rubbed her nuzzle against Parvati's stomach, then raised it to rest on her shoulder.

The scene was so touching, so overwhelming for both that they failed to notice the little gray rat with the silver paw in the nearby bushes. Suddenly, the rat was gone.

* * *

Afternoon

* * *

Voldemort had sent Peter Pettigrew to watch. And Pettigrew had watched. For six long weeks, he had stood just inside the Forbidden Forest, usually in the bole formed by the roots of a large oak tree to avoid predators. But he had been patient. And his patience had unexpectedly paid off.

Voldemort had never expected to catch Harry Potter alone outside the apparating wards of Hogwarts. But he had sent Pettigrew to watch for an opportunity, any opportunity, to capture or kill his sworn enemy.

But the unexpected bounty did have its price. Voldemort was being attended to by only four of his servants, his inner circle, when Pettigrew apparated in front of him. Voldemort knew he had to act quickly. So on his order, Hugh Nott, Esau Avery, Walden Macnair and Lucius Malfoy, along with Pettigrew, apparated with the Dark Lord to the clearing in the Forbidden Forest.

* * *

Harry felt it as soon as Snowflake did. He threw his hand up to his scar as Snowflake bolted out of a startled Parvati's grip and was gone in an instant. Harry screamed: "Parvati, run!!!"

Reacting without thinking, Parvati was sprinting to Harry and was by his side before the Death Eaters finished apparating.

"Go!" Harry screamed. "Get to Hogwarts! Get to safety!"

"I'm not leaving you, Harry!" she screamed back, a look of abject terror on her face.

Suddenly, the tall, thin hooded figure of Voldemort appeared in the middle of the clearing.

"Kill the Spare!" he commanded.

The Death Eaters turned their wands at Harry and Parvati, intent on killing curses. But what they hadn't counted on was the speed, agility and reaction time of the dancer and the would-be martial artist.

Harry had leaped left just as Parvati leaped to the right, pointing her wand in the direction of the Death Eaters and throwing out stunning spells in their general direction. Parvati, by sheer luck, hit Avery in the midsection and he was down.

Harry, more drilled in such situations, was able to get off more accurate spells, stunning Pettigrew and Nott. But that left Macnair, Malfoy and Voldemort.

Parvati found herself behind a small boulder, shaking from the adrenaline surge and from pure terror. Steeling herself, she made a leaping dash for a larger boulder to her left, just avoiding a killing curse and again flinging stunning spells in the general direction of the remaining Death Eaters. The spells fell short, but one of them hit with such force that it plowed up loose earth, flinging it into Macnair's face, temporarily blinding him. Harry saw his chance, hitting Macnair with his own stunning spell.

Voldemort was reeling in fury. He turned to Malfoy. "Kill the bitch! I'll take the boy."

Parvati glanced around the large boulder she was hiding behind and saw Malfoy carefully approaching her. She ducked back just as Malfoy threw a curse at her. It shattered the side of the boulder, sending splinters that sliced open the skin at her right cheekbone and nearly severing about four inches of her braid.

In the meantime, Voldemort saw that Harry himself had hidden behind another boulder. A powerful curse hit the boulder, fracturing it and leaving little to hide behind. Harry leaped into the air, avoiding another curse, and aimed his own curse at Voldemort.

The beam of Harry's curse hit the beam of a Voldemort curse and the stream's of light locked. Suddenly, the two wizards were caught in a standoff as they had in the Shadow of the Tom Riddle's grave marker at the end of the TriWizard Tournament.

Harry had gained strength and will during the past summer, but so had Voldemort. Feeling each other's power, they strained to gain a killing advantage. But neither seemed to be able to overcome the other's power.

Parvati, tears of fear coursing down her blood-soaked cheeks, felt, rather than saw Malfoy's approach. His last attack had been to her left. But could he still be coming from that direction, or would he circle the boulder from the right? She wanted nothing more than to be in her bed in Hogwarts. But she had to act. She had to move.

She turned and crouched, looking up the side of the boulder, which rose a good ten feet above the ground with steep, rough sides. Right? Or Left?

