

The Mutual Deal

by *Southern_Witch_69*

Hermione and Draco pretend to be dating in order to dodge relationships with Ron and Pansy. Will they truly develop feelings for each other?

Helping Each Other

Chapter 1 of 11

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Disclaimer: These characters were created by J.K.R. Lucky woman! I would love to be profiting off of this, but alas, I'm not.

Thanks to my original beta, Charmed_Nay, and also, I want to send thanks to CocoaChristy for helping me to dust this off and make it presentable.

SW69 says: I feel the need to be honest. The Draco in this story is a bit nicer than most people will like him. If you are looking for a sneering brat, this isn't the story for you. Also, I might as well point out that Hermione is a little innocent in the ways of love... for now. Hehe!

Hermione looked at the grounds of Hogwarts, and for the hundredth time, she said a prayer of thanks that the school had been allowed to reopen after the year they'd lost while the war raged on around them. The school wasn't very safe for the students, as they'd had an attack there, and most parents didn't allow the majority to return, although everyone had been invited back. Even though not everyone had returned, the school still had enough students to resume all normal activities. She didn't mind that they would be graduating a year later than they should have. She just wanted the chance to complete her schooling and take her N.E.W.T.s.

There was only one thing marring her year so far. Ron. He'd been trying to flirt with her since things had returned to normal. His relationship with Lavender Brown was over, and now that Voldemort was dead, he was ready to settle down, according to his mum anyway. In Hermione's mind, it was too late for that. He'd had his chance to have her on more than one occasion, but he never stayed away from Lavender long enough to develop anything meaningful with her instead.

She frowned as she saw him making his way over to her. *Oh, no!* Hermione thought. *He's going to ask me out!* Ron had a lopsided grin, red cheeks, and a hopeful expression.

"Oi!" he called when he got closer. "Can I sit?"

"I can't charge you to do so," she said cheekily.

Ron laughed, sat down, and immediately said, "I need to ask you something, Hermione. I've been thinking on it off and on, mostly for the past year. Do you have a minute?"

She tried to think fast. She had known this was coming, and only the day before, Ginny had confirmed that Ron wanted to date her on a serious level. It was something that she had truly wanted for a while, but when he finally broke things off with Lavender for good the last time, she couldn't help but to feel bitter about how he'd treated her.

"Before you do," she said, saying the first thing that came to mind, "I want to make sure that you will be at dinner tonight. I am going to surprise you and Harry... with my boyfriend!" She said the last part with fake enthusiasm. She didn't want to hurt him, but she just couldn't see Ron as her boyfriend. Not any longer. They were too close

now that they'd spent the past year sharing close quarters with Harry while dodging Voldemort until the final battle had taken place. It would be like dating a brother. The only reason they'd come back to school this year was to get their certificates and take their tests.

When Hogwarts had finally reopened, the governors decided since everyone missed a year, school would resume as if it had only been a long holiday. The older students, being legal adults, were given more privileges and shared quarters together in an unused tower, which had been divided into four sets of dormitories. Each set of dormitories represented one of the Houses of Hogwarts, but they all shared a common room. Not many used it, however, as House rivalries still existed.

"B-boyfriend?" His mouth gaped open.

"Yes. We've finally decided to go public. We felt that it was best to keep things a secret for a while. I was just thinking of that when you came here." She blinked as if just remembering something. "Oh, what were you going to ask me now?" she asked innocently.

"Hell, I've forgotten." Disappointment flashed in his eyes. "Does Harry know who he is?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nobody knows! Well, see you tonight," she said and ran off towards the library before he could question her more.

At that same moment, Draco was in the library. Pansy had cornered him. "Come on, Draco. You know our parents want us to be married as soon as we are finished with this useless bit of schooling. It will be over soon. Just accept it, and let's get back to the way we used to be before the war," she said shamelessly, running her fingers along his chest through the opening of his robes.

"Pansy, I can't." He pulled her hands away from his chest. "I... I am in love with someone else," he blurted, nearly groaning because he sounded like an utter fool. He didn't like being put on the spot and said the first excuse that came to his mind. Why the hell had he said that? Her eyes narrowed at first, but then, they softened while she sighed dreamily.

She grinned as if he were a young boy caught being naughty. "So what? I am as well. He doesn't exactly know it, but I'm working on that. Nothing wrong with a quick bit of play before I'm officially off limits." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter anyway, Draco. We're being matched for money, blood, and station. Not love."

"But I truly plan to marry *her* one day. I thought after all that had happened we would be able to choose for ourselves," he said, trying to sound firm. "I just wanted to come back for this last year of schooling so I didn't have to work in the family business with father yet. And," he raised an eyebrow, "I've not been able to admit that to my father. You know how he expects the best of me."

"Well, if you have someone, why don't I know about her?" she asked, slight pout on her face.

"Because... because she's not a pureblood. Father will go mad once he finds out. I'm biding my time," he said. That should convince her as to why he had kept it a secret if nothing else would. She knew that his parents were forthright on their true feelings when it came to those not of pureblood.

"Who is she?" she demanded, stamping her foot.

"I can't say," he replied quickly.

"Well, Draco, I *can* accept you being with someone else, even though you have bedded me. As I have said, I love someone else, too, but I wouldn't dare go against my father's wishes." She paused in thought. "However, if you are brave enough to do it first and break things off with me, I might be willing to do the same." She smiled softly. It was a smile he'd never seen her use before. It almost made her look genuine. Usually Pansy conducted herself unappealingly...whinging voice, fake mannerisms, and icy demeanor. Even in bed. He saw her eyes narrow again. "How do I know that you aren't lying to me? Are you just trying to trick me into going against my father's wishes?"

He gulped. "Because I'm not. I'll tell you who she is tonight at dinner. I just need to prepare her first," he said. He pushed off quickly and made his way to the back table in the farthest corner where he went to get away from everyone sometimes.

Draco sighed inwardly. *Granger!* She always had her nose stuck in some book or other. Well, she'd just have to move from his damn table! "Off you go, Mudblood. I need this table," he said, not using his normal hateful tone, just an annoyed one. He had other things on his mind than baiting her.

"Bugger off, Ferret Boy. I'm busy," she said absently without even looking at him. She seemed quite upset.

"Busy, are you? Not one book open. Staring off into space is what you are doing. Why so put out, Granger? Get turned down by Potty, did you?" He sneered as hatefully as he could, given his inner turmoil.

That brought her eyes to his. "Lord, I wish it were that simple," she muttered finally. "Go on. Have a seat. I don't care. I'm just hiding out for a bit."

That caught his attention. Awkwardly, he pulled out a chair and sat next to her. "So... Potty wants you, but you don't want him. And now, you are hiding at my favorite table."

"No, no! Not Harry. Ron." She looked exasperated and began muttering to herself.

"I take it you told him no?" he asked incredulously. *I mean, Weasley is a dolt, but he is a pureblood. She hasn't had many offers since Krum back in fourth year. Seems as though she should accept any offer.* "I would have thought that you'd be pleased to have one of your arsehole friends after you."

"Maybe before the war, but not now, as we're truly *only* friends! I don't want to ruin that. And I didn't give him the chance to finish asking me out because I wanted to save him the embarrassment," she said softly. "I told him I had a boyfriend and was going to introduce them tonight. I said that we'd been keeping it a secret for our own reasons." She looked miserable. He watched as she put her head down in her hands and sighed.

Draco grinned and then broke into laughter. "Unreal!" he said finally. She was watching him through narrowed eyes from under her hands. It only made him laugh harder.

"It's not funny, Malfoy! I've lied to one of my best friends. Now, I'm just... completely done for. Where will I find a boy on such short notice? And why am I even telling you anyway? Not like you'd understand!" she said angrily.

"Oh, don't I? I'm in the same position. My parents wanted me to marry Pansy before the school year was even finished. I've gotten them to think I want to wait until right after school just to buy some time. They think that now that the war is over, everyone can just go back to the way things were before. I'm not for it, but Pansy is. She loves someone else, but she'll likely never tell him, not wanting to go against her father's wishes." He smirked for a moment. "I've just told her that I've fallen for someone else and was planning to marry the new lover I'd found as soon as I was able to tell my father." He was suddenly horrified. He'd just confided to Granger about his problems.

She giggled. "Well, then, I guess you *can* sympathize with me, can't you?"

She was laughing at him! *How dare she laugh at me?* he thought bitterly. He quickly realized he'd done the same. Instead of a harsh reply, he joined in with the laughter. "I guess I can," he agreed. "Right then. I'm off to pay someone to be my girlfriend. Good luck." He nodded to her and sped off. Just where could he find someone who wouldn't blab about this?

Ron tapped Harry on the shoulder for the second time since he'd come in from talking to Hermione. "Come on, Harry. Stop ignoring me. If she had a boyfriend we would know about it."

"Maybe not. You know how she goes off alone at times." Harry shrugged. "We never knew she was seeing Krum in fourth year, did we?"

"That was different. I've been watching her for a while now. There is no way that she has another bloke. Unless..." His voice trailed off as he looked over at Neville and Seamus. Both were laughing in hushed tones over something. "I wonder which of them it is."

Harry looked up. "Who?" Ron nodded at the boys. "Neither. Trust me."

"I wonder if she's just trying to put me off. Ginny told me earlier that she didn't think Hermione was too keen on having a boyfriend. I'll bet she made this up, knowing I was going to ask her." Ron nodded. "Yeah. That's what it is. I'll just take my time and win her over." He looked over to the corner of the room where Pansy Parkinson was dabbing her eyes and confiding something to Millicent Bultstrode. *Wonder what that git Malfoy did to her now.*

"That's a possibility, though Hermione is too honest to outright lie to you... or to me," Harry said dismissively. "Keeping a secret is one thing. You know, Ron, when Hermione tried to get you to commit to her, you were the one to go crawling back to Lavender. If you've lost your chance now, it's your own fault."

"Wicked," Ron said suddenly, forgetting about his problems with Hermione. "Look at Dean's new broom." Both made their way over to their friend.

Hermione stood at the top of the Astronomy Tower, shoulders sagging. She couldn't think of anyone who would knowingly help her with her plan, being that it was one of dishonesty. She'd hate to pull anyone else into her lies. How did she allow herself to get in this situation? *Damn! I hope Malfoy has had better luck. Speak of the wizard!* "You following me around?" she asked when he came through the door.

"Hell, no. Hiding again. Can't think of one damn chit who could keep her mouth shut no matter how much I paid her," he spat angrily. "You find someone?"

She shook her head and returned to looking out over the grounds of Hogwarts. It was a warm evening, but there was a cool breeze out. It felt good against her skin.

Draco cleared his throat to get her attention. When she didn't look, he spoke to her. "Granger?"

"Hmmm?"

"How about you? You know the whole story, and you need someone as well. We can carry on for about a month until Ron and Pansy move on. After that, we can just break things off."

Draco sounded desperate, and from the look on his face, she could see that it was only as a last resort that he was asking her. *Of course! It is perfect a perfect plan, but could I handle being around him?* Ron and Harry would understand why she had kept Draco a secret, and everyone would know why he had kept Hermione a secret. His family hated those that were not of pureblood. Only because she truly needed help would she agree to his plan.

"It makes sense. I accept," she said uncertainly, holding out her hand for a shake. He took it, and she was amazed at his firm grip. "It's only for a month after all. We just need to spend time together so that we can make it look real."

He cringed inwardly a bit. *Spend time with her? Hell, I thought I'd just point her out in a crowd and pretend she was my lover.* He sighed. He supposed she was right. Couldn't claim to be dating and then never be seen together, could they? "Ok, I suppose that's not so bad, but we really *do* need to make it look real. Pansy won't be fooled easily."

"I don't think that Ron and Harry would either. They know me better than anyone. I could tell them that we started studying together in the library and meeting in our common room on late nights after everyone else turned in for the night. They hardly ever go in the library with me anymore, and I doubt they are up all hours of the night to be checking if I'm in the common room. They won't know the difference," she said.

"Right. I really have been going to the library to work on Arithmancy away from my Housemates. They wouldn't know if I've been going to the common room late nights either. That could be our story. Either that or I could always say you cast a Love Hex on me." He grinned nastily. "People would definitely believe that!"

"Oi! Who's to say *you* didn't Love Hex me? I mean... you are *Malfoy*, an arrogant little snot that I've always loathed, that everyone loathes," she said heatedly.

That wiped the grin off his face. "Am I so bad, Granger?" he asked. "My family helped Potter win. Don't forget about that."

"Yes, they helped, and yes, you are that bad...mostly," she replied honestly. "You're always making trouble for us. It doesn't matter that the war is over. You call me a Mudblood and tell us how superior you are to us. You're always after Harry about something or other. Teasing Ron. I hate it. It's immature."

"Now, now, love," he said mockingly, trying to brush aside her hurtful words. "We can't be having our first fight before anyone knows that we are together, now can we? Come here." He pulled her to his chest and hugged her, hoping to shock her into shutting up.

His actions stunned her. After a moment of relaxing against him, she pushed back forcefully. "What are you playing at?"

"We've got to practice! I can't have you cringing when I touch you. People will always be watching." He stopped when he saw her incredulous expression and pushed her away. "Fine! I thought you wanted people to think we've been secretly dating. Is that not how lovers act?" he asked sarcastically.

"Well, yes, but it's so... not you. It just surprised me is all. I didn't think you'd really want to... touch me," she said. *Damn! He is charming when he isn't acting like a brat.* "You're almost... appealing."

His hardened gaze softened, and the malicious retort died in his throat. Instead, he ran a finger along her cheek. "You know, you are very pretty. Why wouldn't I accept the chance to touch you?" He bent his head to kiss her lips softly. She opened her mouth to say something, so he took advantage. They kissed experimentally at first; then things got hot. He could feel her responding to him; whether she realized it or not, he was uncertain, but it made him respond to her. When his hands moved to her arse, grasping firmly, she gasped and pulled away. By her expression, he could see she was clearly shocked. Probably never had anyone touch her there, he'd wager.

"What?" he asked defensively when she waggled a finger at him.

She licked her lips and looked away in confusion. "Uh... Right... That was very believable. I think if we can get along *that* well, nobody will know the difference." She grinned sheepishly. "Good... acting, Draco."

She had never called him that before. Oddly enough it didn't sound strange to him. It seemed inviting. *Knew she would want more. All the girls do.* She gave him a warm smile as if in welcome. He pulled her to him again. This time he brought his lips to her neck. She smelled flowery and felt soft. It was a stark contrast from Pansy's expensive, overpowering perfume that nearly made him choke when he got too close and her bony body that lacked curves. He heard a sound escape her lips.

It was a pity he'd never seen her this way in all the time he'd known her. She'd always been Granger the Mudblood sidekick of Harry Potter or the bushy-haired overachiever. He'd never respected her until she'd slapped him in their third year. That had taken backbone. After that, he'd hated her for being pretty at the ball with Krum, hated that she was getting so much media attention. The media should have been paying attention to more worthy people like himself. He would readily admit that he

enjoyed taunting her, making fun of her teeth, and getting her angry. He'd never thought anything of it, but now...

He rubbed his body against hers, moving his lips lower in an attempt to nuzzle her alluring cleavage. She pulled back abruptly.

Oh, my! she thought, feeling her cheeks heating. *I was honestly enjoying that. It was so unlike Viktor or Ron. It felt good.* She felt herself leaning back into him and intent on pulling him back to her. Horrified, she decided that she had to get out of there before she allowed him to assault her with more kisses. "Good acting again. Come on," she said, hoping to sound unimpressed and boldly taking his hand to lead him towards the stairs.

"Who's acting?" he muttered. Then, more clearly, he said, "Right. As if a Mudblood could turn me on."

She stopped. "You will have to call me Hermione and pretend that my *dirty* blood doesn't bother you. Can you do that?" she asked vehemently.

He thought for a moment. This would ruin his reputation greatly. Everyone would call him a hypocrite... behind his back of course. He sighed. There was no other option. And he had already told Pansy that his girl was not a pureblood, so it all fit perfectly. Come to think of it, Pansy wasn't all that disgusted about it. Maybe the others wouldn't care either. After they staged their break up, he could always say he'd been Love Hexed to try to recover some of his reputation. He finally answered her. "Yes, Hermione." When he said her name, he saw her eyes brighten. It made him grin impishly. *I think if I really wanted to, I could have my way with her. It would be so easy to take advantage of this. Imagine the expressions on the faces of Potty and Weasel!*

"You have such a nice smile, Draco. You should do it more. Looks better than that sneer you always wear." It made him look softer and more approachable to her.

"Yeah, well, maybe you should lose the know-it-all attitude. Might make people actually want to get to know you," he retorted sharply. As soon as he said it, he wished he could take it back. A hurt expression had passed over her face. Nevertheless, she still held his hand and guided him to the Great Hall. She broke the silence then.

"Ready?" she asked softly.

Draco did feel a bit nervous. He was worried about what others thought of him. This would change things. Nobody would outright tell him anything, but they would all be talking about him behind his back. What would her friends say? She would endure as much gossip as he would over this and suffer just as many questions from her friends. When he noted her hesitant expression, he said, "Hey, look... about what I said back there..."

"Shhh. 'S all right."

"We'll not sit together tonight. I'll just walk you to your table. We don't even have to snog in front of them yet. It will give them time to accept us first before they see that," he said. She nodded. They walked through the door closely together, her hand tightly held by his. He noticed for the first time that her palm was actually damp. *She is definitely as nervous as I am. I can't let her mess this up,* he thought in annoyance. He had to take control over the situation before she would break. Not many had yet noticed them, so he led her closer to the Gryffindor table before stopping near the section with her friends, thankful that the older students were still allowed to sit with their old Houses. Taking her other hand in his free one, he pulled her closer to him and stared into her eyes. He loved that wide-eyed innocent expression she gave him. It made him feel like he was in charge. It made him want to reassure her that *he* could handle things.

"Meet me tonight at the tower again near nine," he said suddenly in a voice only meant for her.

"Maybe," she replied softly. She felt like she was getting pulled into something more than she had bargained for. He was looking at her in seeming adoration. It made her tingle, though she knew it was a false expression.

He raised both hands to his lips and kissed them softly. "Have a good dinner, my love. I'll see you tonight," he said loudly, knowing everyone in the vicinity could hear him.

"You too, Draco," she said easily, kissing his cheek. He let go of her hands and turned towards the Slytherin table. There were some catcalls and whistling for him from the males, but he only smirked smugly.

Hermione saw that some of the girls looked outraged. Pansy, however, just smiled knowingly. She found herself smiling back slightly. When she turned towards her own table, she saw open-mouthed stares and shock. Ron had a horror-struck look on his face. Harry had an unreadable one. She sat next to Harry anyway and said, "So... I guess you now know who my boyfriend is, eh?"

Southern's Notes: I like the whole bad boy and good girl thing To me, it always seems like opposites attract!!

Christy's Notes: I think these two are going to trick themselves right into love!

Help From Harry

Chapter 2 of 11

Hermione admits the truth to Harry, and he reluctantly agrees to help her. She later spends some time with Draco.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling created all characters. No money for me! I own nothing here except the plot. Happy reading!

Thanks go to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and also to CocoaChristy for helping me dust this old story off and making it presentable.

Hermione felt very uncomfortable through dinner. She felt eyes on her from every table in the Great Hall. What made her feel the worst was the pair of hurt eyes across from her and the suspicious ones next to her. Harry and Ron hadn't mentioned a thing about Draco.

Ginny came in after everything had happened and sat next to Ron. She hadn't seen the public display of affection between Hermione and her new beau.

"Why is everyone so glum?" she asked brightly.

"I don't know," said Hermione innocently.

"You... *don't*... know?" sneered Ron. He rolled his eyes and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Now isn't the time," Harry said quickly before Hermione could answer.

Ron just snorted in reply. Ginny looked at each of them quietly. Hermione sighed. She toyed with her food, her appetite lost. Harry leaned over and whispered, "Come talk to me." She simply nodded. He got up and left the hall, claiming the need to start on his Potions essay. She waited until he was gone for a minute before silently getting up to follow him.

She heard whispers from every direction. Taking a chance, Hermione dared to glance at Draco. He was watching her intently. She gave him a shaky smile, and he winked at her. She heard Blaise Zabini taunt him, but he didn't seem to mind. She kept walking, pretending not to hear.

Once in the corridor, she spotted Harry and walked quickly to him. "Follow me," he said firmly and pulled her into an empty classroom. He warded the door to be sure that nobody else would come in or hear their conversation. "What's going on, Mione?" He had a hand on her arm tightly. She shrugged it off.

"It's complicated, Harry. I don't know what to say," she said softly.

"Why not start with the truth? I know you haven't been seeing Malfoy. What's he done to you?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

She sighed. She had to tell Harry the truth. She owed him that much. "All right, but please don't be angry for my deception. I felt I had no other choice." He steered her to a table and sat with her. "Harry, Ron was going to ask me out today. I could feel it. Yesterday, Ginny told me he was definitely going to do it soon. I just... I went mental for a moment. I didn't want to hurt him by telling him no."

Harry nodded, but his eyes grew cold. "So... You went and picked out the first git you saw?"

"No!" she said desperately. "No, it wasn't like that, Harry. Please listen to me. I was in the library. Draco came in. We talked." Tears formed in her eyes. Her sweet Harry, her best friend, was looking at her in disgust. When he tried to get up, she pulled him back down to her. "Wait, Harry, please let me finish," she begged. She told him the entire story from start to end. When she was done, he looked away for a long while before finally hugging her.

"Hermione, there could have been another way. You could have come to me. We'd have thought of something. What do you think hurts him more...you turning him down or you being with Malfoy?" he asked wisely.

"I know. It just seemed like a good idea at the time. I thought it was the answer. Draco and I both needed a way out of our situations." She hugged Harry back. "What am I going to do?"

"Well, you can do the right thing and tell Ron the truth, but then, he will be even more hurt and angry. Maybe you should go on with this for a few weeks until he's had time to accept that you won't be his girl. I can't make your decision for you, can I?"

"I have to keep the deal with Draco. He needs me as much as I need him. I will see this through." She smiled. "Can I count on you, Harry? Will you talk to Draco for me and not give me the cold shoulder?"

"Yes, but I won't be overly friendly to Malfoy. I mean, *he's* a git, and one I can't stand." He smiled back finally. "Thank you for telling me the truth though. I'll always be here for you." He stood and stretched. "Guess I'd better be off to find Ron and cheer him up. You might want to steer clear for a bit."

"All right," she agreed. "That's fair enough. I'll have a walk."

"And, Mione?" Harry said suddenly, looking worried.

"What is it?"

"Please don't fall for him," he said softly.

She giggled. "Of course not! He's *Malfoy* after all. I couldn't fall for someone like him." *And he wouldn't fall for someone like me either.*

"I know that, but he wasn't himself tonight when he walked up to our table. He was... different."

