

**Harry Potter
and the Game of Desire**

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**Chapter 1.1 -
Be Careful What You Wish For**

Disclaimer: Hogwarts starts late, and everyone here is an adult!

The room smelled of butterbeer and something sharper—Ogden's, probably. Knowing the twins, they'd smuggled in Muggle drinks as well; those were cheaper to procure, and Fred and George had never met a profit margin they couldn't exploit.

Harry knew this because he was part of the operation. The twins had a habit of partnering with every Muggle-raised student old enough to buy alcohol, recruiting them each summer to stock up before term started. For the last two years, Harry had supplied them with several boxes of cheap liquor and wine. They shared the profits with him—and never objected when he reached into the supply for his own evenings of libated introspection. This year, he'd had quite a number of those already.

He sank deeper into the large mattress that lay propped on the floor against one of the walls. He was fairly certain the Weasley twins hadn't just *found* this place on the seventh floor so much as they'd sweet-talked whatever house-elf was responsible for Hogwarts' furniture surplus into conjuring it wholesale. Fred had claimed, with all the theatrical gravitas of a man three firewhiskies deep, that he and George had discovered "a hidden gem, a secret chamber of legendary proportions."

Harry suspected the reality involved George batting his eyelashes at the kitchen house-elves while Fred asked, "So, hypothetically, if a bloke needed a room for a party..."

He stretched his legs out in front of him, rolling his shoulders. The castle was quiet now—or as quiet as a thousand-year-old magical building got at half one

in the morning. Somewhere below, Filch was probably stalking corridors with Mrs Norris, hunting for stragglers from the Ball. Up here, though, the music from someone's enchanted wireless pulsed against the stone walls, low enough for conversation but loud enough to fill the gaps.

Harry understood, in a sudden flash of clarity, how most of the staff had white hair.

Not from age. From *this*. From decades of shepherding hormone-addled teenagers through the minefield of adolescence. He pictured McGonagall in her first year of teaching—dark-haired, bright-eyed, full of idealistic notions about shaping young minds—and then pictured her face the first time she'd caught two fifth-years snogging in a broom cupboard. The transformation from brunette to iron-grey probably happened overnight. Sprout's had likely gone in stages, one white streak per incident involving Hufflepuffs and the greenhouses after dark. And Snape—Harry squinted at the ceiling, genuinely considering it—Snape's hair was probably already white underneath all that grease. The oil just gave it that permanent slick-black quality.

The whole system was fundamentally absurd when he thought about it. Proper magical education didn't begin until sixteen. Muggle kids that age were now obsessed with trying to score some tail. By the time Hogwarts students reached drinking age—well.

Old enough to know what was irresponsible. Young enough to find that irrelevant.

Hand them wands, teach them how to transfigure objects and brew potions and unlock doors, and then act surprised when they used those skills for mischief.

Dumbledore must have seen it all. Dumbledore probably found it funny.

Harry chuckled, and the movement of his chest made Padma shift beside him.

She'd tucked herself against his left side at some point in the last twenty minutes—legs drawn up onto the mattress, knees angled towards him, her

shoulder warm against his arm. She'd changed out of her deep blue Yule Ball robes and into something simpler: a cream-coloured jumper that hung loose off one shoulder and a short skirt that showed off her legs. Her hair was still half-up from the Ball, but pieces of it had escaped, dark strands framing her face. She looked comfortable. Relaxed.

That was good. That had taken some work on his part.

On his right, Hermione shifted her weight, crossing her legs beneath her. She'd swapped her periwinkle dress for a thick Gryffindor jumper and—unusually for her—a skirt, and she'd pulled her hair back into a messy knot that was already losing the battle against its own volume. She held a glass of something amber-coloured in one hand and a small glass vial in the other, which she extended towards him.

"Drink this."

Harry took the vial, holding it up to the light. The liquid inside was a pale, medicinal blue. "What is it?"

"Sobering potion." Hermione's tone had that particular crispness—the one that meant the instruction wasn't optional.

