

**Harry Potter
and the Game of Desire**

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**Chapter 1.2 -
Be Careful What You Wish For**

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

The mattress was wide enough for six people to stretch across and still leave room, shoved against the stone wall beneath a tapestry that kept shifting its pattern—stags one moment, serpents the next. The twins had outdone themselves tonight. The main space beyond their door could have swallowed the Great Hall, and branching off from it, a dozen or so private rooms offered varying degrees of seclusion. Muffled laughter and the thump of bass from Lee Jordan's enchanted speakers bled through the walls. Harry had no doubt that behind some of those other doors, hormone-addled students were making decisions that would fuel the Hogwarts rumour mill well into February.

Katie Bell sat cross-legged at the centre of their group, the stolen bottle of Ogden's balanced on her knee, her blonde hair still done up in its Yule Ball arrangement though several pins had gone rogue. She caught Harry's eye and smiled—warm, uncomplicated—and something in his chest loosened a fraction. He'd always liked Katie. When McGonagall had marched him down to the Quidditch pitch in first year, a scrawny sixteen-year-old who didn't know a Bludger from a Quaffle, it was Katie and the other Chasers who'd taken the piss out of him just enough to make him feel normal. Not the Boy Who Lived, not some oddity to gawp at, just the skinny new Seeker who needed to learn how to do a proper interfering run without crashing into anyone. That ease had never changed. Oliver Wood might have treated him like a weapon to be deployed, and most of the wizarding population swung between reverence and suspicion like a pendulum with a broken bearing, but Katie just treated him like Harry.

He glanced at Padma. She winked at him, firelight catching the brown of her irises. Then at Hermione, who surveyed the group, shrugged as if to say *why not*, and adjusted her position on the mattress.

The three of them shuffled forward on their knees, glasses held out to avoid spilling, and settled cross-legged into the loose circle. Ginny had planted herself near the edge, cheeks pink from the cold or the drink or both, and beside her sat a girl Harry didn't recognise—willowy, with dirty-blond hair that fell past her waist and a dreamy, unfocused expression. She had her wand tucked behind her ear. Not resting there. *In* her ear, the tip poking out from beyond her locks.

Katie lifted the bottle and Harry extended his glass. She poured two fingers of firewhiskey—the amber liquid catching the candlelight—then did the same for Hermione and Padma.

Both Katie and Harry watched Hermione accept her glass without so much as a disapproving hum. Katie's eyebrows climbed.

"Not a word," Hermione said, and took a sip.

Harry bit the inside of his cheek. Even after the first task—when he'd walked back into the common room singed and triumphant and found a full-blown celebration waiting—Hermione had spent half the night lecturing Fred about the proof content of his home-brewed mead. Tonight, though, a certain red-haired best friend had seen to it that the rulebook was temporarily shelved.

"Where's Neville?" Hermione asked, scanning the room.

Ginny waved her hand. "Retired about twenty minutes ago. Said he wanted to write his grandmother a letter about the Ball while it was still fresh." She paused. "He looked dead on his feet, honestly."

"Fair enough."

"Oh—" Ginny straightened up and gestured to the blonde girl beside her. "This is Luna. Luna Lovegood. She's in Ravenclaw, in the same year as me."

Luna turned her wide, silvery eyes on them. Her gaze moved from Harry to Hermione to Padma without settling, as though she were watching something slightly behind each of their heads.

"We're neighbours," Ginny continued. "Grew up together, practically. The Lovegoods live just over the hill from the Burrow."

"Lovely to meet you all." Luna's voice was soft and airy, floating a half-beat behind the rhythm of normal conversation. Then she smiled—a slow, serene thing—and looked directly at Harry. "I used to play pretend as Harry Potter when we were small. Ginny would play my—"

"LUNA."

Ginny launched herself sideways. Her hand clamped over Luna's mouth with a slap that echoed off the stone walls. Luna blinked twice, entirely unbothered, her voice continuing as a muffled hum behind Ginny's fingers.

"She's joking," Ginny said, her face the precise shade of her hair. "She's completely joking. She does this. It's her thing."

Luna gently peeled Ginny's hand away. "I was going to say 'pretend wife.' It was a very elaborate ceremony. There was a toad as the officiant."

The room dissolved. Katie pressed her face into her knees, shoulders shaking. Padma buried her laugh in Harry's shoulder. Even Hermione—who moments ago had looked like she might not smile again for a week—cracked properly, her nose crinkling.