She nodded. "Oh, Harry, it was an act. Trust me. I know what I'm doing. This will all be over in a month. Just a mutual agreement between the two of us is all." How could Harry think that she'd fall for Malfoy? A flash of him kissing her passed through her mind. She shook it off and ignored the tingling in her stomach.

"Mione," Harry pressed. "What if you fall in love with him? Not him as he truly is, but the one he is pretending to be? He's still Malfoy underneath it all. You'll be hurt."

"I would never love Malfoy, Harry. He's done too much to us all for that to happen. I can handle this," she said, knowing that Malfoy would never touch her *hear* *Even if he does kiss well.*

"For your sake, Hermione, I hope that's true. Because it's not Malfoy you are going to be close to the next four weeks. It's this fake Draco." With that, he was gone. She heard many footsteps walking down the corridor moments later and knew that dinner was over. She decided to walk out to the lake since she couldn't go to the common room. Harry would be there with Ron perhaps, and she didn't want to face Ginny yet.

The cool evening air hit her as soon as she opened the door. She wished she had known that she would venture outside. She would have brought her cloak with her. The sun's waning light still shown slightly in the distance over a peak on a mountain. Night was closing in around her, but the rising full moon lit her path well. She walked past a thick set of bushes and sat down near the edge of the lake. She would be hidden from anyone seeing her, especially at this time of the evening when everyone was in their warm common rooms. The thick greenery also kept some of the chilly breeze from hitting her, though the stronger gusts sifted through. The drop in temperature was drastic in comparison to how it had been during the day.

She thought of what Harry had said. He didn't want her to fall in love with Draco. She smiled and shook her head. How *insane!* *His kisses did affect you,* a voice in her head said. It was true. She had never been kissed that way before. She had been snogged before of course, but it had felt different with him. Harry was right. It now felt like he had become two different people entirely. Draco kissed well and pretended to be a sensitive, charming man while Malfoy, the spoiled prat, hurt anyone with words without caring. She did like the "new" person she had seen in him, but she knew it was all an act. When they would huddle closely or snog for the benefit of others, it would do her well to remember who he truly was. He was the son of a Death Eater. An evil father he had, that one. His father had wormed his way out of Azkaban prison once again. Lucius Malfoy, no doubt, would have wanted his son to follow in his footsteps, taking the Dark Mark.

That alone would keep her safe from feeling anything real for him. She may call him Draco now, but she'd not forget his last name or where he came from. She thought about Ron. Why couldn't she have feelings for Ron? It was apparent that Harry would accept a relationship between them. It wouldn't hurt their friendship there. In her heart, she knew that things would change between the three of them if she ever dated Ron. What if they never got on that well again, succumbing to normal relationship arguments and involving Harry? The entire time that they'd spent living together the past year had proved that things were best while they remained friends. She couldn't bear to see their "trio" broken apart. She couldn't jeopardize that for anything. Not even to make Ron happy. No, she would hurt him now by "dating" Draco, but he would get over it. He would see that they could never be. Hopefully, he would find someone else and be happy.

She used to always dream of being Ron's girl. Honestly, she'd even dreamed of being Harry's. However, being the thinker of the group, she'd thought of all the angles of possible relationships thoroughly. There could never be an intimate one between any of them. It was all there was to it. A chill swept over her body, and she balled up as best as she could. The wind was getting stronger and cooler. How long had she been out? Was it safe enough for her to brave the common room yet?

"You know you could freeze out here, don't you, Granger?" a drawling voice said from behind her. She moved to a sitting position quickly.

"How'd you know where I was?" she asked. He had taken her completely by surprise.

"Because I saw you come down here. I've been watching you and wasn't going to bother you, but you looked so cold. I wanted to give you something," he said, voice soft.

She swallowed nervously. "And what is that?"

He took off his cloak and set it about her shoulders. He fastened it quickly and sat next to her, leaving a fair amount of space between them. He took to staring out at the lake as she had been doing before. "Thanks," she said. He only nodded. She watched him closely for a few moments. He had changed a lot over the past couple of years. There was a new look in his eyes that hadn't been there before. It was one of defiance. What had changed in him to make him want to go against his father's wishes? It was apparent that he was no longer following orders as he used to.

Much about him was still the same. His pale skin was as smooth as ever, his eyes were still the same light, blue-gray color, and he still had that silvery blond hair. He wore it longer though. Thankfully, he'd given up on that slicked back look a couple of years prior. She had to stop herself. Her hand was halfway to his head before she realized that she was about to run her fingers through his hair.

She turned quickly to look at that lake. Harry's worried expression came to mind. *I'll not fall for him. This is the same Malfoy who calls me a Mudblood every chance he gets. It's the same Malfoy who made life harder on us for so long. It's Draco who kisses so softly and makes me want to...* Her eyes widened. *Stop, Hermione!* she yelled inwardly.

"You can touch me if you want to, Hermione," he drawled softly.

"No. I don't think I will, thanks," she replied evenly.

"Why not?" he pursued.

"Because... I don't know. There's no need. Nobody is here to make a show in front of." She shrugged, hoping her eyes didn't belie what her voice had said.

"But you wanted to," he insisted.

"Yes." She still wouldn't look at him. He didn't push her any more than that. He'd apparently gotten the answer he'd wanted. She stole a quick glance at him and found that his face was expressionless. There was no smirk. No sneer. No glaring eyes. She saw him shiver. A pang of guilt filled her. He had given her his cloak to keep warm, and now, he was doing without. She unfastened his cloak and scooted closer to him.

Draco's face turned towards her, and his eyes held hers for a moment. He seemed to be searching for something. He didn't smile or speak as she pulled part of the cloak over him and huddled closely. He only put an arm around her to keep her next to him, sharing her body heat. In silence, they watched the wind sweep across the lake, disturbing the calm water. She timidly put an arm around him, leaning her head against his shoulder. Silence stretched between them for many long minutes, and both had been dozing lightly, wrapped in each other's arms when they were jolted awake by Ron's loud voice.

"Found her, Harry! She's over here," Ron called out. "With *him*," he added snidely. Harry appeared behind him. He seemed momentarily relieved until he saw her and Draco huddled so closely together.

"Sorry," he said. "Thought you fell asleep out here with no cloak."

"Yeah, didn't know you had your *boyfriend* here to keep you warm," Ron said sarcastically.

"Is there a problem, Weasley?" Draco asked, a smug expression upon his face.

"Yeah, I'd say there is. You with your slimy paws all over Hermione for one!" Ron yelled.

"Ron..." Hermione began.

"No, Hermione. Save it. You do what it is you want to do. I just don't like *them*! Never will. Can't see what you see in him," Ron bellowed. "You could have had... someone else!"

"Weasley, I think you should refrain from yelling at *my* girlfriend," Draco said heatedly, seemingly enjoying Ron's discomfort.

"Your girlfriend, eh? Well, have at her. Enjoy," Ron said.

Hermione gasped. He'd never been so mean to her before. It was quite the insult and left no need for interpretation as to what he meant. This hurt Hermione. Though she'd wanted to say mean things about Lavender while he'd dated her, she'd respected him enough to not do so.

Draco tried to get up, but Hermione pulled him back down. "Leave him. I'm all right," she said softly.

"Nobody talks about *my* girl that way, especially not someone who supposedly cares about her," Draco spat.

It was Ron who gasped this time. His face fell. "I'm sorry, Mione," he said and stalked off toward the castle. Hermione watched him walk away and felt distressed. He was hurting, and she was causing his pain.

"He'll be all right, Hermione. Needs some time is all," Harry said softly. "Here," he said, throwing his Invisibility Cloak to her. "Don't want Filch to see you when you come in." He turned towards the castle and quickly left.

She noticed that Draco was watching him oddly. He turned to gaze at her. "Hermione... you and Harry... Have you ever dated?" he asked.

"Never." What had prompted him to ask that? Was he jealous of Harry because of her? No. She knew better. He was just trying to get to know her better is all. How could they pretend to be in love if they didn't know everything about each other? She decided to ask some questions as well. "You and Pansy... Have you two slept together?"

"Yes," he said easily. She knew it was the truth. He was still in his silent mood though and didn't elaborate any more than that. She was curious.

"How does it happen?" she asked suddenly, not realizing she'd spoken aloud.

"What do you mean?" he asked confused.

"How... how do you be with someone? I mean, does it just happen?" She felt so stupid. He'd know that she had never been with anyone, but that didn't matter.

"Well," he said thoughtfully. "With Pansy, she just asked me, and I agreed. That was the first time. After that, whoever felt like it would tell the other one, and we'd arrange a meeting."

"Oh," she said disappointedly. She had always thought of other romantic things like she'd read in her mum's romance novels back at home. What Draco said seemed like a business arrangement. There seemed to be nothing romantic about it at all. No stars exploding. No peaks of waves to ride. She sighed.

"Haven't you ever thought about it?" he asked, breaking her chain of thoughts. "Having sex, I mean."

"Loads of times," she admitted, cheeks heating. "I just thought it would happen differently, I suppose."

"Like how?" he pressed.

"I don't know. That sounds... vulgar, what you and Pansy had. I just thought that making love was a bit different is all." She shrugged. "I thought that there would be a lot of feelings, romantic dinners, and some other rubbish, making it truly special."

His lips quirked up slightly. "I think that when you are with someone, Hermione, it will be. I suppose it's whatever you make of it." That was all he said on the matter. It gave her some hope though. Maybe there was some man out there like the men in her mum's love stories back home. Yes, someone a bit older than she was with dark hair, strong features, and always going against her at every turn would be her future. She grimaced as Professor Snape's face appeared in her mind. *Not in a million years!* She giggled loudly, unable to control herself.

"What's so funny?" Draco asked.

"Honestly?" she asked. He nodded. "Well, see I've read some of my mum's... love stories. They are very detailed when it comes to sex. In nearly every story, the guy is older, dark-haired, almost untouchable, experienced in the ways of the world, and daring. And," she giggled, "I was wondering if anyone like that was out there for me. Professor Snape seems to match that description. If that's what's there for me, then I'll stay single, thanks," she finished, laughing loudly.

He laughed with her, picturing Snape trying to seduce her. *That will be the day!* Once silence had settled back in on them, Draco slowly moved his face closer to hers. "Why does he have to be older and darker?"

"I have no idea. It's just how they describe him is all," she replied, looking into his eyes.

"Why can't he be young and fair?" he asked softly. His lips were only inches from hers. She closed her eyes and moved forward. At once, she felt his lips upon hers. She opened her mouth to accept as much of him as she could have. Her hand lifted to caress his cheek gently, and she felt one of his do the same. *I could snog him all night,* she thought happily. Moments later, she heard Harry's voice echo in the back of her mind, giving her a warning, and she broke away from him.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean t-to..." she stammered, getting to her feet. She picked up Harry's cloak.

"Wait. Don't be sorry. It's all right," he was saying. But she wasn't sticking around to listen to it. She had to get out of there as quickly as she could before she kissed him again. She needed to be away from this new, touchable Draco.

"It's late, Draco. Have a good night," she said firmly and disappeared under Harry's cloak. She hurried to her dorm as quickly as possible.

Southern's Notes: This was a lengthy chapter, so I divided it up and stopped here. I'll work on editing the next part in a couple of days. Draco seems interested in her, but I wonder if he's just looking for a little "action" while they pretend to date. Hermione seems to be falling even though she doesn't want to.

Christy's Notes: I think Draco is definitely falling. He almost went after Ron for talking to *this* girl that way! Now, if Harry would just get out of Hermione's head...

Pretending to Care

Chapter 3 of 11

Draco thinks about his father's reaction. He and Hermione put on a show for everyone to prove they are truly a couple.

Disclaimer: These characters belong to J.K.R. I'm just using them and not making money whilst doing so!

I want to thank CocoaChristy for helping me dust this off to make it presentable.

Draco couldn't get to sleep. The only thing that he could think about was Hermione's kisses. Her lips were very soft and perfectly plump. It was as if they were made for his mouth. As he'd watched her walk away from him, he'd realized that he wanted to kiss her again. That was something new for him. When he'd dated Pansy, he'd never wasted time on something as frivolous as snogging. Not when there was shagging to be had. Neither of them had been overly affectionate. They'd just accepted their fate and went with it. He'd never felt guilty about having sex with her. He'd thought that she would eventually be his wife. It was the way of things.

His father had been proud when he'd confided that they'd commenced that part of their relationship. His only advice had been to make certain that they took precautions. He could remember the entire conversation perfectly.

"I do not have a problem with you getting to know what's yours, Draco, but I do have a problem with needless pregnancies," Lucius said wisely. "Have a care with how you proceed. Be certain that precautions are taken. If something happens that shouldn't, I shall hold you responsible."

"Father, you don't have to worry about that," Draco said smugly. "I've already seen to it that I know the correct spell."

"Excellent." Lucius sipped his brandy and grinned. "There will come a time for her to conceive an heir, but this must be done properly. A Malfoy states his intentions, he courts, and then he marries. Having an heir must be planned accordingly. Your mother and I waited until we needed you the most."

"When was that, Father?"

Lucius met his eyes squarely. "Initially, it was what the Dark Lord wanted. One of the school governors' was expecting a child. I was able to gain her support and kinship when I revealed that my wife, too, was pregnant." He smirked. "It was quite useful. Being a school governor, I was able to do a little spying for the Dark Lord."

Draco nodded. "I understand."

"When the Dark Lord's spell backfired on him, it worked out well that I had a young one. Nobody dared believe that I would purposely go against the Ministry when I had

such prestige and a perfect family. The claim that an Imperius was used on me worked ideally."

"Good call."

"Yes, it was, wasn't it?" Lucius commented smugly. "I remember telling them that I could never look at my adoring wife or son whilst purposely doing ill deeds." He sneered. "This is why we choose our partners carefully, Draco. Parkinson will bring more money and some land to you. Her family name is well respected in our world. She is worthy of being a Malfoy wife."

"Thank you for choosing her for me, Father," Draco said dutifully.

Draco sighed. He knew he would have to tell his father the truth about Pansy... and soon. In fact, he was surprised that his father hadn't owed him or visited the castle to have a word with him yet. "It's coming," he whispered sourly. That was one conversation that he was not looking forward to. He'd not allow his father to bully him. If he wanted to date Hermione, then he would. His father would simply have to accept it...no matter what he thought of her lineage. He was not a dolt in thinking that his father would dare disown him. No, his father wouldn't do that at this point in time. Not with the public's scorn and mistrust. They'd have a field day with his father if he turned out his only son.

My father need not know the truth behind our relationship. Not yet anyway. I just need to get out of being pushed to marry Pansy. That had been the worst part of the war's aftermath. He and his father had helped Dumbledore's Order, but the people still mostly mistrusted them, having been deceived with excuses once already in Voldemort's first reign. Draco knew his father wanted him to hurry into marriage so that he could unite the stained Malfoy name with the unsullied Parkinson name. It was also an excuse to throw a large party to mingle with those who spoke against the Malfoys. It would prove that the Malfoys still had clout and friends in high places to some doubters.

He hoped that Hermione would be down in the common room in the morning. He felt the need to prepare her for an impromptu visit from his father or a nasty bit of mail. It was unlikely that his father would seek out Hermione first, but he couldn't be too careful. His father wasn't above trying to intimidate others. What would Hermione think of his father if he did such a thing? Would she break and tell him the truth? Would she be upset? Finally dozing off, Draco's last thoughts were of Hermione's head on his shoulder as they'd looked out over the lake.

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Ron couldn't resist talking to Pansy, especially seeing her alone in the common room. No others had come down from their dormitories yet. "When did you and Draco end things?" he blurted the moment he neared her.

She looked up, raising an elegant eyebrow and looking up from her magazine. "Pardon?"

"What's he doing with Hermione? I thought you were his girl," Ron said, plopping down next to her.

"Well, *Weasley*, he's recently told me that he's been seeing someone else and that he loves her." She smirked. "Trust me. I was surprised when I saw *them* walk in together."

"But I don't see how that's possible. I never saw them talking... unless they were exchanging insults! She spent nearly all of last year with Harry and me."

"Well, one time when she went to Diagon Alley without either of you, she helped him get away from a couple of Death Eaters. While they were hiding, they had a long talk, and he decided that maybe Mudbloods weren't so bad."

"Oi! Don't call her that!"

"Sod off. I'm only repeating what *he* said." She shrugged nonchalantly. "They felt it necessary to keep their relationship a secret because they knew that nobody would accept them. Don't worry. I will be watching, as will many others. If it turns out to be fake, I'm certain our parents will force us to marry."

Ron's face contorted in disbelief. "That's horrid. So she's been with him since last year." He shook his head. "I thought that maybe..."

"Do you love her?" Pansy asked wisely.

"I thought I did. I was going to ask her to be my girl," Ron admitted. "She used to love me, but I guess she got tired of seeing me with someone else and moved on. I wouldn't mind that she has someone. I just hate that it's *him*."

"Why is he so bad?" Pansy asked indignantly. "Because in my opinion, *she's* the one that's lacking in the relationship."

"Well, he's a right arrogant bastard, always going on about his father and being a pureblood." He grinned sheepishly. "No offense to you, I guess. You've not been rude for a while."

"Thanks," she said, adding, "I think."

Ron's cheeks turned red, and he stood. "Right then. Think I'll be going. Sort of hungry."

"All right, Ron," Pansy said, looking back down to her magazine.

"Er... Right... Pansy."

Ron walked away feeling relieved. *Maybe Draco wasn't so bad for Hermione. No effing way! Hermione deserves better than Malfoy! I thought she had more sense than to fall for a git. He's probably just using her for sex. Bastard.*

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As Hermione exited her room, she was accosted by Ginny. "How could you?" the redhead asked angrily.

"How could I what?" Hermione asked, trying to prolong the inevitable.

"You know what I'm talking about! You could have told me that you were dating someone instead of lying about it! I could have broke the news to Ron and saved him the shock of seeing you with *Malfoy*!" Ginny's hands were on her hips, and her eyes were narrowed. She seemed to want to sort things out through arguing.

Hermione was in no mood. "I hadn't told anyone. The decision to finally let the school know was a mutual one."

"But you were in love with Ron!" Ginny said heatedly.

"I was. Hear that, do you? *Was!* I'm with Draco now. If you'll excuse me, I need to go to..."

"You are NOT excused!" Ginny said shrilly. "Something isn't right with this. Not two weeks ago you were on about how much of a prat Malfoy was, and now, you are his girl?"

"I couldn't say how charming I thought he was, could I? It was all part of a cover up. We only pretended to hate each other," she said. "And what the hell are you doing here anyway? These dormitories aren't yours!"

"Visiting," Ginny replied, spinning around and leaving Hermione standing in the doorway.

"Well, that went well," she grumbled before making her way down to the common room. To her surprise, Draco was standing at the bottom of the stairway. "Good morning," she said uncomfortably. "You've been here long?"

"Not very," he said, extending an hand to her. "I'd like a word before breakfast. Do you mind?"

She shook her head and noted that others were watching them with interest. She leaned forward to kiss his cheek, whispering, "They are watching."

He simply smirked and led her from their common room. Once alone in a corridor, he said, "I think my father likely knows by now... about us."

"Oh," she said, suddenly worrying about what Draco would have to endure because of her. "Do you think he'll force you to marry Pansy anyway? Will our plan still work?"

"He wouldn't dare try to force me...not after I firmly tell him that I intend to marry you." He swallowed. "I've told Pansy that we've been a couple for nearly a year. I hope you don't mind."

"How can we make that work?" she asked incredulously. Ron and her other friends would never buy it. She listened as he told her of the tale about Death Eaters following them, causing them to have to hide together and starting a secretive friendship. "Well, I guess that *could* work. That would be an excuse as to why I never told them about that."

"Right," Draco said. "I'll tell my father the same. This way he'll believe that I have true feelings for you. A year is a long investment in someone in this day and age."

She smiled and nodded. "It is." Her brow creased as she thought of something. "How did Pansy take this?"

Draco laughed. "She ate it up. I think she was surprised that it was you, but then, I got the feeling that she was glad. It'll likely make it easier to cry to her father. She can pretend to be hurt to not be chosen over a Mu... er... Muggle-born. The old man dotes on her. He'll likely let her take her time and choose her next fiancé. The man never was able to stand up to my father, but this will give him extra ammunition. I'll bet he's glad of it."

Annoyed, Hermione said, "I think that the prejudices in this world are horrible. So what if I'm not from your lot! I'm still as good with magic as any of you. It just takes practice and study!"

"I didn't say you weren't."

"But that's how you used to feel!"

"It was," he said, unable to deny her accusation.

She pulled her hand from his. "I hate that."

"It's not how I feel about you now," he drawled quietly.

"What do you feel now?"

"I think that maybe we..."

Ron rounded the corner. "Oi, look who it is! You two are going to miss breakfast if you don't stop snogging in the corridor!"

"We're not snogging," Hermione said in annoyance, hating that Ron had interrupted.

"Yet," Draco said, pulling her back to him. "I think Weasley wants a bit of a show." He pressed his lips to hers.

Feeling uncomfortable, Hermione pushed him away. "I won't put on a show for anyone." She glowered at Ron for a moment before hurrying away. She could hear them shouting insults at each other until she was a couple of flights down.

"What have I gotten myself into?" she asked aloud.

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During breakfast, Hermione noticed that many students were still staring at her and whispering. She was glad that Ron had eaten already. Ginny's scornful glances were enough to put up with. Deciding to leave, she hurriedly ate some toast and made her way to her Ancient Runes class. When she walked out, Draco was waiting in the corridor for her.

"Walk you to class?" he asked.

She noticed that others had stopped to watch. *Nosey buggers!* "Sure," she said, smiling. "About earlier..."

"Say nothing. I was wrong. I was just trying to get Weasley mad," he said unapologetically. "Can't resist."

"Well, I don't like the way he's acting, but I don't want to hurt him any more than necessary," she said crossly. Suddenly, she found herself pulled into the entrance of another corridor off the main one.

"Go with it," he urged in a whisper before his lips descended to hers.

Hermione wanted to shove him away, but she was afraid that Pansy was headed in their direction. It wouldn't do for her or any of her friends to see her pushing Draco away. She felt his tongue tracing the length of her bottom lip, so she parted her lips, allowing its entrance.

This kiss was unhurried, enabling her enjoy the feel of his soft lips against hers. She could taste cinnamon on his tongue and wondered if he could taste the orange flavor of the candy she'd chewed moments earlier. When she felt him ending the kiss with a final brush of his lips against hers, she whimpered, causing him to resume the kiss. Draco began moving his lips against hers eagerly, pressing his body more firmly against her. She felt the strap of her book bag slide from her shoulder and down the length of her arm. The heavy bag hit the floor with a thud.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked a silky, masculine voice.

Hermione pushed Draco away and stooped to pick up her book bag. Draco coolly said, "Hello, Professor Snape. My girlfriend and I were talking about our Arithmancy assignment, and I couldn't control myself."

Snape's eyebrows rose as he looked from Draco to Hermione. "Is that so?"