Harry's face screwed up. He looked at the vial, then at the half-empty glass of firewhisky balanced on his knee, then back at the vial. The buzz was pleasant. Warm. It sat behind his eyes like sunlight through a window, softening the edges of everything—the music, the laughter from the common area outside their room, the residual anxiety of the Tournament that had been gnawing at his ribs for weeks. He didn't want to lose that.

He'd *earned* that buzz. Three firewhiskies and what he suspected was an enchanted punch of dubious origin. He deserved this.

"I'm alright, actually."

Hermione watched him for a moment—long enough to read whatever passed across his face with the accuracy of someone who'd spent four years

decoding his every flinch, fidget, and poorly concealed emotion. Four years. She could probably write a field guide. *Harry Potter: A Spotter's Companion*. Chapter Seven: *Facial Expressions of Reluctance and Their Root Causes*.

"You don't have to drink the whole thing." She pressed the vial more firmly into his palm. "A few sips. It'll take the edge off enough that you can keep drinking without ending up on the floor. Think of it as—pacing yourself, with pharmaceutical assistance."

"Pharmaceutical *what?*"

"Just drink a bit, Harry."

He uncorked the vial and took two cautious sips. The potion tasted of mint and something metallic, and it cut through the fog in his skull like a cold wind through an open window. Not unpleasant. Just—clarifying. The room sharpened. The wireless came into better focus, playing something by the Weird Sisters that he half-recognised. His thoughts, previously drifting in comfortable circles, snapped into straighter lines.

"Better?" Hermione tucked the recorked vial into her pocket.

"Annoyingly, yes." He tilted his glass towards her. "Well, I guess the night will last a little bit longer."

He raised his glass to clink against Padma's and then Hermione's. They each took a sip—though Harry's was closer to a gulp, undoing half the potion's good work in one go.

Hermione smiled—not a full one, but enough to crease the corners of her eyes—and took a measured sip from her own glass. Small. Precise. Hermione Granger did not lose control of anything if she could help it, including her blood alcohol content.

The door to their room burst open.

Katie Bell came through first, holding two bottles of Ogden's above her head, loudly complaining about third-wheeling while the Weasley twins snogged with

her Quidditch teammates. Her dark hair was wild around her face, her Ball dress replaced by a Puddlemere United shirt that was at least three sizes too large.

"Reinforcements!" she announced to no one in particular.

Behind her came Ginny Weasley, conspicuously missing her date for the evening—Neville, who had presumably been abandoned somewhere between the dance floor and the common room. She'd changed into an old Weasley jumper, one of the hand-me-downs, oversized, the letter on the front too faded to identify. She carried a basket of what appeared to be chocolate frogs and pumpkin pasties. Her red hair was loose and tangled, her cheeks flushed, and she moved with the particular confidence of someone who had decided that rules were suggestions.

More girls piled in behind them—a blur of changed-out-of-Ball-clothes and loosened hair and voices talking over one another. The room seemed to expand slightly to accommodate them all, extra pillows materialising on the mattress and a low flat surface appearing beside the bed for the bottles. Harry glanced at the ceiling.

He really needed to find out more about those house-elves.

"We liberated these from the twins' stash," Katie said, setting the bottles down with a definitive thunk. "Consider it a tax for making us listen to George's impression of Karkaroff for twenty minutes."

"It was a good impression," Ginny said, folding herself onto the mattress with her basket of snacks. "Though I didn't particularly like the image of my brothers playing tonsil hockey with your Quidditch teammates."

"It was the same impression he's been doing since September. The accent's drifted. He sounds more Bulgarian when he's speaking normally now." Katie poured herself a generous measure and raised it. "To surviving the Yule Ball."

A ragged chorus of "hear, hear" went up around the room.

Harry looked at Hermione.

She was watching Katie pour drinks, her chin resting on her drawn-up knee, and the tight, brittle quality that had clung to her face earlier in the evening was gone. Not entirely—there were shadows around her eyes that the warm lamplight couldn't quite soften, and her jaw held a faint clench that Harry recognised from years of sitting beside her during particularly infuriating History of Magic lessons. But the worst of it had passed. The raw, glittering fury that had erupted at Ron in the entrance hall before the Ball—the way her voice had cracked on the last word before she'd turned and walked away—that had faded into something quieter. Something she'd folded up and slotted into whatever internal compartment Hermione kept for things she wasn't ready to deal with yet.

