

*Mr. Intel*  
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# The New Beginning

## Prologue

The cold gray steps leading up to the boys' dormitory spiraled tightly around a granite column three times before ending on the landing where the seventh year Gryffindor boys slept. Harry made it to the third door, just after the first spiral when he was forced to rest. He questioned his resolve to sleep in his own bed and contemplated returning to one of the squasy sofas in the common room. As appealing as that was, he knew that the events of the past 24 hours meant everyone would be clamoring for his time. Eventually, someone would slip in and interrupt him. Sleep was the only thing that would block out the unseeing eyes of the dead from his mind and he was determined to do so until the visions of death in his head relented.

He leaned into the column and closed his eyes, intending only to catch his breath. As if to prove his own thoughts, Harry saw faces flash in his mind. Fred, Tonks, Lupin, Colin, Snape and a dozen others. So many had died that day and so many others came within a hair's breath of it. Neville bravely attacking when everyone thought that Harry was dead. Hermione and Ron being attacked by multiple Death Eaters while Voldemort moved into the Great Hall. Ginny missing death by an inch...

Ginny's face fixed itself firmly in his mind, her eyes boring into his seeming to ask him why he was leaving. Why hadn't he sought her out, even once, before the final battle, and now...

Harry let out a sardonic grunt. He had wanted to go to Ginny so many times over the past few months that it hurt to even think about it. He knew, however that had he given in to that temptation, he very well might not have faced Voldemort at all. Then where would their world be? Would he be stuck on the stairs in Gryffindor Tower? Would Ginny be alive in the Great Hall on the shoulder of her mother?

With a large effort, Harry pushed away from the column and forced his feet to climb upward.

Finally inside his old dormitory, Harry stripped off his clothes and stepped wearily to his bed. Broken trainers, shredded jeans and a hole-filled and smoldering shirt all fell to the floor. With great effort, he pulled on the Hogwarts standard-issue pajamas that were on the end of the bed. In each hand, he held a thin shaft of wood. He contemplated each, one made of Holly and one Elder. He told Dumbledore he would get rid of the Elder Wand but he didn't have a clue how to hide it sufficiently so that it couldn't be found again. The tomb seemed like a crazy idea now that all the adrenaline in his body was spent – the first place Voldemort looked for it when he realized

Dumbledore had it. Surely anyone else on the trail of the Deathly Hallows would look there, too. Should he destroy it? Could it be destroyed?

He fought off a wave of dizziness and decided those questions had to wait until he rested. Shoving both wands under his pillow, Harry slid into the clean, cool sheets and before another thought passed his mind, he was asleep.

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Light and a distant warmth gently woke Harry the following morning. He heard a sound, like a kitten being scratched under its chin and saw the hazy outline of a girl tucked into one of the common room armchairs next to his bed. He blinked and reached for his glasses (when had he put them on the night stand?) and there was Ginny, breathing deeply and very much asleep. Of all the people that would wait for him this determinedly, of course it would be Ginny.

He pulled his aching legs out from the bedclothes and with some difficulty, sat up. There was a pitcher of water and a cup on the table by Ron's empty bed. He contemplated the walk across the flagstone and decided he was better off using his wand. Reaching his hand under his pillow, the first thing he touched was thick and coarse - the Elder wand.

"*Wingardium Leviosa* ," he intoned and a glass of water was sailing toward him.

That was when he realised how long it had been since he'd seen the inside of a restroom.

Five minutes later, he padded mournfully back to his bed and noticed that it was occupied.

"Good morning," said the girl with bright brown eyes. "Feel any better?"

Harry winced as he walked, it seemed every muscle was on fire. "Can I get back to you on that?" He fell lopsided onto the crumpled blankets to avoid bending his joints more than he had to. A spot on his chest felt like Grawp had used it as an anvil.

Ginny smiled and placed her hand on his head. It was relievingly cool. "Poor Harry," she said with a note of laughter. "Maybe you need a massage?"