No, neither! She took two quick steps back and ran forward, leaping at the side of the boulder. Her sneaker found purchase on the jagged edge of the boulder and, with a fierce leg push and she was on top, flying over it and spinning in the air.

Malfoy never saw her as she made a 180-degree turn in mid air, her wand out. As soon as she located him in her spin as he crouched, moving carefully and hugging the left-hand side of the boulder, she aimed her wand.

The stunning spell hit the rock next to Malfoy's head, throwing off a shock that temporarily stunned him. He fell to the ground unconscious.

Parvati landed awkwardly, spraining her ankle. She crouched on all fours until she saw Harry and Voldemort locked in a deadly stalemate.

Her first instinct was to run in terror. But this was Harry. She would stay by his side even if it meant her death. She raised her wand at Voldemort and began spelling.

The first few stunning spells seemed to have little effect as a bubble of energy seemed to envelope the two wizards. So Parvati limped forward, still casting her stunning spells. But as she moved through the bubble wall, it was as if she had entered an electric field. Her skin prickled painfully, but she would not stop.

The first stunning spell to get through the bubble hit Voldemort in the shoulder. What would have knocked a normal wizard out for hours was shrugged off like a bee sting. But Parvati didn't stop. The second spell hit within a second of the first. Then a third, a fourth, a fifth, and sixth. She was rattling off stunning spells as quickly as she could speak the words.

Suddenly, Harry recognized that Voldemort was weakening. He began to press his body against the force of Voldemort's spell. Then he felt it. He took a step forward. Then another. Then another against what felt like a hurricane force wind. But he was moving closer to the Dark Lord, who continued to absorb blow after blow from Parvati.

Harry and Parvati began to hear over the force of the connected spells a noise like a whirring. It began to build. Harry felt his scar throb. But he continued forward, relentlessly.

The noise continued to rise in intensity. Then Harry recognized it. It was a scream. It was a scream of frustration, fury and fear.

Suddenly, in the din of the force of the interconnected spells, he heard Parvati scream.

"INCENDIO!!!"

Suddenly, Voldemort was a ball of fire. He immediately broke the connection between his and Harry's wand and was gone, leaving only the smoke from his robes and flesh and the echoes of his screams behind.

Harry wavered and looked at Parvati, who was limping toward him.

"Pettigrew," he mumbled. "Got to get Pettigrew." And he collapsed into Parvati's arms, dropping his wand, which was smoking.

"Got him!" came a strangely accented voice.

Harry looked up over Parvati's shoulder to see Cyrus Thomas and the Hufflepuff auror, who he now knew was named Andy Winslow. And there were other aurors, and what looked like the Ravenclaw Quidditch team and several others gathered around, binding the Death Eaters or seeing how they could help.

Parvati, wide-eyed in terror and pain, pointed to the boulder where she had stunned Lucius Malfoy. "Over there, she yelled."

All eyes turned to where she was pointing. Lucius Malfoy was shakily pointing his wand at Harry. Harry yanked Parvati down just as the death curse passed over their heads. Before the aurors could react, Lucius apparated.

Suddenly, there was a new scream. Everyone turned, wands out, to see Peter Pettigrew, suddenly awakened from the stunning spell and holding up his silver hand. It was melting.

Two nearby aurors applied as much of an extinguishing charm as they was capable of at that point to Pettigrew's burning hand. As Pettigrew mercifully passed out, there was nothing left of his hand but a charred stump.

Parvati, who now was crying hysterically, grabbed Harry, who had gotten up to look at Pettigrew. Suddenly, he began swaying.

"Harry! What's wrong?"

Harry swayed in physical and emotional exhaustion and then leaned against her. Then he faltered, sitting down in a heap, with Parvati dropping down next to him.

After a quick set of questions, Parvati and Harry were levitated and soon were in Harry's old haunt, the hospital wing.

CHAPTER 25 Dance With Me Harry

Harry awoke several hours later to find himself in a bed next to one containing Parvati. He looked over at her. She turned and gave him a weak smile. There was a thick salve covered by a broad bandage on her right cheek where it had been cut and her braid was noticeably shorter. And her left ankle was taped.

Harry noticed that his right hand was covered with some sort of potion, and his fingers were bandaged.