She caught him looking and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm fine, Harry."

He didn't push it. He knew better.

He turned to his other side, where Padma was accepting a glass from Ginny with a murmured thanks. She caught his gaze and her lips curved—not the polite, careful smile she'd worn for the first hour of the Ball, but something warmer. Something that had taken effort to earn.

He'd been a prat. He could admit that now, with the sobering potion lending his self-awareness a certain unflinching quality. He'd been a spectacular, weapons-grade prat for the first half of the Yule Ball, and it was a minor miracle that Padma hadn't hexed him, abandoned him, or both.

Harry's mind drifted backwards. The hours before the Ball unspooled in his memory like thread from a spool, each one sharper than the last now that the sobering potion had stripped away the comfortable blur. He looked at his glass of Ogden's, catching the light from the lamp on the wall, and let himself fall back into it.

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The trouble had started—as most trouble in Harry's life started—with a combination of procrastination, panic, and Ron Weasley.

He'd left finding a date until embarrassingly late. Not because he hadn't been aware of the Ball—the thing had been announced weeks ago, and Hogwarts had talked of nothing else since. But there was a Tournament to survive, a golden egg that seemed to scream at him in his mind—a constant reminder that he hadn't solved his clue—and the general ambient dread of being twenty and entered against his will into a competition designed for students three years older than him. The Ball had felt distant. Abstract. A problem for future Harry.

Future Harry, it turned out, was just as useless as present Harry.

He'd asked Cho Chang first. That had gone... poorly wasn't the right word. Painfully was closer. She'd been gentle about it—genuinely kind, her dark eyes soft with something that might have been sympathy—but she was already going with Cedric, and the ground beneath Harry's feet had turned to water as the words left her mouth. He'd walked away with his ears burning and his stomach somewhere around his ankles, and he'd spent the next two days avoiding the fourth-floor corridor where the Ravenclaw common room entrance sat, as though Cho might materialise from behind every tapestry.

It also didn't help that he had the urge to kick himself whenever the slow replay of his particular invitation persisted in his conscience like a particularly annoying gnat. The memory of his own voice—stilted, too loud, cracking on the word "Ball"—played on a loop he couldn't shut off.

Then came the disaster in the library. He and Ron, increasingly desperate, had approached the table where Hermione sat studying with a kind of grim determination usually reserved for Quidditch finals.

Ron had been the one to ask Hermione—blurted it, really, with all the finesse of a Bludger to the face. "Hermione, you're a girl—"

The look she'd given him could have peeled paint off a wall.

"—you could come with one of us."

Her expression hadn't improved. "I already have a date."

Neither Harry nor Ron had handled that information with grace. Ron's face had done something complicated. Harry had stared. Hermione had returned to her Arithmancy textbook with the air of someone closing a door.

Neville had already asked Ginny. Dean Thomas had paired off with Lavender. The list of available partners had shrunk with alarming speed, like watching the last lifeboats lower from a sinking ship.

It was Parvati who had thrown him the rope.

She'd cornered him and Ron in the Gryffindor common room three days before the Ball, while he sat staring into the fire and contemplating whether a mysterious illness might excuse him from attending altogether. Something exotic. Dragon pox, maybe. Something more dignified than the truth, which was that Harry Potter, Boy Who Lived, Triwizard Champion, couldn't find a girl willing to go to a dance with him.

"You two haven't got a date yet." Not a question. She'd stood over them with her arms crossed, her dark eyes sharp.

"No."

"My sister Padma doesn't have one either."

Harry had looked up. He knew Padma—vaguely. Parvati's twin, sorted into Ravenclaw. Quiet where Parvati was loud. Observant where Parvati was direct. He'd spoken to her perhaps a dozen times in four years, mostly in shared classes, and she'd always been polite but reserved, watching him with an evaluating quality that made him feel like an essay being marked.