Hermione nodded, unable to look into his dark eyes. She was relieved when Draco said, "I suppose we'd better be off, or we'll be late."

"Indeed," Snape said, sweeping aside and watching them through narrowed eyes.

Draco quickly led Hermione down the corridor and laughed when he was sure Snape couldn't hear him. "Did you see the look on his face?"

"Er... Yes," Hermione said. "Why did you kiss me?"

"Oh," Draco began casually, "Weasley told me that Pansy claims to be watching us. She is afraid that our parents will force us to marry anyway if they think this is a ruse. I figure that we should do things like that often enough to make it look real. When I saw Snape coming, I thought we should give it a go."

"What?" she asked incredulously. "You *purposely* snogged me in front of Snape?"

"Well, he is one of my father's closest friends. He's probably owling him as we speak."

"But I thought you didn't want your father to know yet," Hermione said. "And we could have received detention!"

"Detention? Ha! I didn't think he would give us any. I was right." He laughed at her horrified expression. "Might be better for Father to know sooner rather than later... from another source." Draco shrugged. "Come. After class, we can go to lunch together."

"Can we not go to the Great Hall? I'm sure Dobby would be willing to give us some food if we go down to the kitchen." Hermione looked away. "Everyone keeps staring at me and whispering. Even my friends are treating me differently. I hate it."

"Whatever you'd like, Hermione." He smiled and took her hand, pulling her the rest of the way to class.

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"Come on. You have to get closer than that." Draco grinned wickedly. "I want to put my arm around you while you read to me. That should look real cozy."

"This all just feels strange to me," Hermione said. "Look at all the people down here."

"Since we've started *this* publicly, they've been talking more. I noticed that yesterday." He gave her a mocking smile. "Come here, my love. Let us show these berks how to coexist peacefully."

She slapped his arm playfully and plopped down next to him. "Yes, dear," she said, using a disgustingly sweet tone. She pulled her Arithmancy book from her bag and settled back against him, allowing him to put his arm about her as she read their chapter aloud. After a while, she asked, "Do you think this is truly helping?"

"Yes, everyone has noticed and will comment on it to others," he said, moving somewhat.

"Am I hurting you?" she asked.

"Not really. My arm has gone to sleep."

She scooted away from him and leaned against the arm. Before she knew what was happening, he was stretching out and putting his head upon her lap. "Are you comfortable?" she asked incredulously.

"Quite," he said. "Continue reading." He closed his eyes, and she began reading again reluctantly.

It didn't take long for her to realize that he'd gone to sleep. His breathing was even and not exactly loud enough to be called a snore. Gently, she placed the book aside and boldly gazed down at his face. She traced the line of his jaw and his pointy chin with her finger, stopping to brush back a long lock of blond hair from his cheek. She smirked as she thought, *The first time I touched this cheek was back in third year when I slapped him* Unable to resist, she traced his nose, thinking its slope graceful. How had she ever thought him ugly? Being this close to his nearly flawless, pale skin made her think of him as one of those unblemished portraits of young princes...haughty, regal, arrogant, and beautiful all in one.

It would be so easy for me to really care about him, especially with us... getting along like this. He's only doing this because he has to. I need to remember that Regardless of her thoughts, she smiled as he turned on his side, nestling his face against her stomach. Her hand immediately went to his hair, running her fingers through its silky tresses. She wished that her own would be so smooth and fine. Snorting at the fact that she would envy Malfoy's hair, she looked up to find her two closest friends watching her.

Harry seemed disappointed that she and Draco were together in such a way. Ron seemed furious. Harry shrugged as Ron stood and angrily brushed by Lavender, who was trying to talk to him. Hermione flushed guiltily and looked away. *I'm so sorry, Ron and Harry. All of this will be over in a few weeks.* She looked at Draco's relaxed face. *Will I be able to remain detached of your charms?*

Draco opened his eyes and was watching her intently. He seemed to be searching her soul. It made her wonder if he'd practiced Legilimency with Professor Snape. Undaunted, she continued to gaze into the cool, gray intensity, hand still tangled in his hair. She noticed immediately that his eyes no longer seemed cold and uncaring. They'd changed. *Would it be possible for him to care for me? So soon?*

"I think... I need to go to bed," Hermione said softly. "It's been a long day."

"All right," he agreed, not moving aside.

"You'll... er... have to move."

"Can I come up to your room?" he asked quietly.

Panicking, she blurted, "I think not."

He rose immediately, fixing his rumpled robes and smoothing down his hair. Hermione quickly gathered her book and her bag. "I'll just go up then."

Draco surprised her by leaning forward and pressing his lips chastely against hers. "Night."

"Night," she whispered, watching him walk towards the stairway that led to his dormitory. She swallowed thickly and breathed a sigh of relief. What had he meant about coming up to her room? Did he simply want to walk her up? Did he mean that he wanted to stay the night with her? "Hmph," she grouched. *He will find out that I'm not as easy as Pansy. There will be no sexual arrangements between us.*

Harry caught her by the elbow before she was able to escape. "Hermione, what's going on? Did something change?"

"No," she said quickly, shaking her head. "We're only trying to put on a show." She nodded to Pansy and Millicent. "It seems they are watching us closely to see if it's all a game. We've decided to give them something to talk about. Hopefully, they will carry the news to his father soon, and that will be one less thing for him to worry on." She felt tears well in her eyes. "Ron? Is he all right?"

"Hurting," Harry said bluntly. "I was worried it would send him right back to Lavender. She's no good for him. Tonight, she was trying her best to talk to him again, but he

told her to leave him alone. Maybe he's finally learned to keep away from her."

"I only wish things could be different."

"I know."

"Too much time passed for us. You know?" She desperately wanted Harry to understand. "Do you think I'm wrong, Harry?"

He shrugged. "I don't know what would have been worse for him." He smiled and guided her up the stairs towards her dormitory. "I'm afraid for you, Hermione. You really seemed... taken with him earlier. You should have seen the expression on your face."

She grinned wickedly. "Honestly? I couldn't believe how peaceful and nice he seemed while asleep. I mean, look at all the rubbish he put us through in the past! He looked so innocent, and it amused me."

"You're falling for him."

"No," she said guardedly. "I just hope he stays like this... even after we part ways. I quite like this Draco. Is that too much to ask for? Maybe we could all be friends."

"Good night, Hermione," Harry said. "I think I'll go see where he's gone off to."

"Night," she said as she began moving up the second flight of stairs. Was it too much to ask? There would be nothing wrong with staying in his life, especially if he remained personable. *Careful, Hermione. It's only been a couple of days, and you're already wondering about the future.*

Southern's Notes: Harry can see her feelings. Hermione will see them soon enough.

Christy's Notes: Well, it seems to me the only person Hermione is fooling is herself!

Truly Wanting to Know You

Chapter 4 of 11

Draco decides that he and Hermione need more practice to truly fool his father and the others. Pansy reveals her feelings to the man she loves.

Draco's hands shook slightly as he opened the letter his father's owl had brought him.

Draco,

The most absurd rumor has reached my ears this evening. Would you believe that someone had the audacity to tell your betrothed's father that you had broken things off and were affianced to that Mudblood, Hermione Granger? Haven't you loathed her since first year? Why, even Severus swears that he saw the two of you sneaking about a dark corridor. Surely you know better than to be seen with her. It would ruin everything we have planned for your future. Be more careful with your trysts.

We truly must discuss this in person. I shall come to the castle next weekend to speak with both you and Miss Parkinson. We need to be making plans for your wedding. I am awaiting your response to this letter.

As always,

L. Malfoy

"Just bloody great," Draco griped aloud. "One effing week until he comes here to try to ruin things."

What if his father saw through the ruse? Hermione was doing a fair job of pretending to love him so far, but there were times when he could clearly see that she was uncomfortable with him. Other times though...like when she'd been playing with his hair while he slept...it seemed as though she truly did want to be with him. When he'd woke to find her fingers interlaced in his hair and noticed that he'd turned to burrow his face against her soft stomach, enabling him to inhale her tempting scent, he'd wanted her...in every way. He'd seen the truth, however, when he'd asked her to go up to her room. She'd refused him immediately. That alone spoke volumes.

He would simply talk to her and tell her that they had to spend as much time together in the following week as possible in order to fool his father. Truth be told, he didn't mind snogging her. He enjoyed the feel of her soft, plush lips against his and the way she responded to him. What would be so wrong with a shag or two? They were both consenting adults. "Maybe I should mention it," he said aloud.

"Mention what?" Pansy asked.

"The letter," he blurted. "Father wrote to me."

"Mine did, too. He said that Lucius Malfoy assured him that you were not seeing anyone."

"Well, he's coming up next weekend to talk to me... and supposedly you. Imagine his surprise when I show up with Hermione instead," he drawled.

"You're really going to do this, aren't you?" she asked incredulously. "My father was quite angry and even went as far as to pay your father a call. You know he never tells your father anything unpleasant. I guess the fact that his only daughter is being cast aside bothers him."

"Look, Pansy," Draco began in annoyance, "we've discussed this already. The Wizarding world is different now. We don't have to do anything we don't want to do. Why shouldn't we be able to pick a life with someone that is acceptable to us?"

The smirk disappeared from her face. "I agree." She frowned slightly. "The person that I have feelings for doesn't care for me. I've tried to get his attention, but he's always on about someone else." She shrugged. "Soon, I'll get the courage to talk to him openly about my feelings. I suppose I've been uncertain about you."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I didn't want to voice my feelings to him only to be forced to recant them and marry you, but if you are seriously going to take a stand against your father, then I will tell him."

It was the first time that he and Pansy had had a normal conversation without her ending up pouting or demanding anything. Maybe there was hope for them yet. They didn't have to follow the dictates of their parents any longer. They were adults now.

"You have my word," Draco said, extending his hand.

"Thanks," she said and sauntered off.

Draco's thoughts drifted back to Hermione. They needed to have a talk immediately, but first, he had to write a quick reply to his father.

Father,
I agree that we need to talk. I shall be awaiting a letter confirming a time and day to expect you. I appreciate that you've taken time out of your busy schedule to see to my personal affairs.

Professor Snape did see me with Hermione Granger. Many people have. I shall explain everything when we meet.

Dutifully,

D. Malfoy

Draco read over the short letter and was satisfied that it would be enough. He would send it from the Owlery later. At the moment, he simply needed to find his accomplice in this trickery. He went down to the common room, but he found it nearly empty. He saw Lavender. "Excuse me," he said as politely as he could. "Do you know if Hermione is still in her dormitory?"

"Left just a bit ago," Lavender said, smiling and batting her lashes at him.

"Got something in your eye?" he asked sarcastically.

"Not at all," she replied evenly.

"Right. See you."

Good Lord, that's all I need is that thing trying to seduce me. He decided to check the library for Hermione, and luck was with him. She was in the back at his...their...favorite table. "Hi," he said, sitting next to her.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully. Her smile faded. "What's wrong?"

"I got a letter from my father," he said. "He had a talk with Pansy's father and has chosen not to believe the rumors of our relationship. It seems he will be here next weekend to speak with Pansy and me." He grinned. "You will be with me instead of her, of course."

"Your father hates me," Hermione said nervously.

"What matters is that I do not," he said, taking her hand. She pulled it away.

"Really," she said indignantly. "Nobody is watching."

"Hermione, if we don't practice more...in private and in front of others...my father will not be fooled. I need him to believe that we've been seeing one another for the past year and that we intend to wed." He pulled her hand back into his. "There is nothing wrong with this. I need you... to do this for me."

She cocked her head to the side and gazed at him for a moment. Sighing, she said, "You're right. I think Ron's suspicious, too, anyway. Not to mention Ginny's glares and voiced suspicions."

"Has Ron been talking to you?" he asked.

"No, he's still mad about us... even after these past few days. What about Pansy?" she asked.

"She's not mad at all and seems happy about it." He shrugged nonchalantly. "I wouldn't care anyway. It's my life that I care about." He frowned. "She does believe that if my father makes me break things off with you...which I don't think he will...they would still try to force us together. I need to drive it in that I'm in love with you. Er... you know, our plan."

"Come and sit with me for the noon meal. It would be nice to have someone to talk to," she said hopefully. She was tired of having to walk on eggshells around Ron and Ginny. They would just have to accept it and move on. Harry was strained, trying to keep up a conversation for the three of them.

"Why don't you come and sit with me?" he asked, a naughty glint in his eyes.

"Well, they are Slytherins. They hate me," she said bluntly.

"I don't hate you. In fact, my dating you seems to have mellowed them out a bit. Noticed that some of them are starting to talk more to the other Houses, have you? And you've seen the common room these days. More of the older students are mingling," he said somewhat arrogantly.

She smiled anyway. "Yes, I have, but I'm still not ready to sit with them yet. Do you think you could brave the Gryffindors?"

He grinned. He wasn't afraid of any of them. Well, he'd not want to take on an angry Harry Potter, but he still wasn't afraid. "I could do that for you, beautiful," he said softly. *Damn! Have I gone too far? She's glaring at me now.* It had slipped out naturally. It was interesting that he didn't really find those words false. Was he trying to seduce her without realizing it? Of course, he was. It was all he thought about since the evening that she'd asked him all those innocent questions. He could just imagine her wide eyes staring up at him in wonder...

"Well?" she prompted. "Shall we? It's a little early yet, but there's no reason we can't go and talk. That should give everyone something to talk about."

"Come on then, love," he said, pulling her closer. He placed a light kiss upon her lips. "I do like snogging you. Really."

Her cheeks turned a pale shade of pink. "You're not so bad either."

Before he could lean in again, she pulled him up and led him out of the library. Hand in hand, they made their way to the Great Hall, causing people to stare and whisper. Potter saw them coming and nodded.

"Budge up, Potter," Draco said.

The boy seemed shocked that he was actually going to sit at the Gryffindor table. He moved aside and greeted them aloud. Draco saw that a few of their friends looked at him with narrowed eyes at first, but each looked to see what Harry had to say about it. When they saw that he was all right, they relaxed and went back to their meals.

When Ron came in and sat across from Harry, he didn't talk or look at either of them. It was just as well. Draco pretended not to notice and held a conversation with Harry about Quidditch. Hermione, though, looked uncomfortable. He reached below the table and squeezed her hand to reassure her that it would be ok. She smiled at him sweetly, and he felt his stomach flop.

When had he grown so fond of her smile? If she only knew the things he'd been fantasizing about, she'd die of humiliation. He prayed that just once before they parted ways they could be together in *that* way. Just to see how it would feel. But...*No, I can't use her in that way. She needs to save herself for someone who can truly give her what she wants. Save herself for that dark-haired, fantasy lover she often thinks about.* His countenance darkened. He hated the thought of some blubbery Snape look alike pawing on her. Surely she would find someone more suited for her. Someone like Harry. He darkened even more. The thought of Harry touching her or kissing her sent anger through him. He mentally shook himself. That was not his business. This was just a game. *A game you truly want to take advantage of,* an inner voice thought snidely.

He looked behind him to the Slytherin table. Pansy was watching him. She was always watching, as was Millicent. What the bloody hell did she need to openly stare for? It might make others think that she was jealous. Was she? No, not according to the things she'd told him anyway. She was probably still trying to detect a ruse. Hell, he was always talking about Hermione to her. Lately, he was always seen with Hermione. He just needed to be seen snogging her more. That would get the message across to *anyone* watching. He turned back to his meal. He wasn't hungry anymore. Not for food anyway. He sipped his pumpkin juice and watched Hermione. She was asking Harry something about Transfiguration. Her little lips, soft and lush, were moving gracefully. She had no idea how pretty she was. It was mostly his fault though...and people like him...for always ridiculing her. Even after they stopped this charade, he'd never be mean to her again. Now that he knew her, he couldn't be.

"What's wrong?" she asked, feeling his eyes on her.

He smiled. "I was just thinking about how pretty you are, and how much I would like to kiss you." He saw her blush under his gaze. Her eyes even softened. He leaned forward and gave her a chaste kiss on the lips.

Ron snorted and got up from the table. He exited the hall quickly. To Draco's surprise, Pansy did as well. *What the hell is she playing at?* She seemed upset. Hermione had caught the action as well. She looked at him questioningly. He shrugged as if to say he had no idea what Pansy was about. Ginny spoke, breaking their eye contact and gaining their attention.

"You know, Hermione, I think it's great that you found a guy. And, unfortunately, it's *this* guy. I just wish you didn't have to rub it in Ron's face. You now how he feels about you." Draco's eyes narrowed at the redhead.

It was Harry that spoke though. "Ginny, I think it would do if we'd all mind our own affairs. What she does is her concern. Why can't we just be happy for her... and him?" Harry asked softly. "Besides, Ron never cared much for Hermione's feelings when he was pawing Lavender, did he?"

Ginny looked reprimanded. "I know. I just feel badly for Ron. But... you are right as always, Harry. I'm just torn between being happy for Hermione and feeling sorry for my closest brother."

"I understand, Ginny," Hermione said. "I wish that Ron wasn't hurting right now, but I must say that if he'd wanted a relationship with me, he had his chances. Many of them."

"Right," Harry agreed. "He'll just have to learn to accept things."

Ginny nodded, but she looked uncertain. Harry reached across and took her hand in his in an attempt to reassure her. She blushed and pulled her hand away. "Got... got to go do some... some homework. Right, that's it. Homework." She bolted out of the hall.

Harry was looking at his hand oddly. "What did I do?"

Hermione giggled. "I think she would like you to follow her now and snog her to death." Draco laughed at the look of horror on Harry's face.

"But... no. She and I... I mean, we're just friends. Remember? She gave up on me ages ago." He seemed unsure.

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. Draco said, "Look, mate. If that didn't tell you that she wants you, I don't know if spelling it out would help much either. Go on then," he urged Harry. "Go talk to her... or snog her."

Harry nodded. "Right." Then, he blushed in embarrassment. "Well, guess I'll be off for some homework myself."

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"Why are we up here again?" Hermione asked, shaking slightly. "It's really cold."

"Because this is a place that lovers come to," he said softly. He cast a couple of charms to warm their clothing. "That should work." He led her to the darkest corner and sat down, pulling her onto his lap.

"Draco... I don't know if we should..."

"Shh. /know..." He pulled her face to his and slowly kissed her, slanting his lips against hers and nibbling on her lower lip slightly. "We have to get used to this. It has to look natural." In resignation, she parted her lips and allowed his tongue entrance. He felt her self-imposed barriers melting away as their kiss deepened. Before long, she was moving against him eagerly, breathing heavily, and making him want her more than before. If he knew she'd allow it, he would attempt to have her right there. He finally removed his lips from hers, gazing into her eyes as he did so. "Perfect."

"You make me feel so... aware of myself and of what we are doing," she admitted shyly.

"If you want... anything more, you need only tell me," he whispered, hoping she'd invite him up to her room.

She looked away. "I can't do that." And the mood was ruined. She stood up and fixed her rumpled robes. "I think we should turn in," she said, not looking at his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he ventured. "I shouldn't have said that."

She shrugged. "It's all right. It's what you're used to with Pansy, right? You'll learn that not all girls are built that way."

"Whoa, what's with the attitude? I said that I was sorry, Hermione, and why bring Pansy into this? She is the last thing on my mind at this moment." He turned away, propped himself against the battlement, and looked out over the grounds. Minutes passed, and he finally spoke. "I'm just trying to say that I feel that way about you now. I wouldn't mind being with you. I don't know why. I honestly can't explain it. Maybe I'd like having a true relationship with you, or we could..." His voice trailed away as he turned to find himself alone. "Fucking hell," he bellowed. She'd stormed off and left him there.

Draco felt utterly ridiculous. He'd nearly asked her to truly be his girl just now. What the hell had he been thinking? This was a game... a trick on their peers. He couldn't

afford to get too caught up in it, even if she was very tempting. She was giving him mixed signals! Or so he'd thought. Hell, it was just wishful thinking, wasn't it? *She turns me on and makes me want her. I'm just mistaking that for something more. I can't believe she keeps turning me down.* He paused and smiled humbly.

She'd turned him down. That was the second time. An odd feeling of respect for her replaced his annoyance. "Good for you, Granger," he said to himself, making his way back to their common room, pride somewhat wounded regardless of his newfound respect for her. He was happy that she was not about because he didn't feel like facing her. He might even say something unpleasant, and to others, that would mean that there was trouble in their relationship.

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"Need someone to talk to?" Pansy asked Ron as she moved to stand beside him.

"What do you care?"

"I've been caring for a while now," she said quietly, feeling completely nervous. "I hate seeing you like this."

Ron's eyes widened. "But... *why?*" he asked in disbelief.

"Well, it started out when I heard Lavender Brown bragging about you in the girls' toilet one day." Pansy grinned sheepishly. "She had no idea that I was in there, and I'm not above a little eavesdropping. Anyway, when I saw you after that, I noticed that she was right. You have big, strong hands and long fingers... and big feet."

Confused, Ron said, "You were inspecting me?" His chest puffed out slightly. "Bragging on me, eh? Well, I am quite resourceful when..."

Laughing lightly, Pansy nodded. "I was checking you out, and each time I saw you, I'd do it again. Before long, I was thinking of the things she'd said and imagining them... only that you were being with me, not her."

"What about Malfoy?"

"I've always been resigned to our fate of being married. In fact, it was all I wanted... until you."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. When I'd think of you, I would get excited and feel as though I were bursting. With Draco, it ended up feeling more like a duty. Do you understand? I wanted more. I wanted to have love and excitement." She looked away. "When you broke things off with Lavender, I was smug about it, thinking it served her right for not treating you as you deserved, but it also saddened me because I knew that I could never have you either."

"So when Malfoy told you about his relationship with Hermione, you were... happy?"

"Yes and afraid."

"Of what?"

"I was afraid, Ron, that something would happen, and I'd be forced to marry him anyway. I was afraid to hope for a chance with you." She looked down. "The only reason I decided to tell you now was because I saw the way you were looking at them earlier during the noon meal. I hated seeing you hurt. I thought... No, I hoped that I could ease your pain."

"Pansy, are you asking me to shag you?" he blurted.

She shoved him in irritation. "I'm asking for a chance to win your love, not to shag you."

"Oh."

Pansy backed away from him, heart breaking and feeling ashamed. "Forget it. Please do not tell anyone that I said this to you."

"Wait," he said, reaching out to grab her arm. "I didn't say I wasn't interested."

"So you are?"

"It's a little strange for me," he said quietly. "I care about Hermione a lot and figured she'd be the girl that I married one day." He sighed. "I can't compete with Malfoy. I haven't his money or looks." His eyes narrowed. "That being the case, why would *you* truly be interested in me?"

"I told you why. I overheard Lavender going on about you, and it always stayed with me. I started watching you, and I found myself falling in love with you... or at least with who I perceived you to be...my fantasy Ron." She took his hands in hers. "If you can give me a chance to truly get to know you, maybe I can love the real you, and maybe you can love me. I'm not going to force your feelings for her to change, but if you'll have me, I think I can help you forget her."

