

Shattered Hearts

by jmlane57

An AU 7th-year Valentine's Day fic. After Harry gives her a rose and chocolates, Ginny decides to give him her own special gift ... but is in for a nasty surprise when she finds him.

Heartbreak and Betrayal

Chapter 1 of 1

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An AU Valentine's Day 7th-year story

A/N: I know it's a bit late but this little plot bunny hopped into my head and wouldn't leave until I wrote this.

Harry mentally kicked himself in the arse as he dressed, keeping his back to Hermione as she did the same. Bloody hell, he'd really done it now! How would he ever be able to make amends, ever be able to explain what Ginny had just seen? Especially since he had always been so circumspect with her, never tried anything even remotely inappropriate physically ... not for lack of wanting to, of course. It was mainly because of the frightening prospect of her six brothers hexing his bits off should something untoward happen, such as her getting pregnant when she shouldn't have.

Of course, what could he say that could even begin to justify what he had done with Hermione? It would take far more than a simple apology; even someone as clueless as he was about women knew that...but it was a good place to start. Of course, actions generally spoke louder than words, but what could he possibly do to regain her trust, make her believe in him, or more accurately, his integrity, again after what he had done?

Not that it was really a smart thing to do for her to have not announced herself beforehand, owed him or something, given him some sort of warning that she was coming ... but after Hermione had told him how Ginny had all but browbeat her into sharing that spell she had learned for extra credit, how to incorporate part of one's real heart into an inanimate object, Harry had surmised that Gin might have something like that in mind to give him for Valentine's Day. He thought he had done pretty well, giving her a single red rose and heart-shaped chocolates earlier that day, but mostly his studies had kept him away from her for most of that day. At least he had remembered her, that was something...but now ... How was he ever going to straighten out this latest mess he had gotten himself into? And getting caught on Valentine's Day, seemingly cheating on his girlfriend ... To say the least, the timing stunk to high heaven!

Hermione had been upset after a fight with Ron, come to him for comfort and things had gotten totally out of hand ... the end result of which Ginny had inadvertently walked in on. For that matter, how would he ever be able to explain what had happened to Ron? He wouldn't blame her if she didn't want anything further to do with him; Ron either, for that matter. In fact, it wouldn't surprise him if Gin eventually surmised that the reason Hermione had been so reluctant to share that spell was because she'd intended to give it to Harry herself rather than to Ron, even though it was Ron she had been dating steadily since the beginning of term.

And how did he know that Ginny wouldn't owl her mother about it and it wouldn't make the rounds through the entire family? It was fortunate that he still had Sirius to talk to about such things. Maybe he ought to owl him, explain the situation and see what advice he could give him, if any. It wouldn't surprise him if his godfather lectured him as well for his boneheaded stunt, but he would gladly suffer whatever he said if Sirius could help him in any way. It had not been one of the things Hermione had suggested he

do, but he felt it was a good idea to get some advice from someone *he* trusted and believed in. Merlin knew what Ginny was thinking and feeling now; even if she somehow managed to eventually forgive him, Harry was certain that she would never forget, and it would take a long time before she fully trusted him again ... if she ever did.

Meanwhile, he had best find out just what it was he had shattered in his anger and regret. Followed by Hermione, he left his room to discover the still-glowing pieces of the clay heart Ginny had meant to give him as a Valentine's Day gift. He didn't see this, but Hermione turned pale, knowing what the recipient breaking the gift infused with a literal part of another person's heart meant. The legend behind the old spell had indicated to her that should the recipient break the clay heart, the real heart would end up broken and would likely never be repaired, no matter what the person did to try to make amends. This was part of the reason she had been reluctant to give her the spell, because things could and often did get broken unintentionally, as had been the case this time.

"Mione, was this something Ginny had intended to give me as a gift when she caught us?"

"Yes," came the almost inaudible reply.

"Why was it glowing?"

"Because it literally had part of Ginny's heart in it. I knew there was a spell which could incorporate part of a person's heart into an inanimate object and she obviously thought it would be a perfect thing to give you. She had made a clay heart and wanted to put a part of herself into it. I was reluctant to give it to her, because I knew about the legend behind it, which meant it should not be given out lightly, but finally gave in after she threatened me with the Bat-Bogey Hex. I never got the chance to tell her about the legend, either ... and at this rate, I'll probably never be able to."

Once it sunk in, Harry was the one who turned pale and tears burned his eyelids. "Oh my God, what have I done? As if it wasn't enough for her to catch us together on Valentine's Day, now this ..."

"No matter what you do, according to the legend, you'll probably never be able to make things totally up to her, because shattering a clay heart with a piece of the real one in it means that the real one has been shattered as well...and it's all the worse when the recipient is someone the giver truly loves."