"Would she—I mean, d'you think she'd want to—"

"I'll ask her." Parvati had turned on her heel with the brisk efficiency of someone arranging chess pieces rather than social engagements. "You're welcome, by the way."

She'd swung back to Ron, who hadn't had time to close his mouth. "And you. You'll be my date for the Ball. Any complaints?"

Ron could only nod dumbly. Parvati gave them both a satisfied smirk and left, and Harry had the distinct impression that they'd just been managed.

The message came back through Parvati the next day: Padma would go with him. Harry had felt relief—genuine, full-bodied relief, something he hadn't truly experienced since the Triwizard Tournament started. He had a date. He wouldn't have to attend the Ball alone, standing at the edge of the hall while Cedric Diggory waltzed with Cho Chang. That particular nightmare could be shelved.

But relief, he'd discovered, was not the same as preparation.

The day of the Ball arrived with the inevitability of a train he'd been watching approach from a great distance without stepping off the tracks. He'd spent the morning in the dormitory, staring at his dress robes—black and green, bought by owl order at the last minute—something Angelina, Alicia, and Katie had insisted he buy, as it would match his eyes.

Katie had winked and added "dreamy" when describing them. Angelina and Alicia could only shake their heads. Harry had filed that under harmless flirting.

Ron was worse. Ron's dress robes were a horror of maroon lace and fraying cuffs that his mother had sent, and he'd spent a solid half hour trying to tear the ruffles off with his bare hands before Seamus had pointed out he could use a Severing Charm. This had improved matters slightly, transforming the robes from "Victorian grandmother" to "Victorian grandmother after a sword duel," which Ron seemed to consider acceptable.

Harry had dressed mechanically. Robes. Shoes. Attempted something with his hair that involved water and Dean's comb and achieved nothing whatsoever. His hair defied grooming the way Peeves defied authority—not out of inability to cooperate, but because defiance was in its nature.

He'd met Padma at the base of the marble staircase.

She'd been waiting—poised, composed, wearing deep blue dress robes that caught the candlelight and turned it into something liquid across the fabric. Her dark hair was up, pinned with what looked like tiny silver clips, and her face held an expression of careful neutrality that Harry would later recognise as the look of someone who'd agreed to this arrangement with measured expectations and was waiting to see if they'd been set too high.

She looked beautiful. The thought arrived fully formed and then immediately jammed somewhere between his lungs and his mouth, tangled up with nerves and the awareness that he was no longer an awkward teen wearing shoes that pinched—correction, he was an awkward adult in the beginning of his twenties, and wearing shoes that pinched.

"You look—" he'd started, and his brain had stalled.

What came out was: "—really nice."

Something in her expression shifted by approximately one millimetre towards disappointment.

"Thank you." Cool. Polite. A door held open, but only just. "You look... well, too."

'Brilliant start, Potter.'

They'd walked into the Great Hall together, and Harry had been swallowed immediately by the spectacle of it—the walls draped in silver frost, the enchanted ceiling spitting gentle snowflakes that dissolved before they touched anyone's hair, the twelve Christmas trees blazing with golden light, the orchestra tuning their instruments on the raised stage. Professor Flitwick

was conducting the musicians with a tiny baton, perched on a stack of books, and Dumbledore's robes were so aggressively purple that combined with his tall, narrow frame, the man looked like nothing so much as a magnificent eggplant.

And then the Champions' dance.

Harry's stomach had dropped through the floor. He'd known about this—known he'd have to open the Ball with a waltz—but knowing and doing were separated by a chasm the width of the Great Hall itself. McGonagall had given him a single lesson. One. Forty-five minutes in her office with a practice dummy that didn't step on his feet but also didn't help with the paralysing awareness that four hundred people would be watching him.

"I should warn you," he'd muttered to Padma as they took their position on the dance floor alongside Cedric and Cho, Fleur and Roger Davies, Krum and—his brain stuttered—Hermione, "I'm terrible at this."

Padma had looked at him. Really looked, for the first time that evening, and something had shifted behind her eyes—a flicker of warmth where there'd been only careful reserve. "Lead with your left foot. Don't look down. I'll manage the rest."