"Can I think about this?"

She bit her lip in disappointment and nodded.

"Don't be offended," he said. "It just amazes me that someone like *you* would want *me*. Are you certain this isn't a joke?"

Pansy smiled. "I promise." She stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his for what she intended to be a chaste kiss. Instead, she found herself wrapped in his arms and being held off the ground as he kissed her deeply. *Wow, it's better than I'd imagined.*

Southern's Notes: I think Ron and Pansy will be just fine. Teehee! Poor Draco. He's confusing love with lust, and Hermione needs to realize her feelings and tell him before it's too late.

Christy's Notes: I love the fact that Draco can't get Hermione out of his mind. Obviously, that has not happened to him before! Let's hope Hermione figures things out soon! I am loving Ron and Pansy! Big hands and feet indeed.

Defending Our Relationship

Lucius visits Hogwarts. Draco and Hermione war with their growing feelings and their attraction.

Disclaimer: These characters belong to J.K.R. I'm just using them and not making money whilst doing so!

I want to thank CocoaChristy for helping me dust this off to make it presentable.

Hermione smiled, though she was nervous. In the morning, Lucius Malfoy would be on the grounds, and she would likely have to meet with him. Draco didn't seem very anxious, and over the past week, they'd snogged and practiced being lovers without actually having sex. It should be easy enough to fool his father, but just having to face the man was something she wasn't exactly prepared for.

"I'm sure I'll be fine," she murmured.

Draco pulled her to him for a tight hug. "You look pale." He kissed her forehead. "I'll try to talk to him alone first. Only then will I ask him if he needs proof." He smiled reassuringly. "Unless it's tonight that has you turning pale?" he questioned, cool eyes glinting in the dim light of the common room.

Grinning, Hermione shook her head. They'd decided that she would invite him up to her room while students were still in the common room to witness. Those noticing would naturally think that they were spending the night together, shagging, and doing what lovers do. Unfortunately, he truly would have to stay with her until morning... sharing her bed. She trusted him, but it was still odd for her. With each day that she spent with him, she felt him slipping further into her heart. *What will I do with myself once he's gone?*

"Good," he said casually. "I think that will drive off any doubts from those still disbelieving that we are in love. Er... you know, pretending to be. Not that we are." He chuckled nervously. "I mean to say..."

"Don't speak," Hermione said, resting her head against his shoulder.

"Get a room," Blaise said, causing Goyle to guffaw. "Unless you'll be putting on a show for us."

Draco simply laughed at his friend, but Hermione, however, scowled at the other boy, causing his smirk to fade. In an indignant voice, Hermione said, "Draco, I've had enough of the common room for now. Would you like to come up?"

"For the night?" he asked mischievously, making her want to kick him.

"Yes," she bit out, cheeks heating. She could feel several pairs of eyes on her, but she dared not look around. Thankfully, Ron wasn't about, or she'd feel guilty about her actions, not wanting to hurt him.

Taking her by the hand and wriggling his eyebrows at his friends, Draco guided her up the stairs that led to her room. With each step they took, her heart pounded more quickly. Once they reached her door, he said, "Hermione, you've nothing to worry about." He released her hand and brushed some hair away from her face. "Don't tremble. I won't take advantage of this... though I would want to."

Hermione swallowed apprehensively. "It's not that I don't trust you. I just don't really trust myself." When she grinned, she added, "I want to wait until I'm married to make love for the first time. It's something I've talked about with my mum already." She looked away. "But sometimes, I feel like I just want to shag you senseless."

"Not many people wait until marriage these days. That's a bit old fashioned."

"Yes, I know, but you don't have to worry about getting used and having a broken heart either," she said, opening the door and pulling him in. "No need to stand out here all night."

"Hermione, some marriages aren't forever either," Draco pointed out. "How do you know if you'll want to live your long life with a bloke if you truly haven't taken the time to know all of him before you marry him? What if he's... lacking?"

"Sorry?" Hermione asked, brow wrinkled in confusion. "Oh... oh!" She shrugged. "Size doesn't matter."

"Uh-huh. Tell any girl from Slytherin House that, and see what they have to say on it," he said, pulling off his robes. "I hope you don't mind."

"No, go ahead," she said, turning away to pull off her own. "So... Speaking of size..."

"You want to know how *I* measure up?" he asked, snickering.

"I didn't say *that*. You seem to be comfortable with the conversation. I sense that perhaps you," she pulled her shirt over her head, "feel that you're not lacking."

Suddenly, his hands were at her waist, and his mouth was near her ear. "If you'd like to find out, you need only reach out."

Hermione wrenched away from him and turned to face him. "Scamp! You've not been in here for two minutes, and you're already trying to... to do something!"

Draco laughed loudly. "Calm down." It was then that she noticed he was clad in his underpants only. Her eyes widened slightly. "I didn't bring any other clothes."

"It's all right," she said, suddenly conscious that she wore only an undershirt and skirt. She moved to her wardrobe. "I'm going to go to the loo quickly and change into my nightclothes."

"All right," he said, plopping down onto her bed.

Once alone, she rested against the door. *How will I be able to get through this night?* She only told him that she wanted to wait for marriage to keep him from trying to have sex with her. Would it be so bad to have a bit of fun? *No*, she told herself firmly. *To give my body to him would be dangerous. I can't allow myself to get closer to him* What would a little extra snogging hurt?

She quickly got ready for bed, glad that she'd chosen a modest gown to wear. He wouldn't need to get the wrong idea. Opening the door, she walked across the darkened room to her bed, able to detect his silhouette. "That's my side," she said playfully.

"All right," he said, scooting over. When she remained near the edge of the bed, he pulled her closer. "Hermione, you've nothing to fear. Good night."

"Night," she said. In the long minutes before his light snore filled the room, she thought of the many things she'd like to experience with him. She wanted to be with him, but she was afraid of the repercussions of such actions. Perhaps once she was able to get her emotions under control and had the ability to discern between fantasy and reality, maybe she and he could have just one interlude.

Before she fell asleep, she felt him move closer to her, draping one leg partially over hers and putting an arm about her. She tense for a moment when she realized that his

hand was on her breasts, but the soft snoring continued, reassuring her that he was sleeping. She'd never felt so wanted or safe before. Part of her wished their relationship truly was real. It would feel nice to go to sleep with him in such a way each night.

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Harry was looking at his book, but he'd read the same sentence fifty times. Ginny was sitting across from him, and every so often, he felt her foot touch his leg. Each time, they would look up at each other and grin. *Why can't I just ask her?* he asked himself in annoyance. *All the signs are there. She'll say yes.*

"Er..."

"Yes?"

"What are you reading?" he asked instead.

"Oh... uh, it's just a bit of light reading to accompany my Astronomy homework," she said. "You?"

"Er... Defense Against the Dark Arts homework," he said.

"You've not turned the page in about a half an hour," Ginny said, smirking slightly. "Are you truly studying?"

"Well, you see... er... If you must know... Hang on!" He closed his book and leaned forward. "I've not seen you turning your page either. ~~Are~~ you truly studying?"

"Oh, I'm studying something all right," she said suggestively.

Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise. *Is she flirting with me?* He looked around and saw that Ron was missing. *Where's he gone to again?* He noticed Neville heading their way. He knew he had to act fast. "Want to go to Hogsmeade with me?"

"Sorry?" she asked, giggling. "Your wand flows mead in you? Didn't quite catch that!"

"Would you like to go to Hogsmeade with me?" he asked, laughing at her misinterpretation of his words. "I mean... if you'd like or don't have plans."

As Ginny opened her mouth to reply, Neville plunked down. "Gin, did you decide if you were going to Hogsmeade or not? We're going to go to the Three Broomsticks about noon if you decide."

Feeling like an idiot, Harry sat back in his chair. She'd made plans already. He'd waited too long, misread the signs... Damn.

"Harry and I have plans to eat elsewhere," Ginny said, beaming proudly. "But if we get done, we'll stop by for a butterbeer or two."

"Fair enough," Neville said. Looking to Harry, he added, "Thought you were going with Ron."

"Oh, yeah... er... I decided to do my own thing. Ron's taken off anyway," he said, trying to sound casual.

"Saw him out in the corridor earlier. Talking to Parkinson, he was," Neville confided, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "I think they're a little friendly, if you ask me about it."

Harry smirked. "Maybe," he said. In all honesty, he'd been thinking the same thing. It seemed that Ron found reasons to talk to her for the past few days, talked about her nearly constantly, and he'd been disappearing. "See you."

Ginny asked, "Do you think it's true?"

"I do."

"Well, good for him," she said, reaching across the table. "Want to escort me back to Gryffindor Tower? Maybe we could have a quick stroll to the Astronomy Tower." She nodded to her book. "Quite interesting, that."

"Brilliant," Harry said, smiling smugly. *You're going to get snogged tonight, Ginevra,* he thought to himself, helping her put her cloak on.

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Draco bent over to whisper into Hermione's ear. "Professor Snape told me that my father is waiting for me in his office. I'm going to go down. Will you be here?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'll go back to either our common room or my own room."

"It will be all right. We might not even have to get you to meet him," he said quietly. "If that's the case, I guess all that practicing will have been for nothing." He winked. "Enjoyable but unnecessary."

"Good luck," she said, looking back down at her plate.

He simply nodded, smirked at Weasley, and made his way out of the Great Hall. He took the narrow stairway off the Entrance Hall to go down to Snape's office. Once he neared, he heard his father saying, "Don't worry, Severus. I shall have a word with him and clear this up."

"I think, Lucius, that you will find that your son can make up his own mind. I've told you numerous times this past week that Miss Parkinson has also..."

Draco's entrance cut his reply short. "Father, Professor," he greeted.

"I shall give you some privacy," Snape said, gliding past Draco and closing the door.

Draco sat next to his father and nodded. "You wanted to talk to me about Pansy and Hermione."

"What is between you and this Mudblood?" Lucius asked immediately. "I'll have you know that I am barraged each day with numerous owls. All of them are talking about you and this girl. What of our plans for your future with Miss Parkinson? Do you know she's now trying to cry off?"

I can do this, Draco told himself. "That future is no longer. I have other plans now."

"Come now, Draco. Surely you don't mean to carry on with this other girl," Lucius said incredulously. "She's not worthy of a Malfoy."

"How would you know, Father? You've not even met her. Not really," Draco retorted.

"I've been hearing about her since *you* entered this school." Lucius sneered lightly. "It's your words that have helped me to form an opinion about her, aside from the brushes with her that I've had in the past."

"Pansy and I don't want to be forced together any longer. That life used to be acceptable, but now, it simply isn't. We want to choose our own spouses."

Lucius stared at his son. "I do not approve of her. If not Parkinson, let me make other arrangements with another family. What of the Greengrass girl?"

"Father, don't you understand? I *love* Hermione. It's her that I have chosen." Draco saw his father's disbelieving expression. "Really," he added lamely.

"Interesting that this is the first I hear of it," Lucius said smoothly. "No matter. Do what you will with her, and then you need to be rid of her." He shook his head and chuckled. "I was known for my lusty appetite at one time as well, but I knew when to keep certain things hidden."

His father had just given him leave to do what he must, and he wouldn't force him to marry Pansy. A great weight had been lifted from Draco's shoulders with those words. However, he couldn't call things off with her yet. He had made a deal with her. When he was certain that Weasley wouldn't start bothering her again, they would end things. Truth be known, he wasn't ready to end things just yet. The time he had been spending with her was among the best he'd had.

Another thing that bothered him was the way his father was dismissing her as unworthy to be a Malfoy wife. If Hermione wasn't worthy, nobody was. Feeling indignant, he rose and said firmly, "I will not hide her away in some dark corridor. She is the woman that I have chosen. We have been secretly seeing each other for the past year." When his father's mouth gaped open slightly, he added, "That's right. Some of your old mates tried to do me in. She helped me escape, and that's how this all started. I'm tired of hiding her. You can accept it... or not."

Lucius stood in a huff. "Have a care with your words, boy, and to whom you are speaking with." His voice lowered to a whisper. "We shall see about this, Draco. I don't believe your mother will be very receptive either." After straightening his robes, he said snidely, "I shall discuss this with you further during the Christmas holiday. Perhaps by then, you'll have found your sense or have tired of her."

"I'll not tire of her," Draco said defiantly, knowing it to be true. He couldn't help it, but he wanted to keep her. He wanted to know her better.

When Lucius reached the door and opened it, he said, without turning back, "I am deeply disappointed, Draco. You know what an alliance to the Parkinsons would do for our family." With that said, he strode out, leaving Draco alone.

After the flow of adrenaline left his body, he exited Snape's office, not meeting him along the way. His father hadn't even asked to see her, choosing to believe that it would pass. He'd like to prove him wrong. If only Hermione would feel something for him...

He found her in the common room and moved directly to her. "We need to talk."

"Sure," she said, rising immediately to take his hand and leaving her friends to follow them with their eyes. "Are you all right?" she asked when they were alone in her room.

"I stood up to him," Draco said proudly, pacing across her floor. "He tried to get me to admit that things weren't as I said, but I held fast!"

"So he doesn't want to meet me then?" Hermione asked in a small voice.

Draco paused and looked at her, expression darkening. "No, I don't think he truly believes how much I care about you. He thinks this is just something that will pass." *Damn! I'm admitting to her how I feel. I can't look ridiculous.* "Even though he offered to find another more suitable mate, I refused him. I knew you still needed me to hold up our end of the deal."

Her face fell for a second. "Right. Thank you."

"Wait," he said, reaching out to pull her to him. "I didn't mean it to sound so..."

"But that's all it is. Don't worry. No offense taken," she said, grinning lightly. *How could I be so foolish? For a moment, I thought...*

It was her smile that did him in. "Hermione," he said, drawing out the sound of each syllable as he did so. His lips found hers for an intense kiss. When she parted her lips, he was lost in the moment, picking her up and carrying her to the bed. He never broke the kiss as his hands found her breasts and fondled them. "God," he murmured when his lips finally left hers.

He kissed his way down to her throat and groaned as he felt her pulling at his hair and whimpering with want. His fingers were able to unbutton her blouse in record time and push her bra up and away from her breasts, baring them to him. Eagerly, his mouth and fingers attacked and teased her soft mounds, causing her nipples to harden. He flicked his tongue round her peaks while grinding himself against her.

Tearing away from her, Draco sat back, still straddling her, to begin unfastening his shirt. This was his mistake. It was then that the spell between them was broken. The instant her eyes widened, he knew that they would go no further than they had already. He simply moved aside, sighing in discontent and fixing his shirt while she buttoned hers.

"Draco, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lead you on," she began, voice cracking. "I just don't want to start something that can never truly be finished."

"Right," he nodded, not facing her.

"After I'm certain that Ron has moved on, we'll end things, and I think if we choose to *do this*, it will only complicate things."

Able to school his feelings, he faced her. "Don't worry. 'S all right." He leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Want to go have a walk to the lake? It's not all that cold out."

"All right," she said, taking his hand. "My cloak is just there."

As he helped her put her cloak on, he couldn't help but to feel the disappointment flow through his body. They'd been so close. He'd been so close to having her. He vowed to truly try to woo her while he still had the chance to pretend to be her boyfriend. It would likely be the only way he could ever experience her. Maybe by the time Christmas was upon them, he would be telling his father the truth about them...instead of lies.

Southern's Notes: Sorry that this took a little longer to get out. I had to arrange things differently. The next chapter is not going to need much changing around, so it'll be up sooner.

Christy's Notes: Well! I am happy Draco stood up to his father; now can he face Narcissa? He and Hermione were so close, but I can't blame her for guarding her heart. The thing is, does she really need to?

Dangerous Decisions

Draco finally decides to admit his feelings to Hermione, but she rebuffs him, not realizing his intentions. The consequences are not good.

Disclaimer: These characters belong to J.K.R. I'm just using them and not making money whilst doing so!

I want to thank CocoaChristy for helping me dust this off to make it presentable, and I'd also like to thank my original beta, Charmed Nay.

Draco felt that the last few weeks had changed him somehow. He found himself speaking to people he'd never liked before, and he'd learned that some of them weren't all that bad. It was true that most came from homes that were inferior to his family, but he didn't mind conversing with some. Dating Hermione, unfortunately, meant studying often. Though his grades had never been all that bad, he'd never received better marks until he'd started hanging around with her. There was no denying that he wanted her to remain in his life. That became apparent with each day he spent pretending to be her lover.

How could one not grow to care for someone that was always with him? He'd kissed her each day, he'd held her each day, and he'd taken to sleeping in her room often. Although they had never done anything more than a few caresses and some heavy snogging, they'd nearly lost control a couple of times. He made certain to take advantage of every moment they had alone together, claiming the need to fool his father should he pop in. His parents' owls were no longer filled with their disappointed words. They seemed to be relaxing and giving him space. *Finally*. He felt that he could pursue her without worry of their demands if he wanted to.

But how exactly did she feel? Draco knew that she was attracted to him. Who wouldn't be after spending each day of the past couple of months pretending to be in love? Weasley had backed off immensely and was even on speaking terms with Draco, mostly. Potter paid them no mind, dating the littlest Weasley. Pansy was seeing more of her secret boyfriend. Would Hermione turn him down if he asked her to truly have a relationship? She'd likely toss him aside as she did with Weasley. He snorted. *Hell, she might make a deal with some other bloke to pretend to date her to be rid of me.*

Draco grinned when Hermione edged closer, breaking into his line of thoughts. "Tired of reading, are you?"

"It's a bit noisy in here," she said.

"Let's go for a walk," Draco suggested, realizing that this would be a perfect opportunity for him to ask her about her feelings. If he only ended up straining things between them, he would simply have to live with it. He took Hermione by the hand and led her up to the Astronomy Tower. When they came out onto the roof, they saw two figures in the corner; they seemed to be enjoying themselves...snogging heavily. He pulled Hermione back through the door, not wanting to disturb whomever it was.

Laughing, they hurried down to the first corridor off of the stairway. "Guess someone's having a right good time."

"Definitely," he said, easily pulling her into his arms and leaning back against the wall with her. He couldn't wait any longer to tell her how he felt and what he would like to develop between them. Softly, almost shyly, he stated, "It's Christmas next weekend."

"Yes, and finally a break after our exams. I can't wait for some of Mum's pumpkin pie. Nobody makes it like she does!" Hermione exclaimed excitedly.

"I'll owl you every day," he said, wondering how to voice his feelings. He knew she'd be uncomfortable joining him at his home, but Draco hoped he could get Hermione to invite him to hers.

She pulled back, looking at him suspiciously. "Why?"

Damn. Looking her in the eyes, he said mockingly, "Well, because I will miss you. Why else?"

"Draco, you don't have to do that. I mean... I'm not really your girlfriend." She moved away from him and eyed him expectantly.

That stung him more than he would have liked to admit. He'd never before been so open with anyone, much less a girl, much less someone like Hermione. "Right," he said, but he couldn't hide the hurt in his voice. "I'm nothing... not really. Only someone you're using to get one over on Weasley." He knew that he'd used her for the same reason, but that had changed. He truly wanted to be with her. It simply hurt that she didn't feel the same way.

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly. "That sounded horrible. I didn't mean..."

He became angry. "You know, I don't want your pity. Don't look at me like that. It was just a nice gesture, nothing more." He brushed by her, walking down the dark corridor, pausing when she asked him to wait. When she didn't speak, he said, "Think I'll be off now to get in a good shag before the holidays. Just make excuses for me in the common room. Night." He glowered at her for a moment, pleased that she seemed as stung as he'd been. With that, he stalked off, leaving Hermione with her mouth open.

She replayed the conversation in her mind over and over. Were her words truly so hurtful that he'd turned them about and hurt her with them? Why did it bother her that he was going to go shag someone? Why did he seem so hurt when she'd told him not to bother owling? Had he fallen for her? Her heart began beating wildly. She'd been falling for him a little each day over the past couple of months. If he would really want a relationship, then she'd definitely... No, he had as much as told her that he was just being nice.

The door to the Astronomy Tower opened and steps sounded. As the couple made their way down the stairs, Hermione ducked into the shadows just in time to see them pass. *It was Pansy and Ron that had been up there snogging!* Well, this was a turn of events. If it was Ron that Pansy wanted with the affection being mutual, then she and Draco were in the clear. They could end this now. End it now before she fell in too deep. As much as she hated to admit it, Harry had been right. She had gotten used to having Draco there for her. Even that bit of Malfoy display he'd just had didn't change things. They had been "dating" far longer than their planned month, and she realized that neither of them had seemed in too big a hurry to break things off. She wanted answers, wanted him to explain his emotions just now, and wanted to know if he truly wanted to end things.

She had to find him right away and tell him what she'd just seen. It was only right. She went down the corridor that he had taken. It was a dark passageway and led to the dungeons. She came to a fork in the path and didn't know which way to take. The one on the left was very dark. The one on the right had a little light farther down. She could hear someone talking. Maybe it was Draco. She went silently in that direction.

Nothing prepared her for what she saw when she peeked around the corner. One of her Housemates, Lavender Brown, was on her knees in front of Draco. She had his penis in her mouth and her hands on his waist. He had his eyes closed and was pushing her head closer to him each time she pulled back. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she clasped a hand over her mouth, muffling a cry. Draco opened his eyes and looked at her.

She spun on her heel and ran back the way she had come. "Hermione, wait!" She heard him calling after her, but she wouldn't stop. She couldn't face him. When she got to their common room, she paused for breath. Silent tears were streaming down her cheeks. She tried to sneak to the stairway that led to her dorm, but Harry spotted her.

"Oi!" he called. She tried to pass by, but he reached out to stop her. "Thanks for picking up that book for me at the library. It really..." He stopped abruptly. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not!" she wailed suddenly, unable to help it. Her hopes had been dashed, and the man that she loved was allowing Lavender Brown to do things for him that she'd not

even done. *I can't believe how badly this hurts. When Lavender had taken to Ron, it hadn't hurt this much* As if on queue, Ron was at her side in an instant, looking worried. Even Ginny came closer, trying to see what was wrong.

"Something has happened," Harry stated the obvious.

At that moment, the painting opened, and Lavender ran in. "Hermione!" she said. "Wait. I need to talk to you." She tried to pull Hermione to the side, but Harry clutched his friend closely.

"What's wrong with Mione? You've done something to her?" he asked tightly.

"No, of course not. Well, yes, Hermione, listen. I need to explain," Lavender said. *In private!*"

Hermione reached back and slapped the girl's face as hard as she could, wondering how Lavender could possibly dare to face her after what she'd been doing. She instantly regretted it when Lavender stumbled back, holding her face. The entire common room was silent now, watching the two girls, waiting for something to happen.

Lavender tried not to cry. "I deserved that. I know it. I'm sorry. He's waiting for you. Says you know where." With that said, she went to the stairs that led to her room. The only problem was that she had the room adjacent to Hermione's. There was no way Hermione would go up there now and risk running into the slag...the girl who had just had oral sex with her boyfriend.