"Oh, gods, I had no idea it was her gift I had inadvertently shattered ..." Harry's voice was a mixture of horror and pain. "Isn't there any way around that legend you mentioned?"

"Not that I've been able to find," Hermione returned morosely. "This is one time where not even I have all the answers." Worst of all, she had found a small piece of parchment attached to the largest piece of the heart with Ginny's handwriting on it ... obviously a Valentine's Day message to the one she loved. Just the same, Hermione wasn't sure if she should give it to Harry or not; he was feeling bad enough at the moment without that. On the other hand, if she didn't and he found out, he would probably never forgive her.

"Harry, I found something," she finally made herself say as she held out a hand with the parchment in it.

He took it, growing even paler when he realised what it was. He was almost afraid to open it, but knew he had to. He began to read, his heart aching more and his eyes filling with tears, his remorse at knowing how badly he had hurt her increasing exponentially with every passing moment, especially when he sensed the love with which she had written the note.

Harry, luv ...

I made this heart for you myself, and 'Mione helped me put a piece of my heart into it with a special spell. I had a bit of a problem getting her to do it, but she finally gave in. I can't help wondering why she was so reluctant, but what matters is that she finally did it. Please be careful with it, as one should be with all fragile things, be they clay hearts or someone's emotions. Happy Valentine's Day! BTW, thank you for the lovely rose and heart-shaped chocolates. Maybe we can share them later ... and perhaps a nice long snog as well!

All my love,

Ginny

He looked up at her after finishing the note, knowing he would keep it forever. He didn't deserve such a wonderful girl...and now, because of his earlier idiocy, he was likely to lose her, no matter what he did, however he tried to make amends to her. He frankly wouldn't blame her if she ended up hating him after

this and wanted nothing further to do with him. And whatever Ron did to him upon learning of not only the way he had hurt not only Ginny but Ron himself with his perfidy with Hermione, it was no more than he deserved if they both hexed him into next year...no, *less* than he deserved. And how would Ron react upon learning the legend behind that spell?

Harry knew he had pulled some boneheaded stunts in his day, but this one surely topped them all! Of course, even as bad as Harry was feeling right now, it was nothing to how Ginny was feeling ...

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Ginny had never hurt so much in her life. How could Harry do such a thing to her, and on Valentine's Day, of all days? Now she had some idea just why Hermione had been so reluctant to give her the spell. How did she know that she hadn't planned on using it in something to give to Harry herself, never mind that she was supposed to be dating Ron? Also, how did she know that Harry hadn't been shagging Hermione all along? Most importantly, what would Ron say, what would he do, once he found out that Harry was shagging Hermione behind his back? It would serve him right if Ron hexed him into next year...and for that matter, she, Ginny, might decide to join him! And not just Harry, for that matter ... why should Hermione escape punishment? She deserved it as much as he did. And to think Valentine's Day had started out so nice!

She had been so certain that by this time she and Harry would have been alone together in one of their favourite trysting places, indulging in that long, lovely snogging session she had mentioned in her note to him. Instead, here she was, crying her heart out alone and feeling a mixture of anger, pain and surely the worst betrayal ever experienced. She had never dreamed Harry was even capable of such a thing. Well, he obviously was...so she would have to keep that in mind. She also swore that if she ever laid eyes on either of them again that a Bat-Bogey Hex between the eyes would be the very least they would get if they even attempted to approach her, much less speak to her. No one made a fool of Ginny Weasley and got away with it, not even the great Harry Potter or Granger the Brain!

She was so immersed in her painful thoughts that she scarcely heard her brother's voice. "Gin? Are you all right? Can I come in?"

When she didn't refuse him...or answer at all...Ron became concerned and told himself to investigate. He entered carefully, looking around the common room to notice that it was empty save for his sister, and he moved over to sit down beside her shortly before she threw herself into his arms, sobbing anew. He held her and stroked her hair, murmuring soothing words in her ear for several minutes before asking again, "What happened, Red?" using the nickname that only he could get away with calling her.

All she could get out was, "Harry ..."

"Harry? What happened with Harry?"

"I ... tried to ... give him ... Valentine's Day ..." Her voice trailed off into nothing, no longer able to speak understandably through her tears.

"You tried to give him something for Valentine's Day? What happened?"

"I ... found him ..."

"You found him? What was he doing?"

Again, she could only get one word out, but it was enough. "... shagging ..."

"Shagging? Shagging who?"

"Her ... Herm ... Hermione ..."

That shocked Ron into silence, hitting him like the proverbial ton of bricks. He recalled the row he and Hermione had had and how she had run off in tears. At the time he had had no idea where she had gone, but now he did. One thing was for sure...he intended to get some answers, and soon, whatever he had to do. Only Merlin knew just what Ginny had seen when she had come upon them, and he could tell that she wasn't emotionally up to telling him anything further. What mattered most right now was getting her calmed down, even if he had to take her to the Hospital Wing and have Pomfrey give her a Calming Draught.