He turned back to Parvati. "You sure know how to show a boy a good time," he said in a whisper.

She began to chuckle, showing the first life anyone had seen from her since they had been brought in.

"Harry," she said quietly. "It's over. Voldemort is gone. I don't know if we killed him. But I heard some of the aurors talking about how bad he was hurt. They saw it all."

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back into his pillow. "Thank God." Then he opened his eyes and looked at Parvati. "And thank you."

She was watching him and breathing heavily. "Oh, Harry. I was so scared," she said, tears now running down her face. "I didn't know what to do. All I wanted to do was run away. I wish I was brave like you."

"But you didn't run, Parvati. You saved my life" he said in wonder. "I was terrified, too," he confessed. "I've been through this before, but you can't get used to it."

They looked at each other and then Parvati smiled and lay her head back down on the pillow. "Still, you are so brave."

Harry sighed. He leaned back into his pillows and stared up at the ceiling. "You know what true courage is, Parvati? It's facing your fears and acting in spite of them."

Parvati sighed. "I know. I read that in Teen Witch Weekly. In an article about girls who ask boys out on dates."

Harry started giggling. Parvati followed suit.

The two heard a commotion and turned toward the door. Madame Pomfrey and a couple aurors who they hadn't noticed before were holding out a crowd of people and letting Professor Dumbledore in. He walked over to the two students. He smiled benignly at the two, and his eyes showed a little amazement when he looked at Parvati.

"Well, now. It looks like you two have more fans and members of the press trying to see you than the National Quidditch Team, Gilderoy Lockhart and Weird Sisters combined," he said with a chuckle.

Parvati smiled, but Harry looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Dumbledore's face turned serious. "First of all, we have reason to believe that Voldemort was severely injured. There has been word that a doctor and three nurses were kidnapped from St. Mungos," he said with a deep sadness in his eyes. "Death Eaters did it. Whether or not he will live is anyone's guess."

Harry looked wearily at the Headmaster. "Where did the aurors come from? Mr. Thomas and Mr. Winslow and the rest?"

Dumbledore smiled. "They were provided by the Ministry of Wizarding Law Enforcement. They were in Hogsmeade watching for any trouble during the Hogsmeade Weekend. When the Death Eaters attacked you, they had unforgivable curse detectors and apparated in almost immediately. But they tell me their curses couldn't get through whatever it was that developed around you."

"Parvati walked through it to me," Harry said quietly.

Dumbledore looked at Parvati with surprise. "Are you all right, my dear?"

Parvati gave a small smile. "We're still here."

The aged Headmaster turned and reached for a chair and sat down.

"It also appears that we have new evidence of Voldemort and his activities. Peter Pettigrew confessed to all his crimes. And he named names. Twenty-seven Death Eaters, not counting Macnair, Avery, Nott and Lucius Malfoy. And Malfoy Manor has been sealed off by the Ministry of Wizarding Law Enforcement. The four captured Death Eaters are now in a safe house. There will be no Dementor's Kiss for them, at least until the aurors are through questioning them. Not this time," he said wearily.

"What about Fudge?" Harry asked quietly.

"He is claiming that Voldemort now definitely is dead, that you and Miss Patil killed him. But Cyrus Thomas and Law Enforcement Minister Masterson have already come out with statements to the press that Voldemort is alive. Needless to say, the press is having a field day," he said with a sigh.

Parvati leaned over. "All this is good, isn't it?"

Dumbledore nodded vaguely. "Yes it is good. But what I fear now is that Voldemort and his minions will lash out to show they are still here. Unless Voldemort dies. No one can predict."

Harry was pondering. Suddenly, he looked up. "Sirius will be cleared! He'll be free!"

Dumbledore looked up with a smile. "Yes. Things are in the works already."

Parvati turned sharply to look at Harry, her eyes wide. "Sirius Black is your godfather?"

Harry nodded. "He's a good man, Parvati, who deserved better. And I'll try to see that he's given a chance to be happy again."

"Once Sirius is formally pardoned, which shouldn't take more than a few more hours, I'll see to it that he can come to see you."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore."