And she had. She'd steered them through the waltz with a subtle firmness, adjusting her steps to compensate for his stumbles, applying gentle pressure to his shoulder when he drifted off-rhythm. She was good. She was, Harry realised with growing mortification, *very* good—dancing with the fluid, practised ease of someone who'd trained, who'd learned this the way she learned everything, with thoroughness and quiet competence.

And he was lurching around her like a three-legged hippogriff.

By the time the orchestra shifted into its second piece and the floor filled with other couples, Harry had been sweating through his dress robes, and his gratitude towards Padma had been tinged with the sharp awareness that he owed her rather a lot more than a thank-you.

They'd danced twice more—slowly, carefully, Padma's patience a tangible thing between them—and then Harry had made his first mistake of the evening.

His second. His third, depending on how you counted.

Ron.

Ron had been sitting at a table near the edge of the hall, his maroon robes looking even worse under the enchanted lighting, his face a mask of sullen misery. Parvati—his date, not that he seemed to remember—had gone to the dance floor with Lavender, and Ron sat alone, staring across the hall to where Hermione was dancing with Viktor Krum. His expression could have curdled milk.

Harry had gravitated towards him. Gravity, or guilt, or the simple pull of four years of friendship that made Ron's unhappiness feel like a physical weight on his own shoulders. He'd sat down beside Ron. They'd talked—or rather, Ron had complained, bitterly and at length, about Krum and Hermione and the general unfairness of the universe, while Harry nodded and murmured supporting words and failed to notice the exact moment Padma's patience shifted from elastic to brittle.

He'd left her. Not deliberately, not with any conscious cruelty, but effectively, completely—parked at the table with Ron while his date sat three seats away with her spine very straight and her face very still and the blue robes catching candlelight that she was wearing for no one.

It had been Hermione who'd jolted him out of it.

She'd appeared at their table during a break between sets, her face flushed from dancing, her smile wide and genuine in a way Harry rarely saw from her. Krum hovered a few paces behind, dark and broad-shouldered, his attention drifting towards the dance floor where the only remaining champion couple still moved—Cho and Cedric, her arm threaded through his, both of them looking like they'd been dancing together for years rather than hours.

Krum had wandered over to them. Some exchange about Quidditch—Harry caught fragments, Cho's eyes bright with excitement as she gestured about something, Cedric nodding along with that easy charm of his. There'd been a look between Cedric and Krum that Harry couldn't quite read. Respect, maybe. Or something more measured. He hadn't been paying close enough attention, and by then it hadn't mattered, because Ron had opened his mouth.

Ron had ruined it, of course. The words had come out sideways, all implications and accusations—"fraternising with the enemy"—and Hermione's smile had died like a candle blown out. They'd argued. Quietly at first, then not quietly at all, their voices cutting through the music with a precision that drew stares from nearby tables.

Harry had sat between them, frozen, useless, watching two of his best friends dismantle each other with the efficiency of people who knew exactly where the other's weak spots were. He'd had the presence of mind to pull them out into the entrance hall, where there were fewer eyes—but not the presence of mind to stop it.

Hermione had left first. Spine rigid, chin up, eyes too bright. She'd turned on her heel without looking back, heading towards the double doors of the great hall and, presumably, back to her date.

Ron had stared after her, his face cycling through emotions too fast to catalogue, and then he'd turned to Harry and said something about Krum that Harry hadn't properly heard because his attention had snagged on something else entirely.

Padma was standing up.

Not angrily. Not with drama or tears. She was simply standing, collecting her small beaded clutch from the table, and preparing to leave with the quiet dignity of someone who had waited long enough. Parvati was beside her, whispering something rapid, and Padma's face was blank in a way that was worse than fury.

Harry felt it like a physical thing—a crack running through the comfortable wall of obliviousness he'd been hiding behind all evening. Not guilt, exactly. Something sharper. The sudden, ugly clarity of seeing yourself through someone else's eyes and not liking what you found.

He'd left Ron mid-sentence.

"Padma—wait."