"It's all right, Sis. We'll get to the bottom of this, even if I have to hex both of those ruddy scuzballs into next year! Meanwhile, let's get you calmed down. I'll take you to the Hospital Wing and get you a Calming Draught." He pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and dried Ginny's tears, then placed her trainers on her feet and got her to stand up. With that, he put an arm around her shoulders and led her out of the room, heading for the Hospital Wing and hopefully a merciful oblivion of dreamless sleep for Gin the next few hours.

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Ginny was oblivious to all those who saw them walk by, although there were several of those they knew who made note of the redness of Ginny's eyes and the puffiness of her face, telltale signs of crying ... and they could just guess who was responsible! Ron was intent on his mission, so he didn't acknowledge the fact that anyone else was present other than to make sure he didn't run into anyone and let no one deter him until he reached the Hospital Wing and Pomfrey.

When they entered, the school mediwitch rushed over, concerned. "Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley. What's wrong?"

"My sister needs a Calming Draught. She's been through an emotional trauma. Then I'd like you to see to it that she has a good night's sleep and is not disturbed, not by anyone ... and I do mean *anyone* ... other than myself."

"As you wish," Pomfrey acquiesced, wondering just what kind of emotional trauma Ron was referring to, but the look on his face discouraged further questions. She merely took the still-distraught Ginny under her wing and led her away to a private bed where she directed her to undress and change into a hospital-issue nightgown, then gave her the Calming Draught mixed with a Sleeping Potion and pulled the screen around her before casting a Silencing Charm so no noise would reach her now-sleeping patient.

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Unfortunately, by the time both Harry and Hermione got near Ginny's room, several people saw them and said that if they were looking for Ginny, that they would likely find her in the Hospital Wing. They could just guess who had taken her there and could only hope he could be reasoned with, but there was no guarantee of that, especially if Ginny had managed to tell him the whole story. Good thing they had thought to bring their wands; they would probably need them.

When they reached the Hospital Wing they asked after Ginny and Pomfrey told them what Ron had instructed her to do ... that if they wished to speak to her, they'd have to wait until tomorrow at the earliest.

Harry's voice carried to Ron and he approached his erstwhile friend, his face a thundercloud and his blue eyes shooting daggers. "There you are, you bloody bastard! You have a colossal nerve, showing your face after what you've done! You're lucky I don't have my hands around your throat right now!"

"Ron, mate, listen to me. You don't know the full story."

"I know enough to know that both of you are going to get yourselves hexed into next year if I don't get some answers. And another thing...you go near my sister again with anything but the best intentions and you'll be sorry! You've done enough to her for one day and she deserves some peace, if only for a little while. Meanwhile, start talking ... and it had better be good!" He took them both into Pomfrey's office, cast Locking and Silencing Charms, then sat down at her desk, holding his wand on them threateningly and daring them to make a move to their own...or even attempt to do any nonverbal spells, because they'd get them back double!

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It wasn't easy for Ron to sit and listen, but he made himself do so, if only for Ginny's sake. "It was a mistake to do what I did, mate, I know that, but Gin never gave me a chance to explain, just ran back out before I could say anything. I swear in Merlin's name that I never meant to hurt her, not for a moment, especially not on Valentine's Day!"

Ron knew Harry well enough to know when he was lying or telling the truth, and sincerity rang out in every word. Unfortunately that didn't change the emotional trauma Ginny had experienced. It would be longer than overnight before she got over this...and even then, it would be a long time before she would allow Harry near her again, much less allow herself to be alone with him any length of time. "I hope at least one of you had brains enough to cast a Contraceptive Charm."

Hermione assured him she had.

"Well, thank Merlin for small favours. At least we won't have to worry about that. But that still doesn't mean I want you two anywhere near her right now."

"What? You can't keep me away from her! She's my girlfriend; I love her. I need to see her, be with her!"

"Well, I'm afraid she isn't going to want either of you anywhere near her for a long time. In fact, I'll be surprised if she's even willing to speak to you or be in the same room with you, much less anything else. If there's anything you have to say to her, write her a note and I'll give it to her. Of course, I can't guarantee she'll read it or answer you, but that's a chance we'll have to take, because in her present condition, seeing either of you right now would just make things worse."

"She can't avoid us forever, you know," Hermione pointed out.

"I know ... but right now, I'm acting as her protector, and if either of you try to defy me, I won't be able to answer for what I'll do," Ron warned, quietly but ominously. "I warned you what would happen if you ever hurt my sister, Harry ... and I assure you, I'll be watching you like the proverbial hawk whenever you're around her after this. And don't be surprised if she's sceptical of everything you say or do for a long time to come. You're going to have to prove yourself to her all over again...and even then, there's no guarantee you'll succeed. I'm sure she never dreamed you capable of such a thing as what you did today, but now that she knows you are ..." Ron's voice trailed off, feeling sad for all concerned. Things were going to be difficult for all of them these next few weeks; he could only hope they would have strength enough...both physical and emotional...to endure it.