Dumbledore turned to Parvati. "Miss Patil, your sister Padma is outside and will be allowed to visit with you shortly. The rest of your family should be here by morning," he said with a fond smile.

Parvati smiled back.

"Well," said Dumbledore with a sigh. "I must get back before Rita Skeeter and her crowd tear the place apart looking for exclusives. I'll leave all the sundry details for more informed people than I."

Harry nodded absently.

The old Headmaster looked at the two students with a fond smile. "You both have performed magnificently. So magnificently that I have prevailed on your Head of House, Professor McGonagall not to take house points away for being in the Forbidden Forest," he said with a broad smile.

Harry and Parvati both giggled.

Dumbledore was about to leave when he turned. "By the way, Harry, Parvati. Let me be the first to say thank you to both of you, on behalf of myself, and on behalf of the entire wizarding world." On that note, he left.

Harry leaned back in his pillows and pondered. Suddenly, he began chuckling. He turned to look at Parvati with a smile.

She returned a quizzical smile. "What?" she demanded.

Harry's face split into a mirthful grin. "I guess this makes you 'The Girl Who Lived'."

She made a rude noise at him, but began chuckling herself. "Don't you start, Potter. Don't you start."

Harry and Parvati were still laughing when Madame Pomfrey stepped over to take a look at Parvati, then at Harry. "You look like you're going to be all right. You both will need rest and I'll have to monitor your wounds for the next day or two. And if that crowd out there doesn't thin a bit, I may be forced to keep you in here for few extra days 'for observation'," she said with a rare smile.

"What about our injuries, Madame Pomfrey?" Parvati ventured.

"Yeah, will she get to keep that dueling scar on her cheek? It'll look really cool," Harry said teasingly as Parvati shrieked.

Pomfrey gave Harry a poisonous look. "Sorry, Mister Potter. There will be no scarring," she snapped. "Don't you worry, Miss Patil," she said soothingly and, shaking her head, uttered with exasperation: "Boys!"

She turned again to Parvati. "You should be up and around, if a little unsteady on that ankle, by tomorrow. We'll take a look at your face then, as well. But maybe we should leave the bandage on for a couple extra days until the discoloration fades."

Parvati took Pomfrey's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you," she whispered.

Pomfrey then turned to Harry. "Well, Mister Potter, you have been up here enough over the past few years to be making your own diagnoses," she said with an arched eyebrow.

Harry shrunk down in his pillows.

"Well, the good news is you were out so long simply from exhaustion, not any injury. I've never seen a case where someone expended so much magical energy in such a short time. We will be keeping you here for a couple days just to make sure you are all right. And your hands are actually burned from your wand. The wand is unharmed, don't you worry. And your hand only have first and second degree burns, so there should be no problem with infections."

"And the bad news...?" he said anxiously.

"The bad news is that within the week you will be out of here, free to fall off brooms, wrestle trolls, tickle sleeping dragons, or.." and she cast a glance toward Parvati, who was trying to stifle her giggles, "...get hit over the head by pretty young witches who won't put up with your nonsense, Mister Harry Potter."

Parvati broke into laughter.

Madame Pomfrey nodded. "Well, since your injuries are not imminently life-threatening and you've had a few hours of rest, I suppose you are fit enough for a few select visitors. Do you feel up to it?"

Harry smiled broadly and Parvati nodded vigorously.

Within seconds, Padma and Lavender were escorted in to huddle with Parvati. Harry looked around in disappointment until the door burst open again and Ron and Hermione ran in.

"Harry, thank God..." Ron exclaimed, but was cut off as Hermione flung herself on Harry's chest,

crying hysterically.

"Oh, Harry! Thank God! Thank God you're alive! Oh, Harry, I was so frightened that I'd never see you again! I'm so sorry! I was so confused! I've been so stupid! Can you ever forgive me? I love you! Why couldn't I tell you? You were so sweet! And I almost lost you before telling you! I'm so stupid! Oh, thank God! Thank God!"

Harry put his arms around the crying girl and gingerly rubbed her back in circles, trying to soothe her. She felt so good in his arms. He had dreamed for months of this very thing. All the longing, all the pain.

Then he looked up at Ron, who winked at him and gave him the thumbs up.