"I'll kill him," Ron was saying. Ginny was trying to calm him down. "Knew he was playing with Hermione all the while, but she didn't see it. Pansy thought he loved her though, but I knew better." He hit a nearby wall. "Damn!" he yelled, holding his hand close.

"Enough, Ron!" Hermione said. "I can take care of myself. I just need time to think." She ran out of the common room as quickly as possible. She needed to sort out her feelings.

This was ridiculous. How could she have allowed herself to fall for him? All of the days she'd spent reminding herself that it wasn't real and that he would be gone one day were for nothing. She felt as if that one scene had destroyed her world. *Harry had it pegged early on. Draco's charm had done it, lured me in. He is still just Malfoy beneath it all.* No matter what he said or did, Draco was all an illusion. But he couldn't be. She knew him better than anyone else at this school.

It was obvious to her suddenly. He must have only done that with Lavender because of what she'd said to him right before... about her not being his true girlfriend and rebuffing his offer to owl each day. He had been hurt and angry. He'd warned her that he would go off to shag someone. Somehow deep down she hadn't really believed he would. *Am I just reaching here? Should I go to him?* She supposed that they could stage their breakup now. It was the only thing to do... especially since their friends had witnessed what happened between her and Lavender. It would not be long before they forced the truth out of one of them.

"Mione?" It was Harry. She fell into his arms and sobbed quietly once again. He soothed her as best as he could. When the tears stopped, he spoke again. "You love him?"

She shrugged. "I think I do. This really bothers me. I've gotten used to him just like you said I would. Underneath, I didn't really want to break things off, you know? It all seemed to be going all right, and part of me hoped I would have a real chance with him." He kissed her forehead in an attempt to make her feel better. "I mean... I knew I wouldn't really be good enough, but I'd hoped."

"Mione, I'm sorry that you're going through this. What happened? What did he say to you? What has Lavender got to do with it?" Harry asked.

"Well, he... he said he would owl me everyday over the holidays. I told him there was no need as I wasn't really his girlfriend. Then, he looked so... hurt. I apologized, and he blew up. Said he was going to go shag someone and took off. Then..." She shuddered. "Then I saw Lavender. Oh, Harry, she had her mouth on his... you know." She blushed.

Harry blushed, too. "How the hell did those two hook up? I know Lavender likes boys...a lot! We've seen that when she went after Ron, but I would never have thought she would be with Draco. They don't even talk. I've only ever seen him sneer at her when she'd go round him."

"I don't know. Well, I guess this is as good a time as any to go on with our breakup. Ron and Pansy are doing just fine now." She remembered them earlier, all smiles and affection. "In fact, I think they've moved on *together.*"

"I've seen them talking a lot lately as well. I figured that out. Are you going to be all right? I have to go to my meeting with Dumbledore right now," he said, but he seemed reluctant to go.

"Go on. I'll just have a walk." She smiled.

"Don't you dare go outside in this blizzard, Hermione. Stay to the castle." She nodded and turned away, heading for the library. She would go escape this mess by pouring herself into a book. She realized, though, that Draco would be there. Lavender had said that he would be waiting for her.

It was their spot. There was no way she could go there. She wasn't ready to see him just yet. She wanted to make sure she could handle her feelings first. She knew that she could pretend to have reacted with such disappointment as part of their staged breakup. It would be easier for her if he didn't know how she really felt about him. He would feel no guilt or embarrassment, and he wouldn't taunt her in front of anyone. She was dressed warmly enough, so she decided to have a walk out to her spot by the lake anyway, blizzard or not. When she looked out, the snow had stopped, but it was extremely windy. She wanted to have a look at the moon's reflection in the frozen lake, not that she would truly see one, what with the snow covering it. Just thinking of such a peaceful scene would put her mind at ease.

She giggled to herself as she spied Hagrid through his window; he was dancing round in his hut and holding a large cup. Hermione was sure he had some sort of mead in it. The wind blew her hair wildly as it howled into the evening, causing her to wrap her arms around her body for warmth. She finally made her way to the little clump of bushes by the lake. She Transfigured a rock into a large, plush cushion to sit on. The night was beautiful. The lake was frozen and snowy, the full moon was shimmering against the dark sky, and a few snowflakes were tossing about in the breeze. Nature seemed to be at its worst, all things frozen and dying out. It matched her mood. Her heart felt as if it were dying as well. Hopefully, it would begin to mend again. Nature would soon mend all that she had done this winter by springing new life into everything. Would she have new life? Could she go back to just daydreaming again? Or would she always compare everyone to Draco? These thoughts replayed in her mind continuously until she simply felt numb.

The next thing Hermione knew, the moon had shifted in the sky and more snow was falling. Her body felt as if it were freezing solid. She felt as though blood no longer flowed in her veins, as if only ice was within her body. She'd stayed out too long. She fumbled for her wand. How silly of her. She hadn't been thinking clearly. She could have easily chanted a Warming Spell. Even through her mittens, her fingers seemed frozen. They would barely close around her wand. She muttered her spell and felt a warm glow surround her at once. Instead of making her feel better, it made her want to sleep. She curled into the cushion and gave in to the desire to sleep. She would wake before the spell wore off. Just a little nap wouldn't hurt anything.

Draco was pacing back and forth in the infirmary. He had found Hermione half-covered in snow with a small trace of a Warming Spell still clinging to her cloak. How could she have been so silly as to go out in such weather? Alone at that! He had waited for her for an hour before going off to see if she was in her room. He'd knocked on her door and waited for her for a few minutes before going back down to the common room to ask if anyone had seen her. He'd noticed right away that nearly everyone was glowering at him. He'd wondered if she'd already blabbed to the whole lot about what had gone on. Finally, someone had decided to approach him...someone with red hair and an attitude. Ron had glared at him hatefully and had seemed to be deciding on attacking him or not. His nostrils flared just thinking of the boy's words.

"I should kill you for hurting her. I don't know what you did, but I hope she never forgives you. You don't deserve her."

Ron's words angered him and made him want to hurt the redhead just as much. "Yeah, well, what's to say that you deserved her either, Weasel? I mean, dirt poor as you are. You would just use her after she gets a job to pay your way no doubt. Think she needs your filthy hands on her?" Draco spat.

"Better they would have been my hands than yours. All you wanted to do was hurt her. All these years of teasing haven't been enough, eh? Made you feel good to see her cry? Made you feel like a real man? Where is she, you right git?" Ron bit out.

Draco was puzzled. His anger ebbed away, worry replacing it. "She's not here?"

"Of course not. Left right after she slapped Lavender. What did you do to her?" Ron wasn't as loud as he was before, a worried look passed over his face. "Blimey! We've got to find her. She was upset." Ron quickly fled the common room, Draco on his heels, but when he saw the boy going towards the library, he stopped. He'd just come from there and had even gone to the Astronomy Tower. He had a feeling she was out by the lake.

Draco sighed and looked back towards the bed she was lying in. Madam Pomfrey had said that he'd gotten to her just in time. His heart had nearly stopped beating when he'd found her. When he'd rolled her over to see her face, she'd simply seemed to be sound asleep. However, her lips had turned blue, and she'd had ice in her hair. It was as if she'd been slowly freezing. Pulling off his cloak and wrapping it around her, he'd held her close and summoned strength he hadn't known he'd possessed, running all the way to the infirmary with her in his arms. Harry and Ron had seen him run by with her and followed. They were told to wait outside while she was examined. Draco didn't want to talk to them anyway. Weasley started ranting about how he would kill Draco if Hermione didn't get better quick.

Draco continued to ignore his yelling and didn't notice when Potter pulled him off for a word. Instead, he dropped to his knees in the corner and said a silent prayer for her. He normally didn't pray, but he would try anything to help Hermione. She didn't look good, and it made him feel doubly worse for doing what he had with Lavender. He promised that he'd never hurt her again if he could see her smile once more. He would take her place if that were allowed. Hell, he'd do anything to make her better. He thought back to the conversation he'd had with Dumbledore right after he'd brought Hermione in.

The headmaster spoke with Madam Pomfrey before venturing over to talk to Draco. "Hermione ventured out during a blizzard and ended up causing herself harm. That was quite careless of her," he said kindly. "Are you all right? You seem rather distraught."

"I'm worried. She looks... I'm afraid that she might not..." His voice trailed away. Deep down, he knew that she would be fine. The potions would work, but he was truly worried that she wouldn't forgive him when she did pull through. That has to be why she was crying and had gone out to be alone. If she wasn't upset about what she saw, she would have come to the library to see me. She must have feelings for me and was trying to hide them, as I had been.

Dumbledore put his hand on Draco's shoulder. "She will pull through, young Malfoy. Pride yourself in knowing that you saved the life of the one you obviously love so deeply."

Draco looked into the old man's eyes...the one you obviously love so deeply. Dumbledore knew. How was it that someone that barely saw them together could read his feelings and Hermione never could? Why did he have to wait so long to tell her how deeply he truly felt? It was pride, of course, that had gotten in the way. It had been his pride that had been wounded, forcing him take Lavender up on her offer. "She doesn't know how I truly feel," he whispered. "I never got the chance to tell her."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "You will have that chance. I do believe you should tell her as soon as she wakes up." With that, he walked away, leaving Draco alone to think.

Draco felt someone's eyes on him, causing him to look up. Weasley was standing there with his hand extended. Draco looked at it until Ron retracted it.

"Be that way then, but know that I am just glad that you found her." Ron turned to go back to Harry, who was watching the exchange intently.

"Wait," Draco said. He extended his hand. Ron hesitated, but he took it in his anyway. "I never meant to hurt her." It was all he could say. He didn't have to explain anything to Weasley.

"I know," Ron said. "Come on, Harry. Pomfrey is giving us looks again; we have to go. We'll come back first thing in the morning."

To Draco's surprise, Pansy walked in. She went to Ron and hugged him. "Is she all right?" Ron nodded. Pansy looked to Draco. "You going to be all right, Draco?"

*"Yes," he said through narrowed eyes. So... this was who she was in love with then? Weasley. He almost laughed. How could she have chosen the red-haired prat over a life of luxury with a Malfoy? *It doesn't matter. She's not what you want, imbecile. Never truly was.* He would be happy for her, and he was secretly glad that Ron had another interest besides his girlfriend. *Girlfriend?* It slipped out so easily. Their fake relationship felt so real at times. He always woke up thinking about her. He'd fall asleep thinking about her, and he'd even dream about her. She was his girl in nearly every way.*

When they finally left, Draco took to pacing the floor again while waiting for her to wake up. He had so many thoughts roaming through his mind that he hadn't heard the little cough at first. Suddenly, he realized she was moving, and he went to her side quickly. "Hermione?" he whispered. Her eyes opened. She gave a faint smile. "Thank God," he said and hugged her to him.

"What happened?" she asked weakly.

"I almost lost you," he replied. "You nearly froze to death. I found you... just in time. Another minute or two, and, uh, it wouldn't have been good." He pushed back a stray lock of hair from her face and looked into her eyes. "I feel so horrible about everything, and all I could think of was that I should have told you that I love you. Please don't ever scare me that way again."

"I love you, too," she said, trailing off to sleep once more. He wondered if it was an automatic response, or if she'd truly understood what he'd told her and admitted her own feelings finally. Those words had been exchanged before, but they were said only for the benefit of others. It was likely that she didn't quite remember everything. She'd only been awake for a moment. If Pomfrey wouldn't be bustling about and caring for two other students, he felt that he might cry from the immense relief that filled him. She would be fine. He would make her understand that Lavender meant nothing to him. She was only away to avenge what he'd thought was rejection.

When he had been in that corridor with Lavender, he had been enjoying himself and thought that it was all a form of paying her back for hurting him, but when he'd seen her there with tears in her eyes and her hand trying to cover her horrified expression, he'd felt so ashamed and guilty. He'd pushed Lavender away and ran after her, but she had gone too far by the time he'd fastened his trousers. Forcing Lavender to go to Hermione hadn't been the brightest thing to do, but he'd been certain that Hermione would find him. He was angry when she hadn't. He'd had no idea that she was out in the dark near death. His only hope now was that she would forgive him. He would make things work.

"You should be getting back to your dormitory now, Mr. Malfoy. She'll likely not wake tonight," the matron said kindly.

"I'd like to stay if it's all the same."

Pursing her lips, she nodded brusquely and pulled the privacy curtains round the bed. Taking that as approval, he kicked off his boots and crawled in next to his Hermione, gently holding her. "I do love you, Hermione. I'll make it up to you. I promise."

Southern's Notes: Ah... the realization that you love someone is sometimes bittersweet. I hope that she'll forgive him. After all, they weren't truly dating, and he did warn her. (No excuse though, huh?)

Christy's Notes: Pride! It's one of the seven deadliest! If they had both swallowed their pride and admitted things... Ah well. We all know they are both too stubborn for that! I hope she forgives him, too!

Back to Reality

Chapter 7 of 11

Hermione and Draco discuss what happened and make decisions about their future.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. Happy reading!

I'd like to thank my original beta, Charmed Nay, and CocoaChristy, who is now helping me dust this off and making it presentable.

Hermione woke up a few hours later. Even though the candle next to her bed was nearly burnt out, she could still make out Draco's features on the form lying near her. Bits and pieces came back to her. She remembered sitting at the lake. She remembered crying. She remembered Lavender... and Draco. What was he doing here? He could have easily told everyone that they had broken up. Maybe it was guilt. *I guess I might have stayed out a bit too long, which was very foolish, but I needed someplace private to sort my feelings out.*

Suddenly, she remembered something. *I love you*, he had said. They were here... alone. He'd seemed sincere if her memory served her correctly. Surely it wasn't just a dream. If he could possibly love her and want a real relationship, then she would want to try to make things work. She had to tell him how she felt and why she was upset. If he taunted her, so be it. At least she would know that she'd honestly tried. "Draco?" Her voice sounded a bit weak, even to herself. She had no idea how it managed to wake him, but he jolted upright.

"Hermione!" He hugged her instantly. "I've never been so worried before. Pomfrey and Dumbledore said you would be all right, but I just couldn't stop thinking that..."

"I'm all right. That was really stupid of me to venture out in such weather, but I needed time to think... about us." She felt his arms tense around her. *Apparently that's not what he wants to hear. I don't care. I'm going to say what I have to say whether he likes it or not.*

"I'm so sorry. I know you have every right to hate me for what I did. I was just so dis..."

She interrupted him, saying, "Draco, I had no right to be so upset about that. I'm not truly your girlfriend. I hurt your feelings, and you did only what made you feel better. I suppose I can understand that." She sighed. "But when I saw her with you, I was just so jealous and hurt. It felt as if something sacred had been tainted."

"Hermione, how do you really feel about me? Our little deal aside, I'd like to know." He gazed at her evenly.

Here goes nothing. "I have fallen in love with you. I didn't mean to, but you turned out to be someone that I honestly believe I can spend my life with. We get on so well. Everyone accepted us, though we've deceived them all. It seems such a shame to... end things." She bit her lip and looked down.

Placing a finger beneath her chin, he lifted her face up so that he could look into her eyes as he said, "I love you. All of these weeks that we've spent pretending have enabled us to grow closer, and it's allowed me to see you as you are. I really want us to be together. I need you."

Hermione hugged him tightly, tears shining in her eyes. Those words had been what she'd wanted to hear for a while now. Only a couple of months before, she'd never have believed that she and Draco Malfoy would be lovers, nearly. "Ca-Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"You and Lavender... What, I mean, how did that happen?" She looked away again, not wanting to meet his eyes. He had caught her spying after all. She felt her face heating.

Draco sighed, and when he spoke, his voice was hushed. "I was angry because I was about to ask you to truly be my girl and tell you that I love you when we argued. When I left, I was angry and wanted to do anything to make myself feel less... ridiculous or in control of my feelings. I don't know what came over me, but when she bumped into me, I told her she owed me one for putting her filthy hands on me. She simply backed me to the wall, dropped to her knees, and asked if I would allow her mouth on me. I... ah... accepted." He forced her to look back at him so he could see her eyes. "I feel rotten about it. I'm sorry, and I do wish I could change things."

"I don't like it. I'll admit that, but I had no say so either way. You weren't mine, not really."

"But I was yours, Hermione. You did have a say, though you didn't know it. It was you I wanted. That's what makes it all the worse." He looked away. "I should have said something sooner, but you were always going on about how "fake" we were. I didn't want you to reject me. *I do love you.*" He smiled and faced her again. "You make me want to be good. I want a chance to show that I can be."

"And you make me want to be bad. Maybe we should start anew." She grinned wickedly before pulling him to her for a kiss, firmly pressing her lips to his and prodding with her tongue for entrance. It was the first time that she'd completely put all of her feelings into her kiss. What made it better was that she knew for a fact that he wanted her and had feelings for her...had chosen her and fallen in love with her. They were both breathless when they broke apart.

"Holy shite," he said, as he quivered. "I felt that everywhere without you touching anything else."

"Me too," she agreed, thinking of the feelings the kiss evoked, causing a shiver to pass through her body. He mistook it for her being cold. He pulled her back onto her pillow and pulled the blanket back up around them.

Satisfied that she was comfortable, he eased up on one elbow to look at her, but he kept a hand on her body, not wanting to lose contact with her just yet. "So, what now, Hermione?"

She took a deep breath. "Well, we've been doing good as we were, haven't we? Need we change anything?"

"Not a thing. I just meant... Will things change between us now that we are *real*?" He was uncertain if she'd understand exactly what he meant, but he had to know, not wanting to go too far and wanting to see how she felt about moving their relationship along. The sudden blush rising in her cheeks told him that she'd likely understood what he meant. He saw her swallow before speaking.

"Things will change for us I'm sure...for the better... in *that* way. I just need time to... Oh, please don't be angry with me, but..." Her voice trailed away as she closed her eyes.

His heart dropped. Was she changing her mind? "I won't be angry. Just say it. No more secrets," he encouraged when she didn't continue.

"I need to get the picture of her with you out of my head. Please, Draco, don't take this the wrong way. Although we are talking, that one scene keeps coming back to replay in my mind." She panicked when he turned away from her. She sat up quickly and clutched at his side to make him face her. "Wait. Don't be that way. I love you, and I forgive you. I just need to try to let that memory fade. Forgiving is not forgetting, if you understand. Not right away."

He shook his head sadly. "Hermione, she was nothing. That was just a bit of messing around. *You* are the only one for me, the only one I care for."

"Just messing around? I mean... something like that is sacred and not to be taken so casually, Draco. Not for me anyway." She let go of the hand that had found hers. "I always believed that to do that with someone you had to love him or at least care about the person. Then, here you come, saying that all someone does is ask to have sex, as if it were a bloody business arrangement!"

"Hermione, no, it's different with you. I have feelings for you. They meant nothing to me. It won't be that way with *us*." He had to make her understand that there was casual sex, the need to seek orgasm, but then there was what they had together, the need to share everything and seek things together. "It's not always like the books that you've read with the perfect romance and courtship. Sometimes things are different."

"Draco, I know it's not like in my books. You've told me that already. I just think of sex...in any form...differently than you do is all. I mean... Can I trust that you will only be with me?"

"You're all I want," he said honestly, feeling that they were finally getting somewhere.

"Just promise me that, and I'll promise to never leave you."

"Only you, always." He placed a hand on her cheek, and she smiled in return. "We can do this."

A thought occurred to her. "What of your parents?"

"They haven't disowned me yet, have they? I figure we can just keep things as they are. No need to tell them anything."

He seemed so positive about it that she would not worry on it any longer. No longer would she have to lie next to him each night, fearing that she would give her body to him for naught. It would be for love. If he loved her in return, she wouldn't simply be allowing him to use her while using him in return. She'd been so tempted as of late. His kisses and caresses had been getting bolder, and she'd been eagerly accepting them, doing the same in return. There would no longer be a line that they couldn't cross, keeping them from going further. The vision of his hands tangled in Lavender's hair while her head bobbed against his center came to mind. She pushed it away, not wanting to ruin the moment.

Choosing to smile instead, she said, "We will get used to this together, though it might take some time." She kissed him chastely and pulled away. "Oh," she said cheekily, "come here." She pulled him back to her again, kissing him again. This time, though, she hugged him more tightly and kissed him passionately.

"What of Christmas then?" he asked softly.

"Well, I will still be going home. I have missed my parents, and I would like to tell them about us...now that there is an us." She looked down shyly. "I could ask for you to stay over if you'd like." Part of her worried that he wouldn't want to stay in her home, as it was a Muggle home, but when she looked up, he was smiling.

"I think I would like that. I'll go home to see my parents first, but we can make arrangements via owl." He paused for a moment and asked, "Think they will like me?"

"Yes, I do. Will you feel strange being in a Muggle house?" she asked bluntly. There could be no lies between them. Mostly, she needed to know if he would accept her dirty blood...really accept it and realize what he was getting himself into.

"I think any place that you come from can't be bad. They've done a good job with you, haven't they?" He pinched her nose lightly.

She pushed away and giggled. Then, more seriously, she asked, "Does it not bother you anymore... that I am *Mudblood*?"

"Strangely enough, no. I see you as only a witch, and I see myself as only a wizard. You've taught me that." He looked down for a moment. "You don't know how much I can feel myself changing. It's a good change though."

"I've noticed that you've changed as well, and I like that change. I think that I've changed also. Do you not see it?" she asked coyly.

"The only thing I see is that you are more beautiful every time I look at you."

She laughed. "What I meant was... do I still seem to be a pesky know-it-all?"

He thought for a moment. She had changed. She didn't annoy him any longer with all her facts and superior attitude. "Right. I did not notice until just now. You just kind of grew on me."

She playfully hit his arm. "My bad, naughty Draco," she whispered.

A voice drew them apart. "You're all better I see, Miss Granger!" Madam Pomfrey smiled softly. "I am happy to say that you can return to your dormitory as soon as you feel the need. I see my Thawing Potion has done the trick!"

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. I feel much better now." Hermione smiled warmly.

"Well, yes, of course you do," she said self-importantly, but she then added chidingly, "if it wasn't for your young man there, I don't know that you would have gotten here in time for the potion to work."

Hermione blushed. *My young man. That he is, isn't he?* She grinned at Draco. He looked worse than she felt. He had bags under his eyes, hair disheveled, and clothes rumpled. "Draco, maybe you should be resting."

He was in the middle of a protest when Madame Pomfrey spoke. "Don't even bother him about it. I've been after him since he brought you in to be off to his room for some sleep. Hard head, that one." She scurried off to check on another patient.

He laughed. "Maybe we should go back to your room, and I could crawl in with you for a little while if you don't mind." He held up his hands. "I'll behave."

"All right. I need to get dressed first. Could you give me my clothes?" she asked, nodding to the pile of folded clothing on the stand next to the bed.

"Sure," he gave the clothes to her and turned away to allow her to dress comfortably. "I'm sure Weasley and Potter will be happy to see you."

"Oh... did they give you much trouble?"

Draco shook his head. "Not really. I think they'll just be glad that things have been sorted out for us."