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Harry asked Ron if he and Hermione could be with him when Ginny woke up; Ron looked dubious at the idea but finally agreed. However, he warned him that if she wanted either or both of them to leave, he made them give their word that they would. Harry didn't want to agree, but knew he had to, or else he would probably not get a chance to speak to Ginny again for a long time, if ever.

It was late afternoon, well after classes had ended, that Ginny awakened, Ron holding her hand on one side and Harry holding the other one on her other side. She smiled softly at her brother, but turned her head to face Harry, her eyes staring daggers right through him. Harry lowered his eyes in shame, knowing he deserved all he got from her and then some...but it still hurt. "Gin ... please don't look at me like that. You don't know how sorry I am. If it was in my power, I'd take it back in a minute."

"Not half as sorry as I am, Harry. I loved you, believed in you, trusted you ... and you betrayed me. In the worst possible way...and at the worst possible time." Ginny's eyes filled with tears. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed you capable of it." She then looked at Hermione with the same mixture of anger and pain. "Now I think I know why you were so reluctant to give me that spell. You wanted to use it for yourself!"

"No, Gin, that's not it at all. You never gave me a chance to explain the legend behind that spell," Hermione entreated. "What happened was that Ron and I had had a fight; I fled from him and sought out Harry for comfort...and things got terribly out of hand. That is what you walked in on, not an ongoing affair. I know that's hard to believe, but it's true, I swear it in Merlin's name!"

"Get real, 'Mione. That's not even original!" Ginny all but scoffed, although she did look to Ron for confirmation of at least part of Hermione's story. Ron reluctantly nodded when their eyes met and answered the question in his sister's. "And even if it was unintentional, that doesn't excuse what you did."

"What do I have to do to make you believe me, Gin?" Harry entreated. "What's done is done; it can't be taken back...but that doesn't stop me from wishing to Merlin that it could ... and I intend to do everything in my power to make you realise that despite what happened, I still love you with every fibre of my being and always will."

Ginny turned her head away, tears on the verge of overflowing as she tugged her hand out of Harry's. "You should have thought of that before you decided to shag my best friend ... or someone I always *believed* was my best friend!"

"Gin, Hermione told me what you did, the kind of present you'd decided to give me and why you wanted that spell, to literally put a piece of your heart in a handmade gift. After you walked in on us and I wasn't able to explain myself, I was upset and shattered the nearest thing at hand, which turned out to be your gift. 'Mione said that if the recipient shatters the handmade gift, they're essentially shattering the real heart, because of the great love necessary for the spell to work. Again, I can't tell you how sorry I am. Not only for betraying you, your love, trust and belief in me, but inadvertently destroying your gift. Even if you don't believe anything else, believe that I love you, because it's true."

Harry caught her hand again, raised it to his lips and kissed it, meeting her tear-filled eyes with tear-filled eyes of his own. "It was a beautiful, thoughtful thing to do, infusing the clay heart with part of your real heart, and I'm deeply, most profoundly sorry for having proved so unworthy of you. Lastly, even if I have to start from scratch, I intend to prove myself to you again and even take Veritaserum if necessary to make you believe me!"

The depth and sincerity of Harry's feelings reached Ginny, but even at that it couldn't erase the pain he had caused her, nor the sense of betrayal. Probably only time could do that. "All right, Harry, I believe you. But that still doesn't erase the pain you've caused, nor eased the sense of betrayal. You'll just have to bear with me and not pressure me. As I think you can understand, it's going to take longer than overnight before I'll feel anywhere near as comfortable or safe with you as I once did ... and even as much as I still love you, I think we should start seeing other people again."

"I don't want to see anyone but you," he told her.

"Sorry, but you don't have a choice. I'll continue to see you, but not exclusively. It's either that or we break up, totally and completely, right here and now!"

Harry knew Ginny meant what she said, and even as repugnant as the idea of her dating anyone but him was, he knew he had to agree if he wanted to continue seeing her. "All right, if that's what you want." It was obvious that it was not what *he* wanted, but he was going along for her sake.

"It's not what I want, Harry. It's what's necessary. Now I'd appreciate it if you'd leave me alone so I can do some hard thinking. You too, 'Mione." Harry and Hermione exchanged sad, dubious looks, but knew they had to honour Ginny's request. After what they had done to her, however unintentionally, it was the least they could do. The two made their farewells, then once they left the Hospital Wing, he went back to his dorm and Hermione to the library to renew her research on the aforementioned spell.