Harry's face burned, but he found himself grinning. Ginny looked ready to Apparate through the floor, age restriction be damned.

"Right," Ginny managed, still scarlet. "Moving on. Permanently."

Luna, entirely unruffled by the carnage she'd caused, turned her attention to Padma. Her silvery eyes did that drifting thing again—settling somewhere around Padma's left ear before slowly finding her face.

"You're a Ravenclaw," Luna said. It wasn't a question.

"I am." Padma straightened slightly, the way people did when they weren't sure what Luna was about to say next. A reasonable instinct, Harry thought.

"I thought so. You have a very organised aura. Blues and silvers, mostly, but there's a thread of something warmer tonight." Luna tilted her head. "Amber, I think. That's new."

Padma blinked. Her gaze flicked to Harry—just for a second—and then back to Luna. "I'm not sure auras work like that."

"Most people aren't." Luna smiled, serene and unbothered. "That doesn't mean they don't—also, you helped me the other day when the Nargles misplaced my earrings."

Hermione opened her mouth—Harry could see the rebuttal forming, something about the absence of empirical evidence for aura-reading in any peer-reviewed magical journal—but she caught herself. Took a sip of her drink instead. Progress.

"Do you read auras often?" Hermione asked, and to her credit, she kept her voice carefully neutral.

"Only when they're interesting." Luna looked at Hermione with that steady, unblinking gaze. "Yours is very busy. Lots of sharp edges. Like a hedgehog made of light."

Katie made a noise into her glass. Ginny buried her face in her hands.

"A hedgehog," Hermione repeated.

"It's a compliment. Hedgehogs are very determined creatures."

Hermione stared at Luna for a long moment. Then, slowly, the corner of her mouth twitched. "Thank you. I think."

"You're welcome." Luna picked up her own glass—which Harry noticed contained something pale and fizzy rather than firewhiskey—and took a contented sip. "I like your hair, by the way. It has good energy."

Hermione touched her messy knot self-consciously. Padma leaned into Harry's side, and he felt her shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

Katie recovered enough to gesture towards the other girl Harry hadn't placed—sitting slightly apart from the group, legs stretched out in front of her, watching the exchange with quiet amusement. She was tall, broad-shouldered, blonde hair cropped short above her ears. Her dress robes had a distinctly different cut from anything Harry had seen at Hogwarts—sharper lines, heavier fabric, dark burgundy.

"This is Cassandra Vole," Katie said. "She's from Durmstrang. We met during the free practice sessions on the pitch last month."

Cassandra raised her glass in greeting. Her accent was clipped, Eastern European, but her English was clean. "More of a broom racer than a Quidditch player, if we are being exact. I play occasionally, but I prefer speed to strategy."

"She's brilliant," Katie added, something close to admiration in her voice. "You should see her on her Nimbus. She'd give most of our school's Seekers a run for their money." She glanced at Harry with a teasing wink. "But of course, I still think you're number one."

Harry felt his face heat. He took a sip of his drink and aimed for nonchalance. Missed by a mile, judging by Katie's grin.

"You flatter me."

"Broom racing?" Ginny leaned forward, her earlier mortification apparently forgotten the moment anything adjacent to flying entered the conversation.

"Like the Continental Circuit? I've read about that—they run courses through mountain passes, don't they?"

Cassandra's expression shifted. Not much—she wasn't the type for dramatic reactions—but her eyes sharpened, and she sat up a fraction straighter. The look of someone whose niche interest had just been recognised.

"The Alpine routes, yes. And the Baltic coastal courses—those are worse. Crosswinds off the sea, fog banks that roll in mid-race." She took a sip of her drink. "I have done three qualifying rounds. Junior division. I placed second in the Carpathian Sprint last summer."

"Second?" Katie nudged her. "She's being modest. Second out of forty-six."

"Forty-three," Cassandra corrected. "Three were disqualified for illegal broom modifications before the start."

"What kind of modifications?" Ginny asked.

"Weight reduction charms on the shaft. Strictly banned—they compromise structural integrity at high speed. One girl's broom splintered during warm-ups. She was fine," Cassandra added, catching Hermione's expression. "Mostly."

"Define 'mostly,'" Hermione said.

"She kept all her limbs."

"Reassuring."