"When I went to find you last night, I wanted to tell you that Ron and Pansy were the ones that were snogging on the Astronomy Tower."

"I gathered as much when she came in later to speak to him." He shrugged. "Good. Less trouble for us as far as I'm concerned."

"I agree."

He detected a change in her tone. "What is it?" he asked.

"We've only a few days before the holiday, and it's not that I don't want you to sleep in my bed with me..."

"But?"

"I'll admit that I keep thinking of Lavender."

"I won't ever speak to her again... or look at her. I promise," he said, turning back to face her as she fastened the last of her buttons on her blouse.

"Draco, stop. I believe you, but I want to be certain that I can deal with it before..." She blushed. "You know..."

"Before we make love," he finished for her.

"Yes."

"Hermione, I won't do anything that you don't want me to do. You know that."

"That's the problem," she whispered. "I'm confused. I find myself wanting to be with you in that way, and then, I find myself wanting to wait." She moved to stand next to him. "For now, to be safe, I think we should sleep apart at night to make certain that we don't go too far. I want to wait until the time is right for us... a time when the memory of that bitch isn't clouding my mind. I won't let her ruin my... er... our first time."

"Whatever you want," he agreed, not wanting to jeopardize anything. He'd give her all the time she needed, but he knew it would only be a matter of time before they would be together in every way, especially since she returned his feelings. *I should have never talked to Lavender in the first place.*

"So," Harry ventured, "do you think that she should have forgiven him so easily?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't know. The git didn't leave her side the whole time, and he does seem to really care. I just don't want her to be hurt again... or used."

"Me either, mate," Harry agreed, "but I think that Malfoy is serious about her." He leaned forward. "I heard Zabini telling Bullstrode that his mother had heard that Narcissa Malfoy was beside herself over the relationship."

"Well, if he's told his parents and risked getting his inheritance taken away, I'd have to agree that he's serious."

"What of your new relationship? Is her father as upset as Malfoy's mum?" Harry asked, wondering if Ron would be welcome in the Parkinson home.

"She's not told them just yet, but she plans to over the holiday." He looked down. "I'm a bit nervous about that." His eyes narrowed. "You going to tell my mum about you and Ginny?"

Harry grinned. "She already knows. Ginny's told her."

"And?"

"She's happy."

"Glad to hear it," Ron said. "I think Ginny always knew you'd be the one for her, and I think Mum agreed with her. For what it's worth, so did I."

"What are you two sitting over here whispering about?" Ginny asked, plopping down next to Harry.

"Holidays."

"Quidditch."

Ginny giggled. "Right." She smiled at Harry. "I'm ready to go back to Gryffindor Tower. Will you walk me?"

"Of course," he said eagerly, knowing they'd stop a few times along the way for a bit of snogging. "Talk to you later, Ron."

"Yeah, sure. Go on and leave me here alone," Ron said, sulking slightly... until he noticed Pansy entered the common room. "Er... right. See you later." He stood and made his way over to her.

"Who would have thought?" Ginny asked in amazement.

"Not me," Harry replied. "Maybe I should bring my cloak. Snape or Filch has been showing up every time we stop lately and nearly catching us."

"Oh, so you're planning on having a few stops then?" she asked cheekily.

"Definitely."

Southern's Notes: That's it for Hogwarts. Next, we will see Hermione's parents' reaction to Draco, and Lucius Malfoy comes for a visit. Interestingly enough, he has plans of his own where Hermione is concerned.

Christy's Notes: I am so happy they made up, although I can see her point of view. That would be hard for me to get out of my mind, too. Seems like they are going to be fine though!

Home for the Holidays

Chapter 8 of 11

Lucius Malfoy escorts Draco to the Grangers' home. Draco meets Hermione's family and explains his father's plans to her.

Disclaimer: These characters were created by J.K.R. I'm having a bit of fun with them though.

Thanks go to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and thanks also go to CocoaChristy for helping me dust this off and make it presentable.

Hermione was pacing the floor. Draco would be Apparating to her home at any moment. After having a long talk with her parents, they'd agreed that he could spend the remainder of the Christmas holidays with them, and being that she was an adult, she had talked them into letting them share a room instead of making him sleep on the couch. She had promised to leave the door open of course. She felt slightly guilty about lying to them about the amount of time she'd been seeing him and why they'd kept things a secret, but she and he had agreed that in case their parents talked, they needed to be on the same page.

Her mother smiled warmly. "Settle down, dear. He'll be along shortly."

She smiled back, but she couldn't help being nervous. What if he thought her home was small? What if he and her parents didn't get along? *Bugger. It'll be fine.* She hadn't seen him in nearly a week, and she missed him terribly.

There was a knock on the door. "Must be him," her father said.

Nervously, she went to the door. When she opened it, to her horror, Lucius Malfoy swept in, his fashionable robes swirling about him. He seemed so intimidating. His grey eyes rested on her briefly before he turned them on her parents and then their home's interior. Draco followed him in slowly, looking distraught and uncertain. He smiled shyly at Hermione. She felt much better when he winked and shrugged slightly. He hadn't told her that his father would be accompanying him.

"Well, Miss Granger, we meet again." Lucius drawled, drawing her attention back to him. He looked back to her parents and stared down at her father's extended hand. "I trust you are the Grangers. I am Lucius Malfoy." His lip curled up in a slight sneer before he nodded to Draco and said, "I felt the need to escort my son to a neighborhood such as this one."

Hermione saw her father recoil and retract his hand. They lived in one of the best neighborhoods outside of London. Her parents were very well off in the Muggle world, as they were both dentists. "If you'll not mind me pointing out, Mr. Malfoy, but there are worse neighborhoods than ours." Her father extended a hand to him once again. "John Granger. This is my wife, Jane."

"Yes, of course. You are certainly well off for *Muggles*." He looked around again. "That is a boon, but I was referring to this as being a non-magical community is all." He finally shook her father's hand, but she could see he had no pleasure doing so, withdrawing his hand quickly.

"Would you care for any tea, Mr. Malfoy?" her mother offered sweetly. She seemed not to notice his dislike for Muggles.

"No, thank you, but I won't be staying. I've business to attend to in London." He nodded curtly. "Draco, come meet your new in-laws, boy," he demanded, gesturing Draco forward with his cane. Hermione turned red with embarrassment when he said that, but Draco dutifully came forward and extended a hand to each. It was as if he hadn't heard what his father had said.

Draco seemed to relax when he received a warm welcome. "Nice to finally meet you," he said calmly. "Thanks for allowing me to stay here with Hermione."

"Er..." her father said. "In-laws, did you say?" His brow furrowed in confusion. "Why, as far as I know, there are no wedding plans in the works."

"Figure of speech, old boy, I suppose he's not truly asked her yet," Lucius said. "My son has chosen your daughter of course. Anyone in her position would agree. Therefore, I assume they will marry, especially with him buying such gifts for her." He placed a hand over his mouth. "Oh, I believe I nearly let slip something important." He smirked slightly. "I do believe spending the holidays with one's lover accounts for a very serious relationship, does it not?" His smile did not extend to his eyes, and his voice was tinged with sarcasm.

Her father cleared his throat. "Don't worry, Lucius. There'll be none of that while he stays here."

Lucius nodded, but his expression was politely incredulous. "Indeed." He turned to Draco. "Have a good holiday, son. I trust you have all that you need to get you back to school then?"

"Yes, Father, and thank you for escorting me," Draco replied immediately, voice even.

"Remember what your mother asked of you, and if you decide to come home for Christmas dinner... Miss Granger will be welcome." With that said, Lucius swept out the door, leaving it wide open.

Her mother closed it quickly so that the cold air didn't seep in. Draco shrugged at Hermione as if to say sorry, but her mother started talking. "Well, he didn't want any tea, but would you like some?"

"Yes, I would, thanks," Draco said gratefully. "It's cold out."

"Lovely. Come along," her mother replied, leading the way.

Once her father followed her mother, Hermione hugged him tightly. "I've missed you."

"Same here. I couldn't wait for today." He pulled back slightly and looked towards the kitchen quickly to gauge if there was time for a kiss. Deciding that there was, he quickly and chastely brought his lips to hers. "You look great."

"I don't think your father thought so."

"Don't worry about him. Come," he said reassuringly, entwining his fingers with hers.

They went into the kitchen and sat at the breakfast table while her mother prepared their tea. She saw her father and mother pass a few glances between each other. She could only imagine what was going through their minds. Lucius was certainly an arrogant man. She could see how Draco had been raised to feel as he did, what with someone like that lecturing you on superiority all the time. She was glad that Draco had changed his views.

He seemed much more at ease now that his father was gone. He was making small talk with her father and asking questions about the dentistry. She liked that they were getting on so well after all, but she still felt strange. It was as if Lucius was trying to bait her father earlier, and she was wondering about his comments. Clearly, her family wasn't up to the Malfoy standard, being of dirty blood and having a home only half the size of their manor, but he did note that he was glad they were well off. At least that had bought points with him. She wondered how she would be treated if she went to their home. He'd said she'd be welcome, but was that just for show?

"There you are, Draco. I hope you like it." She saw Draco smile at her mother before he sipped his tea.

"Very much so," he replied. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Oh, he is so polite! I think that is grand." And the conversation went on like that until it was time for everyone to turn in.

"Er... Don't forget to leave the door open, Hermione," her father said sternly, but she could see that he trusted Draco. Draco had made quite an impression on them. She could see that in their eyes.

"Of course, Dad," she said, face heating. "Good night." She took Draco's hand and led him up the stairs to her room. Her room was at the rear of the house down the hall from her parents' room. Once they got in, she turned on the light.

Draco went straight to his trunk to pull out his sleeping attire. He looked around at her room. She had three bookcases filled with books. No doubt some of those mushy novels she had talked about were on the shelves. He smirked. "Like to read this much, eh?"

She threw a pillow at him. "It's my hobby."

He looked at her personal things, noting the pictures on the walls and the things on her desk. He sneered at a picture of his Hermione in the middle of Potter and Weasley. Hermione's home was very nice. It was much smaller than his home, yet it was still large enough to get around in without being cramped. Cozy. He had looked over all of their Muggle things, such as the television, the telephone, and the radio. It was fascinating. Muggles were not as desolate as he'd been led to believe. In fact, they got on pretty well without magic. "Where can I change?" he asked.

"In my bathroom, just there." She pointed to a closed door. He went in and closed the door behind him. She became extremely nervous. They'd not yet been alone since just after he'd had come. She was confident that he'd not try to make any moves on her even though they would be spending the next week in the same bed each night. He wouldn't likely want to upset her parents. The part of her that had been missing him terribly secretly hoped that he would touch her.

He came out of the bathroom after a few moments wearing silky underpants and a white undershirt. "You know that I usually don't wear a shirt to sleep in, but if they would come in, I wouldn't want them to think me improperly dressed," he said awkwardly.

She giggled inwardly, noting the flush upon his face, and made for her dresser. What would she wear? He seemed comfortable in his silky attire, so she hated to put on some plain, cotton nightgown. Then she saw it. A burgundy nightshirt she'd never worn before. It was made of satin. This would make her look sexy and comfortable at the same time. She pulled it out and found the matching knickers. Without looking at him, she went to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth and washed her face.

Since she washed her hair that morning, she pulled it up in a ponytail before getting into her shower. She lathered herself as quickly as possible, not wanting to keep him waiting. When she dried off, she looked at herself in the mirror. What did he of all people see in her? She touched her breasts, remembering that his hands strayed there often. Would he think her sexy if he saw her completely naked? She wasn't overweight, but she was more on the healthy side than the thin one. That hadn't ever bothered her before. Would he think her fat? Draco was rich, handsome, and fit. She supposed her body was all right, but there was nothing striking about her. What had made him love her?

She shrugged. *Oh, well*, she thought. *It doesn't matter why...just as long as he does.* Hermione quickly pulled up the knickers and pulled on the nightshirt. She braced herself before opening her door. He was looking at a book with his back turned to her. She walked towards him slowly. "What have you got there?" she asked.

He jumped as if she had burned him. She saw him tuck the book under the table quickly. "Just checking out one of your books. I'm going to put it aside for later." She saw his eyes widen as he took in the sight of her. He was speechless.

She looked down at herself nervously. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. Everything is right." He stood up and walked to her. "You are beautiful. I think I am quite lucky to have made that deal with you in the first place. If we hadn't been in similar situations, I'd be missing out on this." He slowly lowered his head.

Her breath caught in her throat. He was going to kiss her. She closed her eyes. She felt his lips touch hers softly. He nibbled on one lip and then the other. She opened her mouth and let him kiss her deeply. The feeling of their scantily dressed bodies touching added to the intensity of the kiss. It'd never been quite so... erotic. She felt her knees weaken, and he must have somehow sensed it. He picked her up and placed her upon the bed softly. He moved to lie next to her, never breaking their kiss as he did so. She kept her eyes shut tightly, but she instinctively raised a hand to stroke his face. She heard him groan slightly, and his kiss intensified.

As his lips left hers, Hermione opened her eyes and smiled. "I love you," she said, unable to stop the words. She felt so many sensations flowing through her mind that she felt she would burst.

"It's been too long since we've been able to be this way," he whispered. He traced her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. "Never forget that I love you."

In the next instant, he pounced on her again, renewing their kiss fervently, his body moving partially over hers. *Don't stop. Don't ever stop*, her mind screamed. She could feel something happening to her and didn't want it to end. However, she suddenly realized that she was cold about her waist. Air from the ceiling fan was hitting her skin...skin that should have been covered by her nightshirt.

Draco's mouth was now gliding across her throat. She opened her eyes and saw that her shirt had moved up almost to her breasts. His hand was moving down from one of her breasts over the chilled flesh of her soft stomach and was nearing the top of her knickers. She panicked slightly, her mind warring with allowing him to continue and asking him to stop. A slight noise in the hallway made her decision for her. "Dr-Draco? My mum and dad..." It was merely a whisper, but he heard her, stopping immediately.

He pulled back just enough to look into her eyes. His eyes seemed clouded over. He pressed one soft kiss to her lips before moving away all together. She saw his eyes roam over her body before he turned and slid away to flick off the light switch on the wall near his side of the bed. She pushed over a bit so that he could have more room next to her. She felt the bed sag and a blanket being pulled up over her. "Good night, my Hermione," he whispered before pulling her to him possessively.

"Good night, Draco."

She couldn't go to sleep though. She was feeling a bit flustered. One simple kiss near her bed had led them to a mind-blowing snog and nearly had them shagging. If she hadn't asked him to stop, they would have. *So much for him keeping his hands to himself*, she thought, though she felt smug about his desiring her. Hermione was slightly surprised. He hadn't asked her to have sex like he'd done in the past with Pansy or any other girl he'd been with. Would things be different with them? She hoped so. She hated how he'd described his sexual experiences as if they were business arrangements.

She wanted spontaneity like what had happened just now between them. It reminded her of her mum's stories where some knight in shining armor swept the maiden away in passion and loved her completely. *He asked me once why the man in my future couldn't be young and fair. I wonder if he'd been thinking of me in such a way even back then?* She smiled, but it faded quickly as she thought of Lavender. That made her shudder. Would he expect her to do that? Just the thought of it made her feel dirty. It seemed wrong. She didn't know if she felt that it was wrong because she'd seen Lavender do it or not, but she hoped he didn't ask her to do that.

Draco was still awake, but when he heard her breathing even out, he thought she'd fallen asleep. He tightened his hold on her. He still couldn't believe it. He was lying next to Hermione in her family's home in her bed, and she was utterly his and would always be. When she'd exited the bathroom earlier, she had taken his breath away. He had been flipping through one of the silly romance books from her shelf. He had just gotten to the part where a beautiful, voluptuous woman with unruly, light brown hair began to make love to her handsome, dark-haired lover.

He smirked in the darkness. The beauty in his arms would never be with anyone but him. He'd be sure of that. Smugly, he realized that he'd changed what she'd once considered to be a perfect lover. Now, *he* was the one she'd dream of and fantasize about. He would make certain to read more of that little book as soon as he could. It had done something to him. He'd never read anything like it before. When he'd seen what she'd put on, he'd wanted to have her. He hadn't been thinking when he'd taken her in his arms or when he placed her upon the bed. It had happened so naturally. If her parents wouldn't be about... *Damn! I can feel it pressing against her arse. I hope she doesn't wake and feel it.* This would be a long week. He would love it, but each night would be torture.

Feeling a little guilty for not having explained his father's actions, he softly said, "Hermione, I'll have to explain what my father was on about in the morning. I wanted to tell you tonight, but I thought it best to get to know your parents first." To his surprise, she stirred and replied.

"What is it?"

She hadn't been sleeping after all. *Shite!* "Did you hear that rubbish he was telling your father?" He pulled her onto her back. "Not rubbish," he corrected. "Sorry."

"I don't follow."

"What I mean to say is that my father isn't pressuring me to marry Pansy any longer or threatening to take away my inheritance by being with you," he said calmly, knowing he should just blurt out what he needed to say.

"Well, that's good, isn't it? And he seems to approve... well, somewhat anyway."

"Hermione, they want us to marry."

She sat up and faced him, the moonlight outlining her disheveled hair and body, making him want to pull her to him. "What do you mean? When?"

"He requests it to be soon."

"But we've only just started seeing each other. Although I love you, it's rather sudden. We aren't even finished with school," she said, nervously pulling at her hair.

"We lied, remember? They think it's been over a year for us and feel that... that we should be ready for this step." He sighed and sat up, taking her hand. "I'm sorry, but he's on about saving the Malfoy name rubbish again. He thinks that I chose you because you are Harry Potter's best friend, and he now sees the advantage in such a union, thinking that it would help our standing further."

Hermione remained silent for a long while, and it worried him. He moved away from her and turned the light on. They both blinked rapidly. Draco sat back down on the bed. "I just wanted you to know what he's thinking and why he said those things. No pressure. All right?"

She nodded. "It's not that I don't want to, but it's still so new. I do love you, but..."

"I know," he said, smiling reassuringly.

"Thank you for being honest with me." She pulled him to her and hugged him tightly. "We'll work through things one day at a time, Draco. For now, let's make the most of our days alone and work to get to know each other better."

"Deal," he said lowering his lips to hers. What she said made sense, but he couldn't help but to feel slightly disappointed. He hadn't expected her to say anything differently than she had, but he still wouldn't mind staking a real claim on her. His face heated. If she hadn't taken to the idea, she wouldn't appreciate the gift he'd bought her for Christmas...the gift his father had helped him to pick out.

Southern's Notes: Lucius has found a way to twist things about. I can understand Hermione not wanting to rush into things. I wonder what her parents truly think on things. Guess we shall find out next, eh?

Christy's Notes: Right, Southern, and what I want to know is what is the gift? I loved Lucius being his usual *better than you* self. I hope they go to the Malfoys' for Christmas dinner!

A Christmas Surprise

Chapter 9 of 11

Hermione and Draco have an interesting holiday breakfast with her parents and are surprised by their suggestion.

Disclaimer: These characters are truly not for me. That nice lady (J.K.R.) created them!

Thanks go to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and also, I'd like to say thanks to CocoaChristy for helping me dust this off and make it presentable.

Draco opened his eyes the next morning to see that Hermione was just sitting up. "Happy Christmas!" she said brightly.

"Happy Christmas," he replied, yawning and stretching. He loved her smile, and it nearly made him want to kiss her, regardless of not having brushed his teeth yet.

"We've got our presents!" she said happily. "Oh, look! This is for you. It's from Harry. He sent this other one to me. And candy canes!" She handed him one while taking a bit off the other.

He watched as she opened her present and rolled his eyes as she smiled happily. *It's a book for crying out loud!* She was pleased with receiving a book for a gift. He'd be insulted if someone gave him a book. He put his gift on the side without opening it and watched her. The next one she opened was from Ron.

"Oh, look! It's that new erasable ink!" She giggled contentedly while quickly testing it out.

What in the world? It amazed him that she was actually content with such simple things.

"Here," she said, throwing him a gift from Ron's mother. "They are really good," she whispered conspiratively.

"What's really good?" he asked, eyeing the poorly wrapped package suspiciously. How would she know what Ron's mother had sent to them?

"She bakes really well. Sends them every Christmas." She went on opening presents...gaudy socks from Dumbledore, a diary from Ginny, and a journal from Hagrid. She seemed to honestly treasure each one. "Uh oh," she breathed.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"These are for you from Fred and George. I wouldn't eat them if I were you. Practical jokers, those two."

He nodded and put them aside, remembering some of the stunts they'd pulled back when they were at school. He'd get someone else to test them first. Crabbe or Goyle would try anything.

"Oh, I have no idea who this is from. This must be for you." She handed him a package.

Draco didn't know who would be sending him such an expensively wrapped gift at Hermione's home. His parents had given him his gifts the day before. He pulled open the wrappings and looked inside the box. He couldn't believe it. He shook his head as he read the pompous note. *What are they playing at by sending this? How could he give this to her already? Why must Mother say such things?* He looked up at Hermione uncertainly to find her watching him expectantly. He smiled shyly and shrugged. "Er..."

"What did you get?" she asked excitedly.

"It's not for me. They sent this for you, and I'm sorry. They are different than your parents... and your friends. With them, there is a reason behind everything." He sighed. "Please do not be offended, Hermione." He saw her smile falter as he passed the box to her.

She opened the lid and found the note that had made him pale considerably. It was written on fancy parchment in excellent script.

Miss Granger,

I do hope this finds you in good spirits. You have been lucky enough to catch the eye of our heir and have somehow bewitched him into requesting your hand. Do him proudly, dear girl, and us as well. Remember that all that you do now reflects upon the family.

Please take this cloak as a token of our pending relations. Wear our crest proudly. I've but one request. Since my son has declined to spend this holiday with me, it would not be amiss for the pair of you to have a picture taken and sent to me. Both of you must be tidied and wearing your cloaks of course. I have something special planned for it. Owl it to us at your earliest convenience. Remember, all Malfoys must keep up appearances, even those not of pureblood heritage.

Sincerely,

Mother Narcissa Malfoy

P.S. I suppose you may call me that now.

"Oh, my," she said. These people were trying to intimidate her! It was obvious that his mother was trying to subtly let her know that she found her unworthy, what with her not truly being a pureblood. Either that or they didn't believe she dressed well enough to date a Malfoy. *How absurd!* "What's wrong with my cloak? It's new. I had it on yesterday when I answered the door, thinking we'd take a moment alone outside."

Draco nodded. "I know it is. I'm sure that my father saw that it was as well, but it doesn't have this on it, now does it?" He pointed to the Malfoy crest, tracing it with his fingers proudly. "We Malfoys always wear this on outings."

"But... I'm not a Malfoy." She was at a loss for words. Then she remembered what his father had said the day before and the conversation they'd shared before sleeping. "They honestly want us to be married, don't they? They want me to at least look worthy of you."

"Yes," he said softly. "They truly do. I tried to tell you."