With a grimace, Harry rolled over and let her work the muscles on his back. "Uugherrr," he moaned. He never felt anything that both hurt so much and felt so good at the same time. Ginny moved and he felt her knees next to his. Her hands seemed to know exactly where to go.

The door opened, but Harry could hardly pay attention to it.

"Oi!" came the shouting voice of his best friend. "What are you doin' with my sister?"

"Uhherrr, uhhh, mmmmm," he said while Ginny continued to pound and prod him into jelly.

"I think it's pretty obvious that Ginny has the situation firmly in hand," said Harry's other best friend, Hermione.

Ginny laughed and then moved said hands to his hamstrings, shifting her weight to the side of the bed as she did so. "If you have a problem with me giving comfort to the man who saved every one of us from death, while fully clothed," she emphasised, "then you can go back downstairs and pretend you didn't see anything."

Ron made an incredulous noise with his mouth. "I'm not leaving you two alone."

"Why?" asked Ginny with false sweetness. "Don't want us doing what you and Hermione get up to?"

Harry smiled into the sheets as Ginny's hands finished with his sock-covered feet. Even his toes were sore.

Ron spluttered. "That's right," he began, but Hermione cut him off.

"Ron, maybe you should take a breath and remember why we're here."

Ginny's hands left him and the mattress bounced as she sat on its edge, her bum making contact with his legs. Harry moved his head to the side so he could see his friends. Ron looked put out with his arms crossed and his shadowed eyes staring at a point on the wall over Harry's head. Hermione was looking at Harry with a mix of pity and determination.

"Harry," she said soothingly, giving Ginny a wary glance. "There's a funeral today and everyone is expecting you."

There was a long silence and Harry sighed. He pushed himself gingerly off the bed and took a seat next to Ginny. "Do I have time for a shower and breakfast?"

"Yes," Ginny said, giving Hermione a look that brooked no argument. "I'll bloody dance in front of the crowd naked if I have to, but no one is going to force Harry to do anything before he's ready."

Harry was surprised by her fierce protectiveness. It was both comforting and a little confusing because he still didn't know where they stood. She seemed to take up her role as his girlfriend as if they'd never broken up.

"It's not until noon," Hermione replied, taking Ron's hand.

Ron's face returned to normal. "Overprotective, much?" he asked his sister.

"You better believe it," she said, her eyes blazing. "He needs me," she continued, standing and walking toward the door without a backward glance. "And I need him."

Then she was gone.

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The Battle of Hogwarts, as it was called in the Daily Prophet and in the history books written of the event, touched the lives of almost every witch and wizard in Britain. Dozens were killed and hundreds injured, but in the end, the darkest wizard in a hundred years fell and Harry Potter was proclaimed a hero.

Harry attended as many of the funerals as he physically could. The hardest were for the families who lost children and of his closest friends. Remus and Tonks were laid to rest near James and Lily as they requested. Fred's grave stood on a small hill outside the village of Ottery St. Catchpole where generations of Weasley's were buried. There was a spot beside it for George, who, despite the nearly crushing loss of his twin and best friend remarked that Fred was always the planner and had simply moved on to start on a branch of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes in the afterlife. Didn't God enjoy a good joke, too?

The last funeral, two weeks after the battle was for Severus Snape. Harry and his friends attended, but no one else was there. It was the only funeral for which it rained. Harry thought Snape had convinced someone in heaven to make it rain on purpose. It was fitting and sad and final. For Harry, it was the last funeral he wanted to attend for the rest of his life.

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# The New Beginning

## Chapter One

A month passed since the Battle of Hogwarts. Hermione and Ron used most of that time to retrieve and re-acclimate her parents. Harry had been pressed by Kingsley and the Ministry to help put a public face on the end of Voldemort's reign. It seemed that most people were a little more hesitant to believe he was gone forever since they'd been proven wrong before. Most of the wizarding world was still in shambles, but Harry and others convinced the Ministry to put their first efforts into Hogwarts. The school, therefore, had largely been rebuilt. It seemed that the site of the final battle was a natural place for people to begin rebuilding and there was already talk of school starting again in the fall.