She'd turned. Not hopefully. Not expectantly. She'd turned the way someone turns when their name is called in a corridor—reflexive, neutral, prepared to keep walking.

"I've been a complete arse."

Her eyebrow had risen. A fraction. A degree. Parvati, beside her, had snorted.

"I mean it." He'd stepped closer, running a hand through his hopeless hair, the words tumbling out rough and unpolished because he didn't have time to sand them smooth. "You agreed to come with me, and I just—I sat there with Ron like a lump, and I didn't—you shouldn't have had to—"

"No," Padma had agreed. "I shouldn't have."

The silence between them held a sharp edge. Parvati looked between them with the expression of a spectator at a tennis match.

"Can I—would you let me try again? The rest of the night. I'll—I'll actually be present this time. I'll dance. Badly, but I'll dance. And I'll—"

He'd run out of words. He stood there, twenty and rumpled and earnest, and Padma had studied him with those amber eyes—evaluating.

The silence lasted long enough for Harry to contemplate whether Apparition was possible without a licence if the motivation was sufficient embarrassment.

"One more chance." She'd held up a single finger. "And you're getting me a drink first."

The relief that flooded through him was so acute it was almost painful. "Done. Absolutely. What do you want?"

"Surprise me." The faintest curl at the corner of her mouth. "But if it's pumpkin juice, I'm leaving."

He'd gotten her a drink. He'd gotten her three drinks, actually, and a plate of those tiny pastries from the refreshment table that she'd eaten with a precision that fascinated him—each one in exactly two bites, her fingers never getting sticky, as though messiness were a personal failing she refused to entertain.

"You're staring," she'd said, not looking up from the pastry.

"Apologies—I just—Ron would have scattered crumbs by..." Harry winced. He wasn't really used to talking to girls outside of Hermione, his Quidditch teammates, and Ginny, and he knew he'd already put his foot in it.

"Oh—sorry."

"Don't you dare place me in the same sentence as that slob." She'd glanced at him sidelong, and there it was—the first real crack in her composure, a flicker of warmth behind those careful eyes. "But you are forgiven."

He'd given an awkward laugh. "I'll try not to stumble with my foot in my mouth for the rest of the night. I seem to be an expert at it."

She'd almost smiled. It felt like progress.

She finished the last piece before grabbing Harry's hand.

They'd danced—four more dances, each one marginally less disastrous than the last, her hand warm in his, her laughter when he stepped on her foot a sound that loosened something in his ribs.

"That was my toe, Harry."

"I know. I'm sorry. I did warn you."

"You warned me you were terrible. You didn't warn me you were actively dangerous."

"Would it have changed your answer?"

She'd pretended to consider it. "Ask me after the next song."

Between dances, they'd talked—properly, not the careful, surface-level pleasantries of two people fulfilling an obligation, but the kind of talk that surprised him with how easy it was. He'd asked her about Ravenclaw, and she'd told him about Professor Vector's latest impossible problem set—something about applying Arithmantic principles to predict potion volatility that had half the class in tears. He'd asked about her family, and she'd told him about her parents' shop in Leicester, how they sold potion ingredients imported from India on the magical side and spices on the Muggle side, and how her mother could switch between haggling with a goblin supplier and charming a Muggle customer in the space of a single breath.

"She sounds terrifying," Harry had said.

"She is." Padma's smile had turned fond. "Parvati got her nerve. I got her stubbornness."

"I'd have said patience."

"That too. Though you've tested it tonight."

He'd deserved that. He'd grinned anyway, and she'd shaken her head at him, but her eyes were warm.

She'd laughed—properly, head tipped back, the silver clips in her hair catching light—and Harry had realised, with the delayed understanding of someone who'd spent most of his life receiving very little warmth and therefore being slow to recognise it, that he was enjoying himself.

Not enduring. Not surviving. *Enjoying.*

By the time the Weird Sisters played their final encore and the Ball began to thin, Padma was walking close enough that their arms brushed. Not leaning on him. Not hanging off him. Just... near. Present. Choosing to be there rather

than anywhere else, and that quiet choice meant more to Harry than he knew how to articulate.