"I believed you, but part of me thought that maybe you'd misunderstood them. I believed that maybe they were just saying those things to frighten you or mollify you until they could find a way to part us." She was shocked. It was true that everyone else, aside from Harry, thought that they'd been dating and in love for a long time. It was too late to try to backtrack and change that now. They would see it as a weakness and try to find a way to break them apart.

"They get owls from everyone...students and parents alike. I guess they realize that they can't change my mind this time, and since Father doesn't want the Malfoy name to die with him, he'll not disown me. He'll be supporting my wishes, even if he doesn't completely approve. You heard what I told you. He's twisting this about to suit him and to make the family better," Draco explained. He traced the Malfoy crest with his finger again and gazed at her for a long moment. "Is it so bad to think of, Hermione?"

She was confused. She loved him and wanted to be with him always. Things were just moving so quickly. She looked back up at him and saw that he was waiting for an answer. He wanted to know her feelings, but about what? Wearing the cloak? An early marriage? Instead of taking time to think things through, she said, "I love you."

He pulled her close to him immediately. "We did it. They accept us. Everyone does."

She had never seen him so happy before. For lack of a better word, she would describe him as giddy. As much as he had been set on defying them and not marrying Pansy, their approval had meant so much to him. She'd seen how he had acted with his father the day before. He must have had a difficult childhood. It must have been hard...never knowing if he'd be lectured for saying the wrong thing, never being held like a son should, and never being able to make his own decisions. Choosing his own future and with whom he wanted to spend it with was definitely a big step for him. It was one he'd obviously fought for.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I was just thinking about your childhood. Was it a happy one?" she asked. She saw his eyes dart to the side.

"I never wanted for any luxury. I had a close relationship with my mother until I was about eight. Then my father more or less took over. He said he'd waited too long, and I was too soft. A coward, I think was the word he used." He smiled ruefully. "It's why I always acted nasty. I saw that it was how he treated people. I was just trying to be like him."

She kissed his hand. "It's not your fault that they raised you... er... roughly. You've become a most honorable man."

He kissed her hand. "Only with your help, I believe."

"No," she said softly. "You made your decision on your own before I came along. I just joined in the rebellion is all." She winked mischievously. "And, look, you even showed Pansy how to be happy. Now, Ron has a woman to love...one that can love him the way he deserves."

Draco smirked. "I still don't see what she sees in Weasley though. He's a complete idiot." He ducked a quickly thrown pillow.

Hermione got up and stooped down next to the bed. "Here you are, love," she whispered, pulling out two small packages out and handing them to him.

He hadn't expected her to get him anything. No girl ever had. She looked more excited than he did. *Lord, I can only imagine what this is* he thought, remembering how excited she was over the other silly gifts she'd received. No matter what was inside of the boxes, he decided that he would act as though they were the best gifts he'd ever received. He opened the larger one first. "Hermione!" he exclaimed. He couldn't believe it. She had bought him a Shadowing Cloak. "Where did you get this?"

"Well, Harry told me about them. I wanted to get you an Invisibility Cloak, but they are just too rare. Those that were willing to sell them wanted to charge too much. Harry said this was probably just as good. I mean... You just blend in with the background, don't you?" She was pleased that he liked her gift. He had been so hard to buy for. How did you buy something for the boy who had everything?

"It's great, Hermione. I really *do* like it."

"Well, you sound as if you expected me to get you some Muggle clothing or something." She laughed at his guilty expression.

"Well, the thought did cross my mind once or twice." He grinned. He picked up the second gift she had wrapped for him and opened it quickly.

"I know it's a bit corny, but I didn't know what else to get for you. You already have everything," she explained when he didn't speak.

He loved this gift best of all. It was a small, framed picture of her. She was smiling softly and waving at him. He grinned as the picture winked.

"Press the little green button just there on the side," she instructed. He pressed it and saw the picture Hermione blow him a kiss. He heard her voice say, "I love you, Draco."

"I'll always treasure this the most, Hermione." He hugged her tightly. "I have something for you as well. I had wanted to give it to you later though." He got up and took a small box from his trunk. He didn't know what to do with himself while she slowly opened the expensively wrapped gift. He nervously watched her. Once she'd opened it, she didn't speak. She just stared down for a long time. He shifted uneasily.

From the way she gushed at the other gifts, he'd been certain that she would like this. Maybe she didn't like the shape. "If you don't like it, I can do better. I can get you a nicer one. They had so many. I liked that one and thought that you might. Father said it was too plain for a Malfoy, but I really thou..." He stopped talking. She had tears in her eyes. She was crying. Did she think that he was pressuring her? "Uh... is it *that* bad?" Surely she didn't hate it so much that she'd cry. "Really, Hermione, there's no pressure. Honest."

"It's... I love it," she whispered.

If she loved it, why the tears? Could those be happy tears? He'd heard talk about such a thing, but he'd never saw anyone actually do it. "Please don't cry, love."

"No, it's beautiful." She pulled the gold ring out of its box and looked at the brilliant diamond glimmering as the light hit it. "What's... this for?"

"Uh, well, my guess would be Christmas," he said sarcastically, though smiling.

"I know *that*." She giggled nervously. "But I mean... In the Muggle world, a ring such as this is like a commitment, and after our talk last night and receiving the letter from your mother, I was wondering if this was... a commitment and if you were wanting to take that step."

He knew what she was getting at. *Damn! I should have waited to give it to her, but I wanted to make her as happy as she'd made me. I wanted to give her something beautiful, something that expressed my feelings.* He'd messed up, hadn't he? He decided to make the best of his blunder though. "Hermione, it means the same in the Wizarding world. It's a promise from me to you that I will forever belong to you and would like to have you as my wife when we're ready. I am prepared to make that commitment now. I just thought you should know that it's not only my parents that wants this."

She looked down at her ring once more, caressing it lovingly with a finger. "I thought that might be it," she whispered. "I just had to hear you say it." She smiled at him. "Put it on me then."

"Really?" he asked, completely surprised. He'd thought she might bung it back at him.

"I don't see why we can't be... committed, right? It's not like we have to get married today or anything." She looked back to the ring and smiled. "It's beautiful, and I want to wear it. I want... I want everyone to know that you want me enough to give this to me."

Immediately, he pulled her hand to him and slid the ring onto her finger. It was nearly a perfect fit, only needing an enchantment to shrink it minutely. He watched as she moved her hand back and forth in front of her. "Hermione Jane Granger, I love you, and I hope this ring will be a symbol to you and everyone else...a symbol stating my intentions and feelings for you." He made certain she was looking into his eyes as he added. "When you're ready, I will be a good husband to you. The past doesn't matter any longer. What's important is now and what's to come."

She was his. She was wearing his ring. She had a Malfoy cloak from his parents. He would one day go to sleep every night with her right next to him, and it would be legally and magically binding because she would be his wife. They could make love and not worry about leaving their door open or what others would think. A feeling overwhelmed him, and to his horror, he felt his eyes mist. *Happy tears?* he thought snidely. *So that's how it felt.*

"I love you, too, and the idea is growing on me. It might be a bit soon for us to feel such a way, but I do plan on being your wife one day." She pulled him to her and began placing several kisses along his jaw, his cheeks, and on his lips. His hand slid down to cup her arse as he pulled her closer still and leaned back against her headboard, dragging her atop him. They were still kissing heatedly when her mum walked in.

"Ahem." They pulled back immediately. Her mother's face was red, and she seemed embarrassed to have caught them snogging.

Hermione realized how it must look. Her nightshirt was low cut in the front, revealing a bit of cleavage, and it was very short. That wasn't even mentioning the position she'd found them in. "Sorry, Mum. It's not as it looks," she said.

Her mother looked from one to the other. To Hermione's relief, the woman smiled, but she couldn't meet Draco's eyes. "Oh, it's Christmas after all. Get dressed and come down." Her mother stopped and put a hand to her breast. "Her-Hermione... that ring...?" She seemed to not be able to breathe.

"It... er... it's pretty, isn't it?" Hermione managed. She couldn't speak either. How could she tell her mom that she'd received an engagement ring and that she had already consented to being Draco's wife at some point in the future?

Draco cleared his throat and attempted to sound confident. "Mrs. Granger, your daughter has just done me a great service and agreed to be my wife. I'll cherish her all my days." He held his breath as the woman finally gazed at him, gauging his words carefully. Tears had welled up in her eyes the moment he began talking. *What is with this house? Does everyone that comes here cry over everything, either happy or sad?* he questioned inwardly. His only problem was he didn't know exactly what kind of tears those were in Jane Granger's eyes.

"I am happy for you both. I just feel as though I missed the part of my daughter's life when she went from being a girl to a woman. I suppose I'll need to tell your father! I am so happy that you're doing the right thing!" she exclaimed, kissing Hermione's cheek and hugging Draco. "Come down when you are dressed!" she called behind her

before closing the door.

Hermione looked puzzled. "What's wrong?" Draco asked.

"She closed the door as if to say she approves of me being alone in my bedroom with my boyfriend." She was shocked. Her mother was quite old fashioned. "Doing the right thing?" she repeated, shrugging.

"I'm not just your boyfriend anymore." Draco smirked and caressed her ring. "I'm to be your husband someday," he drawled. "I suppose that raises me up on the level of respect list, eh? She probably figures that it is inevitable, so it's her way of showing us that we can...on her terms and only because *she* approves."

She giggled. "You are absolutely right of course. I wonder what Dad will say though?" Hermione began to worry her lip. "He might not be pleased." Things were moving so quickly that it all felt unreal. His parents approved. Her parents approved. Harry and Ron approved. She shrugged her thoughts away, not wanting to ruin her Christmas. "Let's go down for our gifts!"

Draco watched as she ran to her closet to pick out something to wear and smiled when he saw her glance down at her ring as if checking to make sure it was still there. He went to his trunk and got out his own clothes. When he pulled off his shirt, he glanced towards the bathroom door. At this angle, it was cracked open just enough that he could see her reflection in the full-length mirror. He sucked in a breath. The nightshirt was gone. She had only her little satin knickers on. She was brushing her wild mass of hair. He felt himself go hard. She was beautiful. Perfect. She was his. He smiled smugly. He'd landed the cleverest witch of their age... and the sexiest one, though she didn't realize just how appealing she truly was.

He had to force himself to pull his gaze away to finish dressing. He was just buttoning his shirt when she came out fully clothed. "You got dressed in here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But what if I would have come out? I might have seen... you know." She seemed taken aback by his actions. He saw her face redden. Was she imagining him with no clothes? Her round, innocent eyes met his.

"I don't care if you see me, Hermione. Far as I'm concerned, *I want* you to see me. I am ready for the next step in our relationship." He shrugged nonchalantly. "We're as good as married in my eyes. You read what my mum said. I've chosen you." She needed to realize that there was no going back now. He saw her swallow uneasily. "Don't worry. I won't pressure you into anything, but when you're ready, you need to tell me." He hoped his words comforted her. He'd met no other girl quite like her. The ones he'd been with in the past were not modest, were not virgins, and were definitely not in love with him. He felt better when she smiled.

"Draco, I trust that you won't pressure me." She moved closer to take his hand. "I'm nearly ready." She grinned. "I know I am, according to my heart. It's my mind that is messing with me. I just have to get myself together and accept it."

"No rush," he whispered, kissing her quickly. When he pulled away, he grinned at her flushed cheeks. "Lead the way."

She smiled and pulled him away. They entered the kitchen and spied her parents whispering conspiratorially. It seemed that her father was slightly annoyed. She only hoped that he wouldn't berate their decision.

Surprisingly, her father greeted them warmly. "Happy Christmas, you two! Come in for a spot of breakfast before you open your gifts."

Hermione sat on her father's left, and Draco sat next to her. Her mother swooped upon them and began filling their plates with food. "It looks and smells good, Mum."

"Thank you, dear."

Draco accepted his plate with a nod, not saying anything. She noticed that he looked uncertain. She was about to ask if he needed something when her father spoke instead.

"Well, Jane tells me that congratulations are in order, just as your father predicted. Interesting." He looked down to Hermione's ring before eyeing Draco.

Draco met his eyes evenly. "Thank you, sir. I will make her happy."

Hermione watched the exchange between her father and her fiancé, hoping no sparks would fly. Her father didn't seem overly upset, but he did seem a bit sad, even disappointed. Her mum was humming softly near the sink. She smiled at her father, and he nodded in return as if to say that things were all right. "Thank you, Dad. I am happy." She wanted to put him at ease and let him know that she was doing exactly what she wanted.

"You both realize that this is a big step. You are only nineteen, Hermione," he said in a fatherly tone. "Marriage is a lasting commitment not to be taken lightly. I know that you've been in a relationship for over a year now and might feel that this is the next step... considering... uh... things, but how will you survive on your own? Neither of you have jobs and are still taking courses. How will you support yourselves or a family?"

Draco spoke first. "I have more than enough funds to get us started due to a trust fund made available to me when I became of age. I will be able to support her and make her happy home for her." His cheeks reddened. "My parents are also quite wealthy should I need anything more. As far as being young, my mother was sixteen when she married my father who was twenty-two. She was still taking her normal classes at the time."

"Yes, that is very young," the older man conceded. "You are both adults, however, and if we cannot talk you into waiting, which it's likely best if you don't, we will of course embrace you as part of this family, Draco."

"Dad, it's not like we're going to g..." Hermione began, but she was interrupted by her mother, who began coughing and motioning to her husband. Hermione's father turned red, and she realized that they must have been talking about this before she and Draco had entered. Her suspicions were confirmed as he spoke again.

"As such, we insist that you not only marry in the Wizarding way, as we know you'll likely want to, but please have a wedding our way also. It would ease our minds."

Draco blinked and looked to Hermione in confusion as if to ask what her father had meant.

Hermione placed a hand over his, knowing she could explain later. "Of course we will, Daddy. I wouldn't have it any other way. I want you and Mum to be a part of this... when we decide to go through with it." She turned to Draco. "It's much the same. A minister says some words to bless our union, and we sign papers."

Draco nodded. It seemed nearly the same to him...from what he'd seen of some bindings anyway, and he didn't see the big deal. However, he didn't want to alienate his Muggle in-laws. Besides, he knew that his parents would probably request a Malfoy style binding. "Certainly, sir," he said to her father. "When would you like us to do it? You seem to have some date I mind," he asked her dad.

"Well, there is no time like the present," John stated matter-of-factly.

Her mother chimed in. "We think this holy day would be a perfect day for it. We could be present that way and have another reason to celebrate."

"And," her father began, "with the pair of you sharing a room, well... we'll feel better, knowing how, uh, how serious things are between the two of you." He coughed lightly. "I believe that Lucius had a point and seemed to know something that I didn't." His voice took on a stern tone. "You could have told us that things were already at *this* stage. I admit to feeling disappointed that we've been left out."

Hermione and Draco both looked at each other, completely astonished. She didn't know what to say. Draco squeezed her hand. "Er..."

Jane noticed her daughter's discomfort. "If you aren't certain that you are ready for this, you don't have to," she said softly. "Really. We'll support you either way, Hermione. You needn't feel as if you *have* to do this."

Hermione swallowed thickly. "Well, I must admit that this is sudden. He's only just asked me today. Honestly, I didn't purposely keep anything from you." She looked to Draco and widened her eyes.

"This isn't just some ploy for us to allow your boyfriend to share a room with you, is it?" her father asked, eyes narrowed at Draco.

"No, of course, not," she said quickly.

"Sir, I would never dishonor your daughter," Draco said heatedly, clutching her hand tightly. "I don't know that I like you implying that she's allowed anything... improper to happen between us."

Hermione's eyes widened in wonder. She'd never heard him sound that way before. It was as if he'd changed suddenly, taking on a tone of voice that drawled much the same way his father's did and was tinged with a bit of arrogance.

"Ha! Nothing impr..."

Her mother quickly interrupted her father's retort. "Enough! Whatever Draco's parents or we may believe is immaterial. We are just saying that if you'd like to marry anytime soon...for whatever reason...then we'd like to request today. It would be lovely since it's Christmas, and we could definitely attend without all those... intimidating magical folk about. You do understand, right?"

Draco felt as if this was a test. Surely they couldn't be serious. This was definitely something his father would pull. Well, he would pass this test. "Are my clothes all right? I mean... I don't know what Muggles wear at weddings, but I do have a few nice things." He made sure to gaze at her father steadily. It must have been his idea to suggest such a thing. It didn't seem like he truly approved of a young man sharing a room with his unwed daughter.

Truth be told, he was nervous because he didn't know what to expect from Hermione's surprisingly intimidating father. It had nothing to do with *wanting* to marry her. It's what he wanted. He supposed it made no difference if they did it now or six months later after they took their N.E.W.T.s. Once it was done, there would be no changing it, and he would have found a way to ensure that she'd always be his. No Weasleys or Potters could interfere. He felt Hermione's hand begin to tremble and realized that his own palms and brow were sweating.

He dared not look at Hermione, afraid of what he'd see in her eyes. Instead, he gazed between her parents, hoping that his acceptance of their request had met their approval. Hermione's mother looked at her father questioningly, and in turn, they both faced their daughter.

"I've not heard your answer," John prodded, moving to lift his daughter's chin with his hand.

Draco noticed that she was biting her lower lip and seemed to look away as if in thought. In the next instant, her hand slipped from his, causing his heart to drop. Had he done something wrong? Surely she realized that they were simply meaning to scare them into being more responsible in certain situations.

It was at this moment that Hermione gazed at Draco and smiled shakily. "All right?" she seemed to ask. He nodded reassuringly. "We can marry today then," she announced.

Draco's heart began pounding quickly. She'd agreed to marry him. *The Muggles... er... Hermione's parents are serious. They want us to marry.* He couldn't believe that they would simply decide this so suddenly. Hell, he'd only met them the day before. His eyes drifted to a parchment on the counter. It was angled so that he could just make out the proud handwriting of his father near the top. What had he told them? He decided not to say anything, not wanting to cause any trouble between their families, but he wondered if his father had insinuated something about their relationship that would make her parents request that they be married.

"Well... then," her father said. "My good friend, Minister Rapburn, can come over this evening to preside over things. I happened to speak to him earlier and hinted that we might need his services. He is more than happy to help out." He patted Hermione on the shoulder. "Smile, poppet. Things will be fine."

"We think it's for the best, dear," her mother added. "And tonight, your father and I can go over to my sister's. We've not seen her in a couple of weeks, so she's invited us over." She smiled. "You'll have some privacy to... er..." Her voice trailed away, and her cheeks reddened. "Well, anyway, there is really no need to put things off."

"Thanks, Mum," Hermione said, equally embarrassed and quite confused. "It's what we would have done eventually..."

"Let's get on with Christmas then," John said halfheartedly, eyes distant. He stood and made his way into the living area without waiting for anyone else.

"Take a moment to yourselves," Jane urged, getting up to place her husband's dishes in the sink. She folded the nearby parchment and slipped it into her pocket before leaving the room.

"Hermione," Draco said quietly, "I'm sorry. I was uncertain if they were serious, and I just wanted to prove to them that I love you and would marry you today if you wanted. I..."

"Shhhh," she said, holding a finger to his lips. "I'm shocked. This is all a bit fast, but it isn't your fault. We're both at fault for lying to everyone. I don't know what made them request this." She shrugged. "I'm sorry. I know this is putting you on the spot. Listen, we can call things off for now. There's no need to be bullied into this."

"No, I *do* want this," he admitted. "Really. The way I see things..." He looked down, feeling shy. He was about to admit something that he normally wouldn't. "When we spent this last week apart, I hated it. I wished that we were married so we needn't have spent a single day apart. When my father kept going on about marrying you, I didn't try to argue with him." He looked up, eyeing her intently. "I want to be able to make love to you, I want to be able to hold you every night, and I know that as my wife, you'll feel more secure in being with me. I do remember what you said about wanting to wait until marriage, although I figured we wouldn't wait that long. Not with the way we feel about each other."

"If you are certain..." She slanted her lips across his and kissed him in acceptance, pulling him as close to her as possible. "Should we invite your parents?" she asked when she broke away.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'm certain they will prefer to host a Wizarding binding. We'll just do this with your family."

"All right." She smiled. "I can't believe this. First the ring... Now this..."

"I know," he said, thinking back to the letter he'd seen. "Hermione, maybe my father is behind this somehow. I saw a parchment on the counter."

"Well, let's not worry about that now. My parents seem to really want this for us." She raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps the shock of seeing a man sleeping in my room brought them to the wrong conclusion." She smiled impishly. "And Mum did walk in on us this morning."

He nodded. "Come. We don't want to keep them waiting." She took his proffered hand and followed him into the living area.

Draco was surprised that her parents had bought him gifts since they didn't fully know him. They gave him clothing: comfortable, plain cotton boxer shorts and undershirts. Hermione had giggled when she'd seen his gift while he smirked at their private joke. He was pleased that her parents enjoyed the gift he'd purchased for them. They'd claimed to have never had a magical gift before. It was a miniature unicorn that would prance around, paw at the tabletop, and whinny happily.

"Guess you'll have to keep it out of the sight of visitors. Sorry, didn't think of that," Draco said sheepishly.

"Nonsense," her mother said. "I'll keep it in our room. It's quite beautiful."

He thought that it was quite interesting the way the Muggles kept their gifts under the tree. In his home, their Christmas tree was always finely decorated and dominated their large entry hall. The gifts always appeared at the foot of his bed. Hermione's father showed him how to work a few of their electronic gadgets while Hermione talked to her mother in hushed tones.

Before long, Hermione kissed his cheek. "We are going to go into town for a bit to get a few things for the wedding." She blushed and smiled excitedly. "You'll have to stay here. Mum doesn't want you to see the dress we're going to buy, though it won't be anything fancy. Will you be all right?"

"Yes, I'll go up and read if that's ok."

"Certainly. Do you need anything?"

"Maybe you could purchase a camera to take our picture so that we can send it to my mother. Remember, she did request one."

"We have one. I'll check to see if we need film. We won't be long."

When Hermione and her parents had left, Draco sprinted up to her room, pulled the romance book out from under the bedside table, and grinned. He wanted to finish reading about the two lovers. He found the page he'd been on during his previous read and situated himself on Hermione's bed. A thought occurred to him. He leaned towards her pillow and sniffed. It smelled like her. He had never felt more content. His Hermione. Tonight, they would go to bed as a married couple. Surely they would make love. Her parents' plan had backfired it seemed, and he was going to get the best Christmas gift imaginable. Hermione.

Eyes moving back to the book, he read how nervous the maiden was about giving herself to her experienced lover. The man, though apparently a rogue, tenderly seduced her, seeing to her pleasure first before finding his own. It was very detailed just as Hermione had said. Why, he could easily imagine what was going on. If Hermione had read many of these, then she knew exactly what to expect between them. She would be a little nervous, but he knew he could ease her through that.