"I'm not going," stated Ginny firmly as they sat around the kitchen table in the Burrow. She, Harry, Ron and Hermione were just finishing their first breakfast together since Ron and Hermione's return.

Mrs Weasley stared at her daughter in shock, the plate of eggs she had been levitating crashed roughly to the table, sending eggs flying. "Of course you are," she said with just as much conviction. "How will you make a decent living if you don't get any N.E.W.T.s? Bill needed four to be a curse breaker, Charlie three to work with dragons. Percy..."

"Simple," Ginny said, cutting her off and brandished the letter she'd received that morning. "This is from McGonagall. She said that I had the option to sit for exams next week and skip my seventh."

Harry tucked his copy of the same letter further under his leg just in case Ginny lost their argument while Ron scooped a third helping of eggs onto his plate.

"But," spluttered Molly, "What about Quidditch and your friends?"

"Mum," Ginny said with restrained exasperation. "My friends are here and Quidditch..." she paused and made a show of folding the letter before stuffing it into the pocket of her shorts. "Isn't that big a deal."

Her mother's eyebrows rose into her hairline, but she didn't reply. Harry had a reply, but he wisely kept it to himself. Ginny was a good liar, but even Harry knew how much she cared about Quidditch. It made him wonder what she was covering up with such a blatant fib.

Harry finished his juice and watched Mrs Weasley retreat into the scullery, turning his thoughts to the letter under his leg. Since Ginny won the battle with her mother, it would be infinitely easier for the rest of them skip as well. They were in the Burrow for the summer and Harry couldn't express the happiness he felt in being free for the first time in his life. Free to do whatever he liked and do it with his friends.

"None of us did our seventh year. How come she didn't say anything to us?" said Ron through bites

of toast.

Hermione dabbed a napkin at her mouth and pushed away from the table. "That's because she knows I won't let either of you skive off." She waved her wand and the food vanished.

"Hey!" protested Ron who was about to stab a sausage with his fork.

She ignored him and with another wave, the dishes zoomed into the sink. "Ginny'll be fine. She can study with us."

"Study?" Ron said incredulously. "It's summer! We just defeated Voldemort and a load of Death Eaters. We deserve a holiday in the Maldives, not a face full of books."

Hermione patted him on the head. "Study now and get it over with, Ron." She bent low and whispered into his ear, but Harry could hear her clearly. "Think of all the fun we can have after we've qualified?"

Ron's whole demeanour changed. "What d'you think, Harry?" he asked, suddenly enthusiastic. "Charms, Transfiguration and Defence?"

"Yeah," said Harry, not exactly excited about studying either, but in the back of his mind he knew it would be easier to take them now rather than later. He caught Ginny's eye, noticing a crease in her brow that meant she was thinking about something. "I reckon those would do it."

"Don't forget Potions," said Hermione. "You'll need that one to be Aurors."

"Ugh," said Ron and Harry together. When Harry looked at Ginny that time, her brow was smooth and a smile found its way to her mouth. He felt a familiar thrill course through him at having placed it there.

Ron continued, "It'll take more than a week just to get ready for Potions."

"Slughorn wasn't so bad," Hermione replied and then her eyes grew distant. "He wasn't so bad at all," she said, this time mostly to herself. She snapped her fingers and a determined look stole across her face. "I'll be right back." She then strode to the fireplace and disappeared in a cloud of green flames.

Harry gave Ron an appraising look. They both knew that given the subject of class work and Hermione having sudden, determined ideas, it was inevitable they'd have their every minute scheduled until exams. "We're doomed," they said together.

Ginny stood and grabbed Harry's hand. "Come on," she said, pulling him upright. "Quidditch in the paddock. Now."

Ron shrugged his shoulders at Harry's questioning look and made for his trainers. "Meet you out there."