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Once they had gone, Ginny turned back to Ron; his eyes conveyed sympathy and understanding at the difficulty she had experienced in speaking to Harry as she had, much less sending him away. Finally he gently drew her into his arms and stroked her hair soothingly. She clung to him like a lifeline, as if he were the only thing she had left ... and at the moment, he was. "Ron, what am I going to do? Despite my brave words, I don't want to see anyone else either."

"You've got to try, Sis. Maybe the time's come for you and Harry to be apart for a while, take a break from each other, so to speak."

Ginny reluctantly nodded and held Ron all the tighter, until he was all but breathless. "Do you intend to get back with 'Mione?"

"Possibly. For the time being, though, I think I'll do the same thing with her that you and Harry are doing."

"I love him so much, Ron. How could he...they...ever have betrayed me ... us ... as he...they...did?"

"I don't know, Red. We'll just have to play things by ear, take the situation one day at a time and see what comes up. You'd better get some more sleep now." He released her after kissing her forehead, then stood up and left, trying to convey a reassuring smile as she returned a weak, watery one ... but a smile nonetheless, and Ron felt encouraged, even though he was well aware of the effort it must have cost her.

And the look on Ron's face was such that even the Slytherin Draco Malfoy, whom the young readheaded man passed on the way back to his dorm, was able to surmise that something bad had happened between Harry and Ginny, not to mention Ron and Hermione, and he intended to milk that for all it was worth. Draco smiled evilly to himself. For that matter, he might even decide to give Rita Skeeter an exclusive interview ... but only after he had managed to get Ginny to begin dating him.

Generally she didn't give him the time of day, but now he might have a chance. She and Potter had obviously had a serious falling-out, and he knew all too well what could happen in the case of a rebound, which he fully intended to be, if only to get a rise out of Harry, whatever he had to do to accomplish it. It might also be a good idea to communicate this information to Romilda Vane and her ilk at the first opportunity, so she could go after Harry even as he went after Ginny.

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It was amazing how quickly the news of the trouble between the Trio and Ginny made its rounds throughout the school. Romilda Vane was proving to be even more predatory than usual, but Harry knew the signs to look for and wasn't fooled by her trying to give him something to drink or a certain kind of dessert. He would only accept drinks from Hermione or Ron or get them himself; same with food or desserts. However, he knew Romilda meant business, so he had to keep in mind that love potions could be put into perfume and lipstick and was particularly careful whenever he was around her or her friends.

As for Ginny, the entire male population of Hogwarts (or more specifically, from fifth-years on up) tried to hit on her once they learned of her split from Harry, and one may be assured that she took advantage of her new-found popularity. In fact, Harry would have sworn she was enjoying herself, whatever claims he had heard to the contrary. She seemed to especially enjoy the fact that Draco Malfoy was now hanging around her more and more often, having hit on her a number of times, usually in front of Harry.

It was all he could do to keep from hexing the bloody bastard into next year for laying a hand on her. Only his promise to Ginny kept him from doing it ... but it was becoming progressively more difficult with every passing day. His hands were clenched in such tight fists that his fingernails dug sharply into his palms. So sharply, in fact, that he was reminded of his nightmarish fifth year when that evil cow Umbridge had made him write with a quill which used his own blood for ink.

However, considering the pain in his heart just seeing Ginny with other blokes, not to mention their attentions to her, Harry would far rather have experienced the blood-sucking quill again. At least that pain was at least more-or-less bearable; this latest pain was quickly becoming well-nigh unendurable. He didn't know how much longer he would be able to stand it. Worst of all were Draco's superior smirks in his direction even in the midst of snogging Ginny publicly, leaning against the wall of the Great Hall near the Gryffindor table in full view of Harry and company, having chosen that particular area on purpose because he knew that was where Harry generally sat.

He had managed to go on a few dates with girls such as Luna Lovegood and Susan Bones, although these were usually short, few and far between. They told themselves

they understood why Harry was so distant with them and felt sorry for what he was going through, even though they were at least technically on Ginny's side in this latest situation. Most of the girls were, in fact; that is, except for the Slytherins and Romilda and her friends.

Ron and Hermione truly felt for Harry, understanding the blazing pain of jealousy which both consumed his heart and made his eyes roar green flames behind his glasses whenever he saw Draco kissing and fondling Ginny. Even the few dates Ginny had granted him only seemed to make things worse, because she would neither allow him to kiss her, put an arm around her or even hold her hand. He vividly remembered the feel of her in his arms, the warm sweetness of her lips, her soft moans of pleasure as he moved sensuously against her, the smell of her perfume ... More than one time he had jumped on his Firebolt, shot away from the school until out of earshot of everyone, then screamed and swore at the top of his lungs until his pain and anger were at least temporarily extinguished.