Katie snorted. "This is why Hermione doesn't come to Quidditch matches voluntarily. Remember the Hufflepuff game last year? She brought a book."

"It was a long match," Hermione said, with dignity.

"It was forty minutes."

"A long forty minutes."

Harry caught Ginny's eye across the circle. She was watching Cassandra with an intensity.

"What broom do you fly?" Ginny asked.

"Nimbus 2001. Modified—legally," Cassandra added, with a glance at Hermione. "Better grip on the handle, adjusted tail-twig alignment for sharper turns. The 2001 is not fashionable anymore, but for racing it is quite solid, especially when flying through a torrent, I might prefer it even over a Firebolt."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "And why not?"

"Are you defending your broom's honour?"

Harry blushed and sputtered. "No—maybe."

Cassandra's mouth twitched—the closest thing to a smile he'd seen from her. "We should race sometime. Then we will have facts."

"Done," Harry said, before his brain caught up with his mouth. Katie laughed. Padma shook her head but was smiling.

"I want in on that," Ginny said. "I'll borrow Fred's Cleansweep and still make it competitive."

"On a *Cleansweep*?" Katie raised her eyebrows.

"It's not about the broom, it's about the flyer." Ginny's chin lifted. The Weasley stubbornness was a force of nature, and it had found a worthy hill to die on.

Cassandra regarded Ginny for a moment, then nodded once. "I like her," she said to Katie.

"Everyone does," Katie said. "It's annoying. Oh yeah, Hermione where's your date?"

Hermione sighed into her glass. "Viktor is busy, last I saw. He and Cedric Diggory were deep in conversation with Roger Davies—I already have enough

Quidditch talk with Harry over here." She rolled her eyes. "I told him I'd see him tomorrow."

"Quidditch." Cassandra's mouth twitched. "How very Viktor."

"You know him?" Padma asked.

"Everyone at Durmstrang knows Viktor. He is not easy to miss." She paused. "He is also not easy to have a conversation with that does not eventually become about Quidditch. Or fishing."

"Fishing?" Harry said.

"It is his other passion. He talks about it less, but when he starts, he does not stop." Cassandra took a measured sip. "I once sat through forty minutes on the migratory patterns of magical sturgeon. I learned more than I ever wished to know."

Padma turned to Hermione. "Did he talk to you about fishing?"

"No." Hermione frowned slightly. "Just Quidditch. And books, actually—he asked about what I was reading."

"Then he likes you," Cassandra said, matter-of-factly. "He only talks about books with people he is trying to impress."

Hermione's cheeks went pink. She took a very deliberate sip of her drink and said nothing.

Katie leaned forward, eyes bright. "Right, so Hermione—your date ditched you to talk about their broomsticks with each other. Probably exchanging stroke technique—how to get that sheen on their wood with a good wax."

"Don't be crude, and he didn't *ditch* me—"

"Because from where I'm sitting, that's precisely what happened."

Hermione's jaw tightened, but there was no real anger in it. "It was mutual. I was ready to leave and he wasn't. It's fine."

Katie and Harry exchanged a look. Katie pressed her lips together, suppressing a grin. Harry lifted his glass to hide his own. Straight-laced Hermione Granger, drinking firewhiskey at an afterparty while her date talked about wood with other boys. He'd remember this night for a while.

Then a commotion erupted from outside—beyond their private room, from the main space. Whooping. Gasps. The kind of collective noise that only came from a crowd witnessing something genuinely unexpected. The music seemed to stutter, or maybe Lee Jordan had abandoned his post to watch whatever was happening.

Everyone in the room exchanged looks. Katie's head snapped towards the door. Luna gazed at the ceiling as though she'd heard birdsong. Hermione's brow furrowed.

"What on—" Ginny started.

The door burst open.

Cho Chang stormed through first. Her dark hair, which had been immaculate at the start of the evening, hung in disarray around her face. Her eyes were red-rimmed and blazing, her lips pressed into a bloodless line. She clutched the skirt of her silver dress robes in one fist, knuckles white.

Behind her, moving with considerably more poise, came Fleur Delacour.

Harry's stomach dropped three floors. He nearly scrambled backwards off the mattress—an involuntary lurch of pure, undiluted embarrassment. The last real conversation he'd had with Cho replayed in his skull at triple speed: him, stammering, asking her to the Ball in a corridor near the Owlery. Her gentle, kind refusal. The way she'd said *I'm really sorry, Harry* like she meant it, which somehow made it worse.