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They played Quidditch until it was time for lunch. Harry and Ginny played opposing Chasers while Ron was Keeper for both teams. Ginny wiped the floor with Harry, despite his better speed and agility.

"I'm a Seeker, not a Chaser," he explained as they walked back to the Burrow. The sun was high in the sky and it was getting uncomfortably hot.

"No excuses, Potter," said Ginny playfully. Her hair was tied into a messy ponytail and her shirt was sticking to her body in distracting ways.

Harry cleared his throat, trying to turn his thoughts to what he wanted to do besides revise, but his traitorous eyes kept glancing at Ginny.

Ron held the door to the broom shed open. When Harry stepped in behind Ginny, he placed his broom in Harry's path. "Keep your eyes on her face, Harry," he said, his voice low and full of warning.

"As soon as you do the same with Hermione," Harry replied, equally serious.

Ginny pushed Ron's broom aside, brushing up against Harry as she exited. "Come on you two, I'm famished."

Harry threw his broom randomly at the far wall and left Ron mumbling at the broom shed.

When they got to the kitchen, Hermione was there, a stack of books on the table where Harry was expecting a stack of sandwiches to be.

"Finally," said Hermione. "I've got it all worked out." Her eyes darted to the door over Harry's shoulders. "Where's Ron?"

Harry stole another glance at Ginny, who was draining a cup of water, the light from the window causing her outline to stand out. "Putting away the brooms," he said, his eyes still weren't responding to his command to look away.

Ginny put her glass on the counter by the sink, but when she pulled her hand back, it knocked one of the breakfast forks from the drying rack onto the floor.

"Blast it all," said Ginny and she bent over to pick it up.

Harry's eyes finally moved to the table in front of him as soon as it became clear which direction the fork went. He tried very hard to read the spines of the books on the table as his face began to heat.

The kitchen door opened and Ron strode in. *Whew*, Harry thought to himself, but Hermione was smirking at him. *Uh, oh*.

Ron groaned at the sight of the books. "What the..."

"I've spoken to McGonagall," Hermione announced, ignoring Ron. "We're going to have mentors for each of the subjects we're going to N.E.W.T. in." She began to tick off her fingers. "McGonagall for Transfiguration, Flitwick for Charms and Slughorn for Potions."

"Reckon we won't need one for Defence, eh, Harry?" said Ron hopefully.

Hermione plucked a book from the top of the stack and handed it to Harry.

"Advanced Auror Prep: Defensive Spells and More," Harry read. There was a picture of Mad-Eye Moody on the front brandishing a wand in classic duelling pose. It must have been a much younger Moody as he had both legs. The Moody in the picture swished his wand and a jolt of light shot out and out of the picture's view. "This doesn't look like the defence book for seventh years, Hermione."

"It isn't," she said. "You two are getting a different N.E.W.T. exam for Defence. Kingsley Shacklebolt will personally administer it."

Harry gulped. "I don't think I'll be able to study all of this in a week, Hermione."

She took the book back from Harry and banished them all upstairs. "That's why I had our exams moved to the beginning of August," she said with a smile.

Ginny stood next to Harry and her hand brushed his shoulder, sending chills down his spine. "So much for getting it over with," said Ginny just as Mrs Weasley appeared with the much longed for, heaping plate of sandwiches.

\*

The next morning's post brought even more interesting news. Ginny received three letters and Harry one. Putting his fork down and swallowing his eggs, Harry noticed it was embossed with the official seal of the Ministry of Magic.

Harry took the envelope tentatively, wondering what the Ministry wanted from him now. He and Ron hadn't turned in their Auror applications because they were waiting for their N.E.W.T. results.

"Go on, then," said Ginny encouragingly, still holding her unopened letters.

Harry tapped the back of the letter with his wand, using a charm he'd learned from Mr Weasley and the wax seal became unglued, allowing it to pop open.

He scanned the letter, his eyes dropping to the signature first. "It's from Daniel M. Jones, Department of Wills and Trusts."