The hall emptied to its last stubborn handful of stragglers. The enchanted candles above had burned low enough to pool the corners in shadow, and the music had faded to something slow and distant, like the castle itself was winding down. They'd drifted together towards the back wall as though by some unspoken agreement. Harry felt the stone cool against his shoulder blades, and then Padma had turned to face him, and the world had gone very quiet.

Green eyes met amber—almost golden in the dying candlelight—and something shifted in the space between them, some last careful distance collapsing. He could see the faint dusting of shimmer on her cheekbones, could count the silver clips still clinging valiantly to her dark hair, and his chest felt tight with a kind of terrified anticipation he couldn't quite name.

'She's going to—we're going to—'

Padma's gaze dropped to his mouth. Just for a second. Just long enough.

He closed the distance.

Their noses bumped and heat flooded his face, a stuttering apology half-forming on his tongue—but then she tilted her head, her fingers curling into the lapel of his dress robes, and suddenly the angle was right, was *perfect*, and the apology died unspoken.

Her lips were warm and soft and tasted faintly of butterbeer and those tiny pastries, and Harry's brain went entirely, blissfully blank. His hand found the curve of her waist, the fabric warm beneath his palm, and she leaned into him—a small, deliberate shift of weight that pressed her closer and sent his pulse hammering into his throat. They broke apart for half a breath, a shaky almost-laugh passing between them—noses bumping again, foreheads touching—before they found each other again, deeper this time, slower, her fingers sliding from his lapel to the back of his neck and his hand settling against the small of her back, drawing her in.

The stone wall was cold against his shoulders. She was warm against his chest. The contrast made him dizzy, or maybe that was the kiss, or maybe that was the way her breath hitched when his thumb traced a slow circle against her hip. His other hand came up to cradle her jaw—tentative, careful, his thumb brushing her cheekbone—and she made a soft sound against his mouth that short-circuited every rational thought he'd ever had.

He didn't know how long they stayed like that. Long enough for the music to fade to nothing. Long enough for the candles to burn lower still. Long enough that when a familiar voice shattered the silence, it took Harry a full three seconds to remember that other people existed.

"Ohh, looks like Harry-kins has discovered the wonders of a proper snog."

Fred. Unmistakably Fred—George would have been subtler about it, which was to say George would have waited at least five seconds before commenting.

"Don't be *crude*—" Hermione's voice, sharp and immediate, followed by the unmistakable sound of two skulls being smacked in quick succession.

Harry and Padma broke apart. Not gracefully. There was a moment—Loss of contact. Cold air where she'd been warm. The particular mortification of being caught mid-kiss by an audience.

Harry wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Padma turned away and did the same, though with considerably more dignity.

He turned towards the group. Hermione stood at the front, flanked by Katie Bell, Angelina, and Alicia. Katie looked delighted. Angelina looked amused. Alicia had a hand pressed to her chest in mock scandal. Behind them, Fred and George clutched their heads where Hermione had cuffed them, looking not remotely sorry.

Harry's gaze caught on Hermione. Her eyes were still red-rimmed, and there were marks on her cheeks where tears had dried, but something in her bearing had steadied since the entrance hall. She looked tired. She looked

like she'd made a decision to stop letting Ron Weasley ruin her evening. A twinge of guilt twisted in Harry's chest—he hadn't gone after her, hadn't checked whether she was alright after the argument.

But she was here. She'd come to find him. That had to mean something.

And he hadn't wanted to ruin Padma's night. Not again.

Katie stepped forward with a teasing grin. "C'mon, loverboy, the night is young—most of Hogwarts is at the afterparty."

Hermione caught Harry's eye, gave him a raised eyebrow and the faintest smirk—a look that said *we'll talk later, but for now, I'm fine*—and something in Harry's chest unclenched.

He glanced at Padma. She met his gaze, and the curl at the corner of her mouth was back—small, private, just for him.

He took her hand. She let him.

They followed the group up seven flights of stairs, into a night he'd never forget.

And to the Harry sitting on the mattress now, Ogden's in hand, the memory warm and close—that night had cascaded into the very best thing that had ever happened to him.

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End

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