But something was wrong.

He had known Hermione for over four years. She had been, with Ron, his closest friend, his only true friend. She was pretty and brave and adventurous. And she loved him now. It had been all he ever wanted.

But his thoughts turned to the girl in the next bed, who now was looking at him with an expression of pain and anxiety. This young woman who he never really knew until four days ago.

She was not as smart as Hermione. Or as mysterious. Or as complicated. But she had shown him the simple things that he had missed throughout his life, even here at Hogwarts. Like the thrill of a well-executed dance move. The warmth of sharing a late night ice cream. The comfort of being able to trade secrets. The beauty of a kiss from a unicorn. The joy of unrestrained laughter. And she had shown him that she was capable of simple acts of courage despite mind-numbing terror that had saved his life.

No, Parvati was not complicated or brilliant. 'But then again,' Harry thought, 'neither am I.' What she was open and warm, caring and loving, mischievous and fun. She may be vain and frivolous at times, but she was self-aware enough to know that and laugh at herself.

Dealing with his emotions about Hermione made him feel like he was handling quicksilver, like his love was the stuff of smoke and shadows. But Parvati was flesh and blood. As Hermione had been there by his side during times of physical danger, so now was Parvati. He now knew that Parvati would always be there to support him, to kick him in the butt when he screwed up and to clean him up when he fell. But he also knew that she would always be there for him emotionally, open and honest, when he needed her, as Hermione could not be.

And he realized now that it was Parvati who showed him that life was something to be embraced and savored, not studied and analyzed. Harry had faced injury and death more times than he wished to recall, but she had shown him what he was risking his life for...what life and living was all about. And now that he was free, he planned to enjoy the gift of life, the gift he was nearly robbed of and the gift that he never thought to open before Parvati came into his life.

Now he was exhausted. All that he wanted now was to be with someone who could be open and caring with no walls, no games, no turmoil, no reservations. He knew he no longer had the strength to fight lonely battles, either physically or emotionally. He had no patience left for angst. He realized that he was simply a 15-year-old boy. He wanted to have fun. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to dance.

It was then that Harry realized that he truly loved Parvati. It might not always be easy, but then, good relationships never are. As Parvati had said only hours before, some things are worth the risk. And so, as he held Hermione, he knew it felt good. But he knew it was wrong.

Gently, he lifted her off his chest so she was looking into his eyes. And with infinite sadness and infinite compassion, he spoke. "Thank you, Hermione. You know I'll always love you as a friend.

And I'll always be there for you." And he slowly leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

Hermione rose from the bed, confusion in her eyes. "Harry...?"

But Harry had already turned to Parvati, who was looking at him with tears in her eyes. He reached out across the space between the beds. "Parvati," he whispered. "If you'll have me..."

Under the eyes of her twin sister and her best friend, Parvati closed her eyes to tears of relief. She felt a wave of a pure joy and love wash over her that was beyond her most romantic imaginings. She reached across and gently took his injured hand. "I love you, Harry Potter," was all she could say. It was all she needed to say.

* * *

It was a week later. In the Forbidden Forest, in the meadow where the smoke and screams of Tom Riddle had scattered to the winds, a beautiful white unicorn walked quietly and looked up at the castle in the distance. The unaccustomed lights, celebrations and activity that had been a constant during the past week had finally ebbed as things got back to normal.

She had sensed she was losing the connection with her friend. Snowflake now knew that Parvati was no longer the hopeful young girl she was before. And she would no longer need Snowflake in which to confide her fears, her hopes, her dreams. Now, she had found a good man who would be there for her, to listen and to take care of her.

An equine tear fell. Such were endings. But Snowflake understood that life is full of endings. And for every ending, there's a new beginning. She felt the weight bearing down gently on her neck and playfully turned to nip her new mate Lightning's withers as he rested his head affectionately on her.

She knew that her friend Parvati had found what she had been looking for, just as Snowflake had found what she had been looking for. And she knew that, come spring, there would be another in a long line of Snowflakes to listen to a new generation of young girls' hopes and dreams. She turned and nuzzled Lightning and, under a bright, moonlit sky, the two magical creatures walked off back into the forest.