Confused, Harry read through the letter and then set it on the table. "He wants to meet with me

today to talk about my assets,” he said with a mixture of relief and apprehension. “I guess there’s more of my past I didn’t know about.”

“Maybe there’s something Sirius left you,” Hermione offered.

“Maybe you’re rich,” said Ron with a smile. “You could own half the country and not know it.”

Ginny shook her head and then put her hand on his. “I can go with you if you want,” she said quietly.

He turned his hand over and gripped it loosely, marvelling at how soft her skin was. “I’d like that.”

She smiled and then held her letters up. “Guess what these are?”

“Love letters from Dean?” asked Ron cheekily.

Ginny rolled her eyes as Hermione tutted. “No, they’re offer letters from three professional Quidditch teams to attend tryouts.”

There was a stretch of silence as Ginny grinned at them, their eyes glued to the envelopes in her hand.

“You’re joking!” said Ron tactlessly.

Ginny tossed the unopened letters on the table in front of him. “See for yourself,” she said her grin replaced with a beaming smile.

Harry gave Ginny’s hand a squeeze under the table and their eyes met. “That’s brilliant!” he said, his smile mirroring hers.

“But Ginny,” said Hermione as Ron tore open the first letter, “how did you know they’re offer letters?”

“Gwenog Jones told me to expect it,” she replied as if that explained everything. Then, seeing the confused look on the older witch’s face, she continued. “Gwenog owled me the week after Fred’s funeral and said my name was making the rounds in the league.”

“When did you get a chance to be scouted?” asked Ron as glanced up from the second letter.

“You remember that game of pickup Quidditch after the mass funeral at Hogwarts?” she replied.

“Yeah?”

“Several of the scouts were there, too and when they saw us playing, they came over to check us out.”

Harry stared at her in astonishment. He remembered that day. He'd been so sick of crowds and everyone pressing for his time that he retreated to the Headmaster's office and spoke with Dumbledore for what must have been hours. Ginny and the rest of the Gryffindor team held an exhibition game at the largely untouched pitch.

"Well," Ginny continued, "I guess they liked what they saw..."

Ron finally opened the last letter and held it up reverently. "Tis is from the Canon's. They want you to start as Chaser immediately," he said quietly as if a loud noise would scare away the letter. He looked up at her with the most solemn expression Harry'd ever seen on his face. "It's a blanket offer. You won't have to even try out – you have to say yes."

"Puddlemere is offering more Galleons," she pointed out, "even if they can't guarantee a spot on their starting squad."

"Who cares," said Ron, gaining his voice back. "It's the Canons!"

Harry watched the exchange and felt that Ginny enjoyed winding her brother up a little too much. Then he wondered how serious she was about Professional Quidditch at all. League level play required a lot of time, which Harry realised, would cut into any time he would want to spend with her. He was just getting used to the idea of spending time with her, which was a bit odd because they hadn't talked about their relationship much. Actually, they hadn't talked about it at all.

"I think I'm going with the Harpies," Ginny said and scooped up the letters before walking toward the stairs.

Ron wasn't finished, however and followed her. "Think about it, Ginny," he pleaded. "The Canons have a new Seeker that isn't completely horrible and one good Chaser. With you on the team, that would..." but their voices faded as they turned the corner on the second landing.

Hermione opened her notebook and began to write while Harry looked back at his own letter and considered with apprehension what was waiting for him at the Ministry. It wasn't long before he turned his thoughts back to something much more pleasant, which happened to be taking a shower two floors above his head at that very moment.

\*

After breakfast, Hermione took Ron to visit her parents and Mrs Weasley left to do the weekly shopping, which left Harry and Ginny alone until lunch. They left the Burrow to walk around the Weasley's property – something they'd done almost every morning since the final battle.

Harry valued this time with her. It was strange, really to think about how much time they'd spent together the past month without saying much of anything to each other. Ginny was perfectly happy to be with him without pestering him for explanations about their year apart, the Deathly Hallows, or anything else. It was one of the things he liked most about her. That's not to say they never spoke to each other, but the first week especially, Harry's head was so full of death and the after

effects of the war that he hardly had any room for words at all. Throughout his brooding, Ginny was there, a silent, but ever present companion like a single ray of sunshine in the midst of rolling black clouds.