Her former boyfriends, Michael Corner and Dean Thomas, had both been out with her at least twice since the public split, but it was Draco who seemed to be spending the most time with her. Harry was sure that what his friends had told him was right, that Draco was only doing it to try and get a rise out of him, so even as much as he wanted to, he dared not allow himself to be provoked. It was the hardest thing he had ever done, so Ginny bloody well better appreciate it!

It was about two weeks into the most horrendous month of his life before Sirius finally managed to answer him.

Sorry to take so long to get back to you, mate ... and that things are so difficult between you and Gin right now, but I'm sure you know you brought it on yourself. Maybe you hadn't intended to do it, but it did happen and Ginny knows it. I'm afraid you're just going to have to live with it as best you can, at least for the time being. Just the same, my heart goes out to you. I can definitely understand how you're feeling right now...certainly your father would, considering all that your mum put him through before finally accepting him...and I will help you in whatever way I can.

I can definitely relate to your feelings regarding Draco and his actions with Ginny, however. It's Hell to see the girl you love being manhandled by a smarmy git like that and be unable to do anything about it. What's worse, she's allowing him to do it ... and in front of you to boot! Just the same, Ron and Hermione are right. You mustn't give him the satisfaction of knowing how much it bothers you.

I know how much it hurts that you cannot be holding her, kissing her and loving her yourself, but that should teach you to keep your bloody hands to yourself, not to mention keep your ruddy bits inside your trousers. Once you do manage to get back in Ginny's good graces, and I have no doubt that you will eventually, I also suggest you make sure to touch, hold and kiss only your current girlfriend ... if only to avoid this sort of trouble again.

Keep me posted as to the latest developments. Best of luck to you, mate.

Sirius

Harry couldn't say he was totally pleased with Sirius's response, but then he'd fully expected to get lectured, so he wasn't all that surprised. At the same time, it made him feel better to know that Sirius did sympathise with him where and when it counted most. Meanwhile, he had to deal as best he could with both sides of the issue ... or more accurately, the highly polarised groups of students and faculty alike, part of whom were hard-core Ginny supporters, others neutral, and still others able to see both sides, but still glad to see that Ginny wasn't letting Harry get away with what he'd done.

Yet others believed she was being just a bit too hard on him, hardly allowing him near her, and even when she did, she never let him touch her. Some responded to criticism like that in this general manner: "How can you say that? He cheated on her...and what's more with her best friend!"

"It still isn't fair to him that she lets Draco snog and fondle her, yet won't let Harry touch her," another snapped in the other person's direction.

"Well, I say it's no more than he deserves after what he did to her," came the equally snappish reply.

"I still say she's convicting him on circumstantial evidence."

"Circumstantial evidence? For Merlin's sake, she saw him naked in bed with another woman! You call that 'circumstantial'? Sounds pretty damning to me, especially when he wouldn't do that with her!"

"Just the same, everybody close to him says he's a terrible liar, so when he says he's sorry and will do all in his power to make it up to her, she may believe him."

"I myself would require more than a simple 'I'm sorry' from someone I caught cheating on me, even if it was supposedly unintentional, as he claims."

There were many such conversations going on all over the school; Harry managed to ignore most of them, as did Ron and Hermione, but it's what Draco eventually did that came out in the *Daily Prophet* the next day that he couldn't ignore. And naturally he'd had to go to that nasty sensationalist cow Rita Skeeter to boot!

The headline went something like this:

DRACO MALFOY AND GINNY WEASLEY TO MARRY?

Slytherin Head Boy Has Proposed Marriage to Only Weasley Daughter, Former Girlfriend of Boy-Who-Lived

By Rita Skeeter

That was as much as Harry could take; he threw down the paper and pointed a finger at it, intending to burn it to a crisp with a nonverbal *Incendio* Charm ... which is just what he did.

"He's bloody well gone too far, the stinking bastard! Just wait until I get my hands on him!"

"You can't, Harry! That could drive Ginny right into his arms, if only out of sympathy. Do you want that?" Ron pointed out. "I don't like it any more than you do, but we can't just go off half-cocked here!"

"Neither can I just sit by and do nothing. I love her!"

"Besides, the article says he's still waiting for her answer, so nothing's firm yet," Hermione put in, further scanning the page. "So you still have a chance to win her back."

"Bloody hell, don't you think I've been trying? But she keeps turning me down for dates in favour of Draco! I can't force the issue; otherwise I'll lose her for all time ... but I can't let her marry him either! What am I going to do?"

"I don't know, mate ... but we'll do all we can to help you," Ron promised. "Even if it means getting the entire rest of our family involved in this."

Ginny herself wasn't too pleased upon seeing the damning headline in the *Daily Prophet* either, but there wasn't much she could do about it ... and Merlin knew what Harry must have thought, how he must have reacted upon seeing it! She really didn't know how much longer she could keep up this charade, but still wasn't fully convinced of Harry's sincerity yet. Just the same, she really didn't want to marry anyone else either, no matter what that headline said. Draco had indeed proposed, but she hadn't given him a definite answer, saying it was such a sudden thing that she needed time to think it through.