He forced himself to stay put. Running would look worse.

Fleur surveyed the room. She was still devastatingly beautiful—Harry felt the familiar, irrational tug at the base of his skull, the faint compulsion to stare that

pulled at him whenever she was near. The Allure. A warm, syrupy impulse to keep looking, to lean closer, to—

Harry shook his head. Hard. The pull fractured. He fixed his gaze on his glass, then on Padma's knee, then risked looking up again. Fleur's silvery-blond hair caught the candlelight, and her blue eyes swept the circle of students with an expression that suggested she found the entire evening mildly absurd.

"May we join you?" Fleur asked, directing the question to the room at large. Her accent softened the consonants, turned the question into something almost musical. She'd already flicked her wand—two crystal glasses materialised in midair and floated into her waiting hand.

Katie was already reaching for the bottle. "Course. Sit down."

Cho dropped onto the edge of the mattress without a word. Fleur settled beside her, cross-legged, and held out both glasses for Katie to fill. Katie poured generous measures—three fingers, not two—and Cho took hers and drained half of it in one go.

Nobody spoke for a beat.

"What happened out there?" Katie asked, carefully.

Cho's grip tightened on her glass. Her chin trembled. She opened her mouth, closed it again. She looked caught between fury and tears, neither winning.

Fleur placed a hand on Cho's arm—brief, light, the kind of touch that acknowledged without intruding. Then she looked at the rest of them.

"Perhaps we give 'er a moment, yes?"

The room understood. Ginny busied herself with the basket of snacks. Hermione studied her drink. Luna hummed something tuneless and soft. Harry appreciated the collective instinct—nobody pressing, nobody staring, just the quiet agreement to let Cho breathe.

It lasted about twelve seconds.

The door swung open again.

Parvati Patil exploded into the room like a hex with legs. Her Yule Ball sari billowed behind her, and her eyes were enormous—the wild, gleaming eyes of someone who'd witnessed something monumental and intended to share it with every living soul within earshot.

"PADMA." She flung herself onto the mattress, nearly upending Katie's bottle, and grabbed her twin by the shoulders. "You will never—oh, hello everyone—you will NEVER believe—"

"Parvati—" Padma started.

"Krum. Cedric Diggory. And Roger Davies." Parvati paused for dramatic effect, which lasted approximately half a second. "They're kissing. All three of them. In the middle of the main room. Right now. Full on. Like—properly. Cedric had Krum by the collar and Davies had his hand in Cedric's hair and Krum was—"

Harry's brain stalled.

He remembered—earlier that evening. There'd been a moment. Just a moment. Cedric and Krum exchanging a look over the heads of their dates. Something passed between them that Harry hadn't understood—a flicker of recognition, maybe, or agreement, or something else entirely. He'd filed it away as two champions acknowledging each other.

Until now.

His eyes moved to Cho. His stomach clenched.

She sat rigid, jaw locked, staring at the surface of her drink. Harry couldn't tell if she and Cedric had been officially together or if tonight was supposed to be the start of something. Either way, the answer to whatever Cho had been hoping for was currently snogging two other blokes in front of the entire school.

"—and honestly, the technique—Krum does this thing where he tilts his head and sort of—"

Padma was already making the gesture—hand drawn flat across her throat, again and again, the universal signal for *stop talking immediately*.

Fleur cleared her throat. Loudly. The sound cut through Parvati's narration like a bell through fog.

Parvati's mouth hung open mid-sentence. Her gaze drifted sideways. Found Cho on the mattress. Took in the red eyes, the white knuckles, the rigid posture.

"Oh."

Silence.

"Oh, Cho. I—I'm so sorry, I didn't see you there, I—"

"It's fine." Cho's voice was flat. She held out her glass without looking up.

"Could someone pour me another?"

Katie poured. Cho drank.

Parvati settled onto the mattress beside her twin, her earlier exuberance punctured and leaking. She mouthed *sorry* at Padma, who closed her eyes briefly.

Luna, who had watched the entire exchange without any visible change in expression, leaned towards Cho. "Wrackspurts," she said, gently.

Everyone looked at her.

"They cloud your thinking. Make everything feel worse than it is." Luna's voice was soft, entirely sincere. "They're very common after emotional shocks. I could lend you my spectrespecs, if you like. They help you see them, and once you can see them, they tend to leave."