The Burrow's property enclosed an orchard, a large vegetable garden, a small pond and most of a sweeping bend in the River Otter. Most days, they stopped at the river and sat on two large knobbly roots from a maple tree and threw rocks into the slow moving water. This was where they stopped today.

A slight breeze blew as they sat in silence, listening to the babble of the river and the rustling leaves above them. It was very peaceful here and Harry found his eyes drawn to his companion. She tossed a rock with expert precision, aiming for a twig floating in the lazy water. The twig disappeared under the ripples and then reappeared several feet downstream.

She was a constant source of amazement to him. Smart, funny, a skilled Chaser and one of the prettiest witches he'd ever seen. Yet here she was spending day after day with him. Soon she would be claiming her spot on a professional Quidditch team and who knows what that would mean for them. *Them*. Harry laughed silently to himself. He didn't even know what *they* were. Friends for sure, but things had been so disconnected since Voldemort died that Harry couldn't seem to put two thoughts together regarding him and Ginny.

Suddenly, she was looking back at him and smiled, breaking him out of his thoughts. "You okay?" she asked quietly, as if she didn't want to break the magic tranquillity around them.

"Sure," he said and threw his own rock at a passing leaf, missing it by a foot. "Just thinking."

She made a non-committal sound in her throat and dropped her eyes to her lap. Her hair fell down around her shoulders, framing her pale face in fire. He felt something pull in his stomach and let out an almost silent sigh.

He'd wanted to restart their relationship back as soon as Voldemort's mutated body hit the ground, but Fred's death put a halt to that. Harry knew Ginny needed time and space to get over such a loss and so he'd remained respectfully friendly to her ever since. Just last week, he caught a glimpse of her pushing a tear off her cheek on one of their morning walks.

So, he waited and watched until Ginny was ready, hoping that he'd have the courage to approach her when the time was right. Why did it seem like it was harder to restart a relationship than it did to begin it in the first place?

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Harry's appointment with the Department of Wills and Trusts was the following morning, but not so early that he made a special effort to get up at a particular time. Ginny was still determined to go with him, which didn't make any sense to Harry, but he accepted her company gratefully.

The Atrium was much as it had been when Harry had visited as a disguised Ministry worker with

Ron and Hermione with the notable exception that the Voldemort-installed statue was gone. Replacing it was a much smaller and simpler fountain. A sign next to it read:

*All donations to this fountain will be given to the war orphans fund.*

Harry paused, pulled out his money pouch with the hand that wasn't held by Ginny's and dumped its contents in the fountain. He certainly didn't want the money and though it was a small amount, Harry knew that people like Teddy would benefit much more than he would.

They walked slowly toward the lift at the end of the atrium and tried to avoid the obvious staring from the dozen or so witches and wizards that were going about their work. One wizard even made the effort to shake Harry's hand, which he obliged grudgingly.

"He was nice," said Ginny when the lift door closed. It seemed strange, but consoling that they were the only ones on it.

Harry sighed, thinking that being the object of any sort of attention was ridiculous. "I suppose so."

"Well, it could have been worse," she pointed out. "He wasn't a lunatic and he didn't want to off you for killing his master."

Harry snorted. "I guess so." He liked the idea of having Ginny with him now more than ever.

The lift announced their level and the doors opened. "It's nice to be appreciated instead of demonized," Ginny said wisely and as they walked toward the Department of Magical Wills and Trusts, Harry remembered that Ginny lived most of her first year as the one who opened the Chamber of Secrets.

Dan Jones was a middle-aged wizard with balding grey-brown hair and sharp eyes. He had an air of efficiency that would have made Hermione proud, but Harry got the impression from the too-neatly stacked papers that his organization was slightly compulsive.