He'd looked suspiciously at her, as if he knew (or suspected) why she was hesitating, but didn't argue with her or insist on an immediate answer, for which she was

thankful. And naturally she'd heard of the polarised factions, from some who backed her all the way to those who could see both sides but agreed that Ginny mustn't let Harry get away with what he did. She personally thought the matter had gone far enough, but so far Harry hadn't made a move against Draco, even though she was equally sure he wanted to.

Perhaps Ron and Hermione had warned him against doing it supposedly because that could drive her right into Draco's arms, if only out of sympathy. Just the same, she would have thought Harry'd have at least confronted Malfoy before now! And she herself wasn't helping matters, denying Harry the physical pleasures she was granting the Slytherin. Even at that, she had seen what kind of temper Draco had and was frankly afraid to cross him by refusing him. How could she ever have let it get this far out of hand? She had no further right to judge Harry's actions after what she herself had done. For Merlin's sake, Draco was the son of a Death Eater as well as an accused Death Eater himself!

She had to talk to Ron soon, if not Hermione, see if he could advise her ... but not to say anything to Harry just yet, that she preferred to tell him herself. With Ginny to think was to act, so she grabbed her roll of parchment, conjured up a Self-Inking quill and scribbled a note to her brother, suggesting to him to bring Hermione with him if he could, that she needed to meet with him quickly...the sooner the better, in fact! She headed up to the Owlery and told the first owl she walked up to, a brown female, to take this to Ron Weasley and told him in the note to meet her in the Gryffindor common room; Draco was less likely to corner her there.

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It was just after dinner that evening that Ginny met up with Ron and Hermione in the Gryffindor common room; in spite of herself she was glad not to see Harry anywhere. They went to a secluded corner and Hermione cast a *Muffliato* spell so that they would not be overheard by anyone else in the room.

"Okay, Sis, we're here. What did you want to talk to us about?"

"Draco's proposed to me and is expecting an answer ... the kind of answer I know I must give, but am afraid to give, knowing his temper. I need your advice as to what to do next."

Hermione shook her head dubiously. "You've really done it now, Gin. You should never have let it go this far."

"No one knows that better than I do, 'Mione. Is there anything either of you can suggest to get me out of this?"

"I can think of something, but even under the best of circumstances, I can't guarantee it'll work. Even at that, we'll have to see if Harry's willing to go along with it."

"Harry? What does he have to do with it?" Ginny's eyes widened incredulously.

"Everything. As far as I can see it, the only way you can get out of marrying Draco is to accept Harry's proposal."

The silence after that was almost thick enough to cut; it was only after ten minutes of this that Ginny spoke again. She now realised that she had never stopped loving Harry, despite how it may have seemed, and would be more than willing to marry him in spite of what he'd done to her. The question was, would he still be willing to marry her?

"That's all well and good, but how can you be sure that Harry will be willing after the way I've been treating him?"

"Because I know he still loves you. In fact, he hardly stops talking about you; there are times I feel like casting *silencio* spell so I don't have to listen to him. He's even confessed times that he's jumped on his broom, flown out of earshot of everyone, then screamed and swore until everything was out of his system ... at least for the moment. I've even heard that he has broken down and cried in Sirius's arms over you! If that doesn't say it all, I don't know what does."

Ginny bowed her head and closed her eyes in pain, for both Harry and herself. One thing was for sure, she had some heavy apologising to do. Harry wasn't one to cry over something or someone unless he felt very deeply about it ... and if anything indicated his deep feelings for her, that did. Harry was more likely to be almost as stoic as a statue, having learned the hard way not to show how he felt if he wanted to survive another day in the house of his abusive relatives. Thank Merlin he was away from them forever and staying with Sirius until he could get a flat of his own, which he didn't intend to do until after he was officially out of school.

"Of course, he'd probably hex me into next year if he knew I'd told you, so don't tell him ... at least not while I'm around anyway."

"Don't worry, I won't...but if he asks point-blank how I found out, you know I can't lie. But getting back to Draco ... what do I do if he confronts me and demands an answer?"

"We'll be with you ... as will Harry. We've just got to find him now and explain things." With that, the three left the Gryffindor common room and headed for the seventh-year boys' dorm, which was where Harry usually was if he wasn't anywhere else.

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It was Hermione who knocked on the door. "Harry? Can we come in? We need to talk to you."

A dull, apathetic voice answered. "Why not?"