Cho stared at Luna. The room held its breath—Harry could see Katie bracing for something, Hermione's mouth half-open—but Cho's expression didn't harden. If anything, something in her jaw loosened, just a fraction. The sheer,

earnest strangeness of the offer had knocked her off the track of her own misery, if only for a moment.

"Maybe later," Cho said. It was the closest thing to warmth her voice had managed since she'd walked in.

Luna nodded, satisfied, and returned to her fizzy drink.

Then Cho turned. Looked directly at Harry.

Her eyes were bright—too bright, the shine of unshed tears catching candlelight. She swallowed once. When she spoke, her voice had that careful, over-controlled quality of someone holding themselves together by sheer will.

"I should have said yes when you asked me, Harry."

The words landed in the centre of the room like a dropped glass.

Harry felt several things happen simultaneously. His face ignited. His throat closed. And Padma's hand found his and squeezed—her fingers lacing through his with a grip that made the bones in his knuckles shift.

He was suddenly, acutely aware of every pair of eyes in the room. Katie's widening. Ginny's flickering between him and Cho and Padma. Luna's, still dreamy but focused. Hermione's, sharp as a tack, watching everything. Cassandra, sitting very still, observing with the detached interest of someone studying a culture she didn't fully understand.

'Right. Brilliant. This is fine.'

He took a sip of his firewhiskey. It burned. He took another.

"Thanks, Cho," he managed, aiming for something between empathetic and non-committal and probably landing on strangled. "I'm—sorry about tonight."

Cho nodded and turned back to her glass, and Harry released a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Padma's grip loosened but didn't let go. He risked a glance at her. Her expression was neutral—too neutral, the careful blankness of someone who was filing everything away for later discussion.

He sipped his drink again. *'Well. Can't possibly get more awkward than this.'*

The universe, as always, took that as a personal challenge.

"Hey, Scarface!"

The voice sliced through the room from the doorway—sharp, drawling, and unmistakable. Harry didn't need to look up to know who it was. He looked up anyway.

Cassiopeia Malfoy stood in the doorway, one hand on her hip, the other holding a glass of something green. Her white-blonde hair had been pulled into an elaborate updo for the Ball, but several strands had escaped, framing her pointed face. Her dress robes were emerald silk—Slytherin to the bone, even at a party—and she wore them like armour. Pansy Parkinson hovered at her shoulder, black-haired and watchful, scanning the room with an expression that suggested she was cataloguing weaknesses.

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione. Hermione's eyebrows had climbed so high they'd nearly vanished into her hairline. Her mouth formed a small, tight shape—not quite a grimace, not quite a laugh. The expression of someone watching a situation unravel in real time and finding it grimly fascinating.

'The night just keeps going,' Harry thought.

"Malfoy," he said. Flat. Tired.

Cassiopeia opened her mouth—something sharp and practised loading behind her teeth—

"Oh, come off it, Malfoy."

A third voice drifted in from the corridor. Daphne Greengrass appeared behind Cassiopeia, one shoulder propped against the doorframe, her expression saturated with dry amusement. She was blonde, sharp-featured, and held her own glass with a languid ease that made standing in a doorway look like a deliberate aesthetic choice. Beside her, Tracey Davis peered into the room

with open curiosity, her brown hair falling loose around her shoulders and beside her was Susan Bones.

"Let's not add to the chaos of the night, shall we?" Daphne continued. "Let's just have a fun night without you trying to vie for your crush's attention like a primary school boy pulling pigtails."

The room went very, very still.

Cassiopeia's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. Two spots of colour bloomed high on her cheekbones—vivid pink against pale skin.

"I—that's—I do *not*—" She sputtered, the trademark Malfoy composure cracking like ice on a spring lake. "Greengrass, I swear to—I will hex you into next—"

"You're proving my point," Daphne said. She stepped past Cassiopeia into the room, Tracey following. "Is there space? There seems to be space."

Katie, who appeared to be enjoying herself immensely, gestured at the mattress. "Plenty of room."

Harry looked up at the ceiling. The room had a vaulted, cathedral quality—dark stone arching into shadow, dotted with floating candles that drifted like lazy stars. He stared at it and wished, with every fibre of his being, that he hadn't taken the sobering potion.

He drained the rest of his glass.

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End

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