"Mr. Potter," Jones stated clearly as he removed the top folder from the bin that said "Thursday" and opened it. "You have two inheritances that we need to discuss with you. They were to have been disbursed upon your seventeenth birthday, but as the Ministry wasn't in a fit state to process its own payroll for months on end, this is the soonest we could manage to get to your file."

Harry gave Ginny a confused glance but her hand in his reassuringly told him that it would be all right. "Okay," Harry said, still wondering what inheritances he could possibly be getting. "I've already had the money in my parent's vault."

Jones looked up from the stack of papers and made an impatient noise in his throat. "The vault you have been using was simply the trust fund established by Dumbledore in accordance with the terms of your parent's will." He flipped through the papers and pulled out a tally sheet. "According to this report pulled from Gringott's yesterday afternoon, you have just under a

hundred thousand Galleons in the Potter family vault, not counting the remaining..." he consulted another slip of parchment, "twenty-six hundred and three Galleons in the trust vault."

Harry sat back in his chair, feeling like someone had Confunded him. How did he not know his parents were so wealthy? Having this information meant he never had to work another day in his life. He was free to do whatever he wanted to do without consideration of salary or expense.

His exuberance was short-lived, however as another question surfaced in his mind. When was he going to stop being confronted with surprises about his past that changed his future so drastically?

Unfortunately, Jones wasn't finished. He pulled another tally sheet. "You also inherited the contents of the Black family vault, which holds approximately three hundred thousand Galleons."

At this pronouncement, the shock began to wear off, replaced with a numbing sensation at the sheer vastness of Harry's new wealth. How could he even begin to wrap his mind around something like this? Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noticed that Ginny was staring blankly at the paper in Jones' hand.

At Harry's glazed look, the man continued, finding another sheaf of papers. "You are the owner of four properties, three in England and one in Brazil."

"Brazil?" asked Harry, his eyes snapping to Jones's. "What in the...?"

Jones noisily cleared his throat, regaining command of the conversation. "Your parent's owned a property in Godric's Hollow, which you are no doubt aware of." Harry nodded. "They also owned the ancestral Potter property, which according to this is on an estate somewhere in the Scottish highlands." He flipped the pages a few times, as if looking for something. "There's no address, but the instructions state this blank parchment fragment would be all that is necessary for the heir to find it."

Harry took the paper from Jones and stared at it for a moment. It looked as if it had been ripped from a piece of school parchment and was definitely blank. But as Harry looked at it again, words began to appear.

*Potter's Castle can be found at 7 Stonebridge Court*

After learning more about Harry's new properties, they were given a ream of paperwork to fill out. As Harry signed the last page, Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared in the man's office.

"Jones," he said, nodding to the man behind the desk. "Send them my way when you're finished with them?"

"J-Just finishing up now, Minister," Jones replied and nervously tried to organize their folder.

"Very good," replied Kingsley. He nodded at Harry. "Shall we?"

Kingsley led them to what could only be described as a meeting room. Squashy leather chairs

ringed a long wooden table. They were the only ones in the room. Kingsley closed the door and produced a thin velvet box.

“I know how you feel about public events,” he said wryfully. “To be honest, I’m with you. The less time behind a podium, the better.” He handed the box to Harry and motioned for him to open it.

The purple velvet lid opened on a stiff hinge to reveal an opulent pendant festooned with a ribbon across the bottom. There were words on the ribbon that Harry read swiftly before feeling his face heat up. Ginny inhaled quickly as Harry snapped the lid closed. “I don’t want it,” he said forcefully, shoving the box back to Kingsley. “I didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

Kingsley appraised Harry carefully. “You certainly *did* earn this, Harry. It would be foolish to think otherwise. I know your modesty is strong, but think about it this way... If we didn’t award you for your very public confrontation with the most evil wizard in a generation, the public would demand answers in uncomfortably prominent ways. You would be the centre of heaps of attention you and I both know you don’t want. By giving this to you in private, and making a brief announcement in the Prophet, we circumvent all that and you get to keep out of the public eye.”