When they walked in, they saw Harry sitting on his bed, his hair messier than it had ever been and his face covered with three days of beard, his clothes wrinkled as if he'd slept in them several nights in a row ... not to mention not having bathed for several days. A large bottle of Firewhisky was sitting on his bedside table. When they got closer, they realised that his normally bright, sparkling green eyes were both clouded with drink and pain-filled behind his round glasses, as well as half-ringed with dark circles that just wouldn't quit. That told Ginny better than any words that he needed her...and right now! There was no time to lose.

His head remained bowed even as his friends stood beside his bed, aching for him but knowing that only Ginny could make him truly happy again. She finally approached him and gently lifted his chin to face her. He smiled for the first time in days and covered her hand with his before bringing it to his lips.

"Gin."

"Harry. Ron and 'Mione have told me what you've been through. Please don't be upset with them; they care about you. Besides, I know that it's my fault for treating you as I have. Forgive me." Her brown eyes were soft as they gazed into his green ones. "I never stopped loving you; I hope you know that. That headline in the *Daily Prophet* is a load of rubbish. However, Draco is going to be demanding an answer from me, and the reason we're here is because we need your cooperation in order to pull it off."

If nothing else, that made Harry sit up and take notice. "What kind of cooperation?" After they told him, Harry brightened considerably. "You've got it! Just tell me when."

"We'll have to make it convincing," she warned.

"Oh, I intend to, I assure you ... and what better time than now to do it?"

"What are you saying, Harry?"

"Marry me. Once we get out of school, that is."

Again, there was a silence almost thick enough to cut until it sunk in to Harry's three companions that he meant it.

"Are you serious, mate?" Ron got his voice back first.

"I've never been more so. I just need to have Sirius get my mother's engagement ring out of my vault since I can't leave school to do it myself. So what do you say, Gin? Will you still have me, idiosyncrasies and all?"

Her answer was a smile and a lingering kiss ... so lingering, in fact, that Ron and Hermione began to get uncomfortable. "Get a room, you two!" Ron finally called out to break up the reunited lovers.

"Sorry," Harry apologised after reluctantly releasing Ginny. "Now, if the three of you will be so kind as to give me a few minutes to make myself presentable, we'll go find the Ferret and give him the news." With that, he excused himself to go into the bathroom to shower. The look he gave Ginny just before closing the door told her that he wouldn't have minded her sharing said shower, yet couldn't do it with Ron and Hermione present ... but just wait until they were properly alone again!

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Harry seemed literally transformed upon their seeing him again; he had even used a simple Cosmetic Charm to hide the dark circles. He wore a light shirt under a green jumper with an "H" on it, accompanied by a well-fitting pair of black jeans and his favourite clunky black shoes. He had even brushed his teeth, which prompted Ginny to kiss him lingeringly again. His lips had been as warm and sweet as ever during the previous kiss; she just preferred fresh breath to the virulent case of halitosis he had had up that point. Now he looked more like the Harry she knew and still loved.

They waited a few minutes more while he wrote a note to Sirius, telling him to get Lily Potter's engagement ring out of Harry's personal vault, which he had had transferred there upon turning seventeen and after he had gotten seriously involved with Ginny. "Okay, I'm ready now," he said upon giving the envelope with the note to Hedwig and telling her to take it to Sirius. "Let's go find Draco and show him the superiority of Gryffindor over Slytherin once and for all!"

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By this time it was dinnertime, and the four went to the Great Hall, all of them heading for the Gryffindor table. However, halfway there, Draco confronted Ginny and demanded an answer to his proposal. "I'm sorry, Draco. Your proposal was most flattering and I was honoured by it, but Harry has already proposed...and I've accepted." She gave Harry a meaningful look and he slid a possessive arm around her.

Malfoy gave them both suspicious looks. "Is that true, Potter, or are you lying to help her weasel out of marrying me?"

"All too true, Ferret-Boy. I've even owed my godfather to get my mother's engagement ring and send it to me so I can make it official." Harry relished the mixture of incredulity, anger and pain on the blond Slytherin's face before Draco sighed and shrugged.

"I should have known I was nothing but a rebound. In which case, I'd better go see if Pansy is willing to take me back. Good luck, Potter, Weaselette. You'll need it. And maybe if you have any luck, you'll end up killing each other." With that, Draco stalked off to the Slytherin table and pointedly ignored them the rest of the evening.

The others began laughing in spite of themselves even as Harry squeezed Ginny and kissed her again before they sat down to the best meal they'd ever had in their lives ... or at least the best meal as far as Harry was concerned, because he had the girl he loved back and had gotten a pound of flesh out of his long-time nemesis in front of everyone in school. Once the meal was over, the two couples went their separate ways...Ron and Hermione to their own rendezvous while Harry had convinced Ginny to come back to his dorm with him in order that he be able to show her just how happy he was to have her as his own again ... and then some! By the time he was finished with her, Harry intended to make sure that Ginny never doubted his love for her again.