Harry considered this and reluctantly agreed it was the best option. He honestly hadn’t believed he would get any kind of award for offing Voldemort. He’d always assumed it was just part of being Harry Potter. Why be rewarded for coming out on top of a kill or be killed situation?

Kingsley pulled a heavy sack from his robes. “There’s one more thing,” he said handing the sack to Ginny, who took it automatically. “All Order of Merlin recipients receive a thousand Galleons.”

Harry didn’t even get the word ‘No!’ to form on his lips before the Minister slipped out the door and was turning a corner down the hall.

Ginny hefted the bag and smiled. “You want me to find Kingsley and hit him over the head with this?”

“It’s too much,” said Harry, not quite ready to laugh at her question. “You saw how much money I have. There’s no reason for me to have any more than I’ve got.” He looked up at her and had an idea. “You keep it.”

Her mouth opened in shock. “No way,” she said. “I didn’t win an Order of Merlin, First Class, you did.”

“I’m giving it to you,” he replied, liking the idea more and more. “It’s a gift.”

Her shock was replaced with a familiar, intense look. “Absolutely not. You’re just giving it to me because I happen to be here with you.”

“So what? I want you to have it all the same.”

“Harry,” she protested. “Don’t do this. Give it to someone else, please? Maybe a charity like the

war orphans fund?"

"Fine," he relented. "But you can't tell anyone about this."

Ginny dumped the contents of the sack into the fountain as they left the Atrium, garnering surprised looks from several witches and wizards. Harry Apparated them back to the Burrow as soon as the last Galleon hit the water.

Away from the Ministry, they found a secluded spot under a willow where the River Otter touched the boundary of the Wesley's property and Ron and Hermione followed them a few minutes later. Harry's mind was reeling from the information he'd learned about his past and, he was beginning to realise, his future.

After discovering his parents owned a castle, he was told something he already knew. Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was also legally his. The final shock of the morning was learning that Sirius had purchased a hut on an island off the coast of Brazil sometime after he escaped from Azkaban.

"Do you reckon the Goblins let him have access to his vault?" asked Ron after Harry and Ginny told him and Hermione about their visit. Ginny's hand was back in his as they reclined against the willow's trunk.

"It'd be impossible to know," offered Hermione, who had conjured a blanket that she and Ron were sitting on. "The goblins are very secretive. I doubt they'd tell his own family what he did, let alone the Ministry."

"Brazil," said Ron somewhat wistfully. "That explains the bird that delivered your letter from him in fourth year, remember?"

Harry nodded. It was some sort of multi-coloured, tropical bird and was definitely not any kind of owl Harry recognized. "Yeah. I reckon he left the country for a while to throw off the Ministry. He wasn't there very long. I wonder why he bought property if he knew he was coming back."

"Maybe he didn't think he was," said Ginny. "Maybe he thought he would have to leave Britain again and wanted a safe place to go back to."

Harry wondered more and more lately about the past of so many people that touched his life. Sirius, his parents, Remus... Thinking about them caused him to stop breathing from the pain of it. Would he ever be able to move past these suffocating emotions?

Ginny's fingers were in his hair, breaking his train of thought and bringing him gently back to the present. They worked his scalp in such a soothing way that he could hardly think straight. Had she dripped a little calming draught onto their tips when he wasn't looking?

"There's no telling unless we go there," said Hermione as Harry's eyes closed from the sheer pleasure of Ginny's ministrations.

“Would that be before or after we take four bloody N.E.W.T.’s?” asked Ron. It was clear that he was still having trouble with the idea of studying despite Hermione’s promised reward, whatever it was.

Ginny’s fingers pulled slowly away from Harry’s head and he leaned back onto the willow’s trunk, which wasn’t remotely as comfortable as Ginny’s hands. “A holiday sounds really nice about now,” he said, his eyes still closed. Despite the rough bark his head was resting on, he felt strangely serene – so much so that he completely missed the look Ginny shared with Hermione.