He'd proved that the night before. She had let herself experience his kisses and caresses fully, getting carried away by feelings... before she halted things, fearing her parents would come in. Tonight, there would be no parents to interrupt things. All of those nights that he'd spent fantasizing about her or lying next to her in frustration would finally be over. She would be his. He grinned wickedly as he continued reading. If she wanted her first time to resemble what she read in her naughty little books, he'd give that to her.

Southern's Notes: I know it seems quite soon for them to be married (since we know the truth of their time together), but I have faith that all will be well. I will reveal what Lucius wrote to the Grangers soon.

Christy's Notes: Very good! I really like this and can't wait to read the wedding.

The First of Many

Chapter 10 of 11

Hermione and Draco finally progress to that next step in their relationship... and it's 'legal' (haha!).

Disclaimer: I borrowed these characters. Hehe!

Thanks go to my original beta, Charmed_Nay, and also, I want to thank CocoaChristy for helping me dust this off to make it presentable.

"You look beautiful," Jane Granger gushed.

Hermione had donned a light turquoise dress, had her hair swept up into an elegant arrangement of curls on her head, and she'd applied light make up. She looked at her reflection and felt suddenly confident. In her mind, she appeared much older and even pretty. Her mother had insisted that she wear a lacey, white negligee beneath her gown. She'd never owned something so... sensual before. She could feel it rubbing against her skin.

"Thanks, Mum, but this *thing* is bothering me." She sighed. "I don't see why I had to have it. It's not like anyone can see it. Plain knickers and a bra would have worked just as well."

"*He* will see it, my dear, once you remove your dress," her mother stated softly. "It's for his appreciation mostly. Men like that sort of thing."

Hermione gasped as her mother pointed out the obvious. "Oh, my! I hadn't thought about that."

Her mother took in her expression suspiciously. "Are you positive that this is what you want? He would understand if you wanted to wait."

"No, Mum. I won't cry off," Hermione replied firmly.

"I need to ask you something," her mother began, "and you may not appreciate it. However, I can't allow this to go on any longer without knowing for certain."

"Well?"

"Are you pregnant?" Jane blurted.

"No, Mum!" Hermione said incredulously. "Why would you...? Oh, honestly! I can't believe you'd think that. Is that why you and Dad are trying to push this wedding?"

"Ah... Well, yes, you could say that's the gist of it, I suppose." She shook her head in annoyance. "Haven't the pair of you ever... made love? Your expressions and wordings are leading me to believe that you are still innocent."

"Of course, I am," she huffed. "You did raise me to be a respectable girl." She grinned. "Though, it's been hard to not be with him in that way. I want to. Really, I do. It's just..."

"His father... Are you certain he hasn't been pressuring you? Draco, I mean."

"No, he's very understanding and has always said that he'd wait until I decided to move forward," Hermione admitted with a proud grin. "He's quite honorable, although he used to be a bit of a bastard."

"Oh, what language!" her mother chided halfheartedly. "I must say that I am pleased to hear this. Though, I do wonder why his father thought otherwise."

"What do you mean?" she asked suspiciously.

"Well, a great big owl, which I noticed is still outback, came with a letter from the Malfoys wishing us a happy Christmas and giving us what he'd hoped were good tidings. He'd gathered, after speaking with his son, that you were in the family way, and he requested that we help him in talking the pair of you to get married. He said that an unwed mother in the Wizarding world was ill treated, and the child's paternity would come into question, making people disbelieving that it was a true heir. We didn't want our daughter or grandchild to be treated with scorn."

"That dirty, rotten... Mum, I swear to you that Draco and I never let things go that far." Her face reddened. "What you saw this morning is about as far as it goes normally."

"Well," her mother said indignantly, "we can call this wedding off immediately. There is no reason to rush. We'll just explain to the fellow that he was mistaken."

"No, Mum," Hermione said quickly. "Draco... would be devastated if I changed my mind now."

"He'll get over it," her mother said firmly. "You have the rest of your lives to do this."

"We'd talked about doing it just after school maybe." Hermione shrugged. "If my love can only grow stronger with time, as it has been doing, then I would eventually be his bride anyway. We might as well get on with things."

Jane nodded and added, "Your father would be less worried about you and he having improper relations. If you're married, it is no one's business but your own." She hugged Hermione as tightly as she could without wrinkling her dress. "What has you so worried, poppet?"

"Honestly? I am a bit afraid. I know what is to happen between us tonight, but I'm not sure I will go about it the right way." She shook her head sadly. "What if I'm not as good as the others he was with? He's experienced. Will he still love me?"

"Oh, nonsense, Hermione. He will always love you no matter what. He loves you now... before you have given yourself to him. He will certainly love you after tonight." Her mother blushed. "Do you know about contraceptives?"

Hermione giggled. "There is a charm I can chant. I've read on it in a book once." So this was it then, wasn't it? On Christmas day, she would be married, and on Christmas night, she would become a woman. Lavender flashed through her mind. She pushed thoughts of her away. Memories would not ruin this day for her. "I'm so nervous and simply afraid I'll do something wrong."

"I was too on my wedding day," Jane confided. "I wasn't your father's first girlfriend either."

"Mum, when you and dad... Was that experience anything like what happens in the books we read?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"I don't feel comfortable speaking on that subject with you."

Hermione could see her mother was uneasy, but she was relieved when the woman continued talking.

"But I will say that what happens between married people is normal. I just hope you realize that. Whatever happened with his other friends in the past will stay in the past. From this night forward, you are his lover, and nothing that happened before can change that." She stepped back to admire her daughter once more. "You are lovely, and he will enjoy showing you pleasure. Trust me. He'll not think of anyone except you. You need to do the same. Relax and just feel. Go with it." Clearing her throat, her mother added, "Now, since your father and I are going to go stay the night over at Aunt Sophie's home tonight to give you two some privacy, make use of it."

Hermione shook her head numbly, thinking of what she and Draco would be doing with their privacy. The next thing she realized was that she was being ushered down the stairs. Her father, Draco, and Minister Rappaport were waiting in front of her family's Christmas tree. Her husband-to-be looked dashing in his crisp white shirt, tie, and trousers. His Muggle coat looked odd on him though, as she was so used to seeing him in his robes.

Draco watched as Jane brought Hermione to him. She seemed so pale and nervous, and he could feel the tremble in her hand as he held it. He'd never seen her hair pulled up that way, and the dress she wore framed her perfectly. His wife-to-be was beautiful. *Wife*. He couldn't believe this was happening. He pushed the thought of his parents from his mind. No matter what they'd done or said, he'd not worry about them. The current moment was for Hermione... and him. His parents would understand why he'd not asked them to appear at their Muggle wedding. They would be satisfied with conducting a Wizarding ceremony. He vaguely wondered if this would change anything for them at Hogwarts. *Looks like I'll be sleeping in her room each night now,* he thought happily.

Hermione listened to the minister attentively, yet she couldn't wait to get on with it. Finally came the part when she was to give Draco his ring...the ring that she and her mother had chosen for him. She hoped he would like it. It was a gold band with three small diamonds embedded in it. Shakily, she took the ring from her mother's hand and faced Draco. He smiled, and it soothed her. She saw him glance down at his ring with a soft expression on his face. She repeated the words that the minister had spoken easily.

Draco did the same. He took her ring from her and placed it into a second band. Then, he slid it back on her finger. She saw that her lone diamond now had a cluster of smaller diamonds on either side of it. The set together took her breath away. She had never seen such a beautiful set of rings. The next few sentences were heard in a daze.

"You may now kiss the bride," the minister finally finished. She shook as Draco drew closer to her. Thankfully, he simply gave her a chaste kiss on the lips, as neither wanted to snog in front of them all.

"We're married," she said softly when he pulled away. "I can't believe it."

"I know," he agreed, smirking slightly.

"Congratulations, you two," her mother said, snapping a few pictures.

Draco was amazed that Muggles had technology where the pictures would come out from the camera. He'd always thought their lot to be barbaric and behind. In actuality, they were ahead in some things. "Would you allow me to put on my cloak and take a picture of us? I would like to send a copy to my mother."

"Oh, certainly."

He was gone for only a minute when he made his way back to Hermione's side, cloak with the Malfoy crest proudly donned. He pulled his wife into his arms and gazed at the camera in what he hoped to be a serious yet happy demeanor. He would have asked Hermione to wear her cloak, but he thought her dress to be amazing and didn't want to cover it up. His father's owl was still lurking in the backyard, so he used it to send the picture and a brief note to his parents.

They all shared a light meal and wine to celebrate. When her parents announced they'd be leaving for the night, her father shook Draco's hand and kissed Hermione's cheek. She could tell it was hard for him, but he carried through with it all the same. Her mother hugged them both and quickly pulled her husband out the door. The house was eerily silent since the minister and her parents had left. The sunlight had long since faded. "What now?" she asked nervously.

His feral grin made her feel even more nervous. She'd never seen him look at her quite that way. It was almost as if he wanted to eat her alive... but in a gentle way. He advanced on her slowly. "Now, I think we'll go up to *our* room." He held out a hand to her. "I want to make love to my wife." She placed her shaky hand in his and allowed him to lead her up the stairs in silent agreement.

Draco knew exactly what to do thanks to the sappy book that he'd read. He'd be sure to give Hermione exactly what she had been dreaming of. Or at least he hoped he could. Right before they reached the door he paused and turned to her. She was very tense and shaking. He smiled and lowered his lips to hers for a soft kiss. Some of the tension left her, and she moved one arm up around his neck while placing one hand on his cheek. As soon as he felt her lean into him, he scooped her up into his arms to bring her into the room. He kicked the door closed once inside. He never took his eyes off of hers as he let her slide down his body. Taking both of her hands into his, he sat on the bed and pulled her to stand in front of him. He kissed her ring softly. "I love you, Mrs. Malfoy."

Her breath caught in her throat. She had a new last name now. He was looking into her eyes and seeing her as his wife... not his girlfriend. He had gone through with marrying her. Her mother was right. He would love her no matter what. The past would remain in the past. "I love you also, Mr. Malfoy." She kissed the ring on his hand. "Happy Christmas, husband."

Draco almost lost it and pulled her to him roughly. Instead, he closed his eyes and calmed himself. He reached around to her back without standing up and began to unzip her dress. She put her hands on his shoulders in unease. He could feel that she was afraid. Once the back of her dress was completely unzipped, he slid his hand down the length of the smooth flesh of her spine. She was so soft, so silken. He heard her sharp intake of breath and felt her shiver. He searched her eyes. "You have nothing to fear tonight, wife." One lone index finger traced the curve of her cheek. His hands moved to her shoulders.

Slowly, he pulled down the sleeves of her dress, which made the top drop down as well. He paused just before he let the dress fall completely to the floor his eyes on hers. She was blushing, her eyes wide with innocence. He wanted to show her that, although he was eager to have her, it wasn't only her body he was longing to see. He wanted to see acceptance in her eyes, wanted to see to her comfort. When the dress lay at her feet in a pile, his eyes slowly dropped to see the body of his wife, and it was his turn to inhale a sharp intake of air. Hermione was wearing a white, lacey negligee. It clung to her at every curve and defined her breasts. She was immaculate. And his. Always his. His eyes met hers again with intensity.

Draco took that moment of connection to rise, making certain to slide up her body suggestively while never taking his eyes off of hers. Briefly, he kissed her lips before bringing her fingers up to his tie. While she began unfastening his tie, he began removing his belt and lowering his trousers. She fumbled nervously with his buttons, so he pulled her hands away to kiss her fingers, taking one into his mouth to suckle. She whimpered lightly. Quickly, he pulled off his shirt and undershirt. He was only wearing his boxers now. He allowed her to look at him for a moment before he placed her hands on his chest, wanting her touch upon his flesh.

Hermione couldn't believe this was happening. She felt as if the world had stopped and only they remained. He was gorgeous...firm muscular arms and chest proudly on display in front of her. She ran her fingers up and down his chest enjoying the way his skin seemed to torch them. She saw that he had closed his eyes and took note of his fast breathing. Gingerly, she tiptoed up and placed a kiss along his jaw. She heard him groan deeply. She stepped back from him then, and their eyes met. His full of desire, hers full of unknowing. She reached up to the front her nightie and began pulling the ties loose. His expression told her all she needed to know. It said that he wanted her... *badly*.

His brave little Gryffindor was taking the initiative to remove her last piece of clothing. Draco had never wanted or needed anything more in his life. He could feel himself harden even more...if possible. When she paused, he helped her. He loosened the last tie and pulled the material away from her chest, leaving her breasts and stomach uncovered. He placed her hands on his silk boxers in order to remove them, but he had to bite back another groan when he felt her fingertips move just inside his waistband. She had no idea what she was doing to him by allowing her nails to dig into his skin as she pulled them down.

When he was fully exposed, he heard a little, "Oh," escape her lips.

He did not blush. He was proud of his body, and she would learn to be proud of hers. He kissed her lips hesitantly at first and then deeply all the while sliding down what was left of her nightie. He pulled away slightly and sat on the bed. She was left standing before him. He looked at her from head to toe. "My God, Hermione, you are exquisite."

She'd been afraid that he would never speak, but when he did, she felt so much better. Exquisite, was she? Well, no word could describe what she thought when she saw him...all of him. She'd never seen any male completely undressed before. It was not a shock to her, as she had read about it and seen pictures, but it was a shock at the same time, though she knew it made no sense. Words were lost to her. She had no reply for him.

Draco smiled at her before he pulled her to stand between his thighs. He wrapped his arms around her waist tightly and laid his head on her breasts, simply holding her as closely as possible. He could feel her heart thudding wildly. Suddenly, he felt her shift, and her fingers were moving through his hair. *It's now or never!* he thought. He moved down a little and placed a small kiss on the center of her stomach. He felt her jump but only slightly. He moved up a bit more to place another just below her breasts. She jumped again but leaned into him after.

Her smooth, unblemished skin called to him. He caressed her lovingly with his lips and tongue, making her whimper and tug at his hair. While nibbling on her breasts, he looked up. Her eyes were closed, and her head lolled back limply, a complete expression of desire on her face. He could stand no more of this. He pulled her down over him and then rolled over so that he could be on top.

She could actually feel him *pressing* into her stomach. *That* part of him. It made her feel heady. His smoldering silvery eyes were boring into hers, and she could see her reflection in them. She hoped that she would do things right for him. Nothing was more important to her than him at that moment. When he lowered his lips to hers, she whispered, "I'm not afraid anymore." She saw the emotions pass through his eyes: love, relief, victory, and desire. He kissed her then, and things changed, becoming intense. She felt as though he was air, and she needed him to breathe. Everything began to move quickly. His lips and hands were everywhere. She was mortified when he kissed her between her thighs, but that lasted only a moment as another feeling took over.

"Oh, my... Draco... What are you doing to me?"

Draco's reply was to continue at a faster rate. In seconds, he had her whimpering and moving wildly against him. Just the sounds elicited were driving him insane, and if he weren't careful, he'd be done as well...before ever taking her. Her shuddering subsided, and he ended his laving, licking his lips and thoroughly enjoying her taste. He placed soft kisses on her stomach all the way up to her neck. Her eyes were half open, and her breathing still fast. He positioned himself between her legs and whispered, "Hermione, it's time. I need you."

She nodded, still in a daze. He placed himself directly over her and pushed in slowly. Her eyes opened widely as she stared at him in wonder. "It won't be uncomfortable for long," he said, remembering what the character in the book had told the maiden. Personally, he didn't know what it was like to be with a girl on her first time. His partners had been experienced. And, yet, not one had driven him mad like Hermione had. He pushed in farther and noticed that it felt as if something had given away. She gasped. He quickly pushed all the way in, remembering a nearly exact description in that romance novel.

That chit must have written about an experience she had, he thought for a moment. Hermione's nails, which were suddenly embedded in his shoulders, drew his thoughts back to the present. He didn't move his body until they eased their grip. Ever so slowly, he pulled almost all the way out and then all the way in again. "All right?" he asked hopefully, wanting her to be all right and warring with the need to ravage her.

"Uh huh." She nodded and moved herself to get in a more comfortable position, enabling him to move more freely.

He moved a little faster and watched her to see if she was hurting. She made a few grimaces, but once her features relaxed, he quickened his pace even more. The moment she moaned in pleasure, he knew it was time to get things started. His strokes deepened and lengthened. It felt too damn good, and he knew he'd never last long

enough to see her through to her expected second orgasm. *Damn*, he groused internally. *How the hell did that bloke in her book keep from spilling himself straightaway? I guess I'll get better as we grow to learn each other's bodies.*

Before long, she was erratically moving with and against him, as her legs had snaked around his waist...sometimes aiding his thrust; sometimes throwing it off. Her nails were running all along his back, diminishing his willpower to last longer. "God, Hermione..." He felt sweat forming around his temples, and he willed himself to slow down for her. But he couldn't. "I can't stop," he groaned.

To his delight, she whispered, "Don't stop, Draco."

"Her-my... oh-nee..." When his shuddering and thrusting stopped, his eyes met hers. He could see all the love he'd ever need in her eyes. He'd never felt this way about any girl. Correction. Woman. His wife was amazing, and he relished the thought that it was his personal secret. Nobody else would ever know exactly what she could do to a man. She belonged to him. And he belonged to her. How could he have never noticed her for what she was before this year? Had he been blind? Yes, he supposed he was. Blinded by ill-taught beliefs.

"Look what we did," she said proudly, kissing his nose. Her smile melted him. "I love you. I love this."

"As do I." He moved to the side, regretting that he was no longer within her. "How do you feel?"

"Light."

He chuckled. "Are you sore?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Will I be?"

"Probably." He held her tightly. "I hate to ask this, but was that how you thought your first time would be?"

She turned to look at him. "No. It surprised me. I didn't know such feelings existed. I was afraid you wouldn't like me."

"If you only knew how you make me feel, you'd never think that. You are all I'll ever need or want." He kissed her.

"It was perfect, wasn't it? Just like the stories that I read. Think we'll have a happy ending?" she queried.

"I think we'll manage somehow, Mrs. Malfoy."

She grinned. "That's right! I'm married." He laughed when she pulled up her hand to see her ring. "I love it, you know. Beautiful. Oh! I need to owl Harry about this."

"Hang on," Draco said in a mock incredulous voice. "You're going to give him details now? I mean, if he needs the pointers..."

She smacked his chest softly. "That I am married, silly." Hermione got up, turned the light off, and fumbled around.

Draco felt her slide back in next to him and noted that she was still naked. He felt his body respond.

"Oh, wife?" he said playfully.

"Yes, husband?"

"I think there is a problem." He was holding back a chuckle.

"Oh?" she asked curiously, playing along.

"Uh huh," he said. He took her hand and moved it down so that she could feel the erect problem.

She giggled. "Sorry. Didn't know I left a large cucumber in bed when I made salad earlier. How can I ever fix this?"

"Cucumber, is it?" He grinned evilly. She'd left herself wide open for this one. "Well, don't you want a bit of a snack then?" He felt her tense up momentarily, and he could have slapped his own face. She'd still not gotten over that whole Lavender thing, had she? *Damn*. Then his eyes opened in shock when he heard her reply.

"I must say that I *am* rather famished. All that movement earlier worked off my dinner." She was still playing. "But I don't know if I quite know how to eat this particular vegetable while undiced."

He turned red. "There will be no dicing of cucumbers at any time!" he roared playfully. They both laughed wildly as if nothing had ever been funnier. "God, I love you." He would tell her every day, fifty times a day if he could.

"You know that I love you, too, and that's why I think I will give this a try," she whispered, losing some of her playful tone as she flicked her wand to silently clean both of their bodies.

"No, love, it's not important. We can go down and get a proper meal." He didn't want her to do something that he knew offended her. He'd not have her feeling bad on her wedding night.

"Sssh..." was all he heard as she moved down slowly.

Southern's Notes: I hope their first time wasn't too... fantastical. I wanted it to be sort of realistic and have the poor bloke try to mimic a rake from a romance novel. I wouldn't turn Draco out if he ventured my way. Hehe!

Christy's Notes: Oh, evil, evil cliffie! I loved how her first time went. How sweet was Draco?

Meet the Malfoys

Chapter 11 of 11

Hermione and Draco return to Malfoy Manor. Will the Malfoys truly accept Hermione? What do their friends think of their

marriage?

Disclaimer: Having some fun with characters that aren't truly mine. No Galleons forthcoming though. Sigh.

Big thanks go to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and also, to CocoaChristy, who kindly agreed to help me dust this off and make it presentable.

Draco had never known such happiness. He awoke each day holding his wife, and they made love every chance they got. Her parents made an effort to get to know him better whenever possible. He really liked them and felt at home there. It was strange how a Muggle home was more cozy than his own. Each time he thought of Hermione as his wife, he felt a little giddy inside. He was married! He used to think on marriage and shudder with dread, but he'd never expected it to be anything like what he experienced with Hermione. Though they had only truly been together for a few months as a "couple," he knew that she was the one for him.

They had one last day before returning to Hogwarts. "What should we do today?" Hermione asked in a lazy voice. "I'm feeling up for something to get me out of this room."

"Hermione, we could go to Malfoy Manor if you'd like. My mother keeps owling to see if we will go before school starts."

His eyes seemed to be pleading with her. She didn't really want *that* much of an adventure, but if it meant so much to him, then she would do it. "Will they not be angry with us for not going sooner?" She was truly afraid that the woman would not like her.

He grinned. "No, she'll just be glad to see us. Let's get our things together. I have a Portkey that always takes me home if I need it to."

She nodded and went to let her parents know that they had made other arrangements to get back to school. After everything was packed and they'd bid goodbye to her parents, Draco took out a long, skeleton key. "I'll activate it. Be ready to touch it in ten seconds."

She saw light flare up around her and felt a tug just behind her navel moments after she'd placed her fingers upon it. The sensation of being pulled forward was so powerful that when they stopped finally, she landed in a heap at his front door. He laughed and pulled her to her feet.

"Lord! You're a bit clumsy, aren't you?" He ruffled her hair.

Quickly smoothing down the mess he'd created, she replied curtly. "You don't have any complaints at night, now do you?"

"No, ma'am. You've got me there, Mrs. Malfoy." Just as he bent to kiss her lips, someone opened the door.

"Oh, Draco!" a female said excitedly. "I didn't know you were going to be here so soon. Oh, and is this the little Mu... er... wife-to-be?"

Hermione nearly recoiled. She looked at the woman and felt herself instantly dislike her. Hermione could see through her false smile. Her eyes were cold, and the expression on her face made her look as if she had smelled something horrible.

Hermione saw that Draco was looking at her in a rage. "She's my wife now. We were married by a Muggle minister, remember? If you are going to act as you are now, we *will* leave."

Mrs. Malfoy laughed. "Oh, nonsense! Do come in. You know that we feel it's not truly a wedding until it's been done the Malfoy way." She flashed a saccharine smile at them. "I'll have servants ready your rooms. She can have the one directly next to you."

"She'll be staying with me," Draco said firmly. His mother simply shrugged.

Hermione felt Draco's hand tighten on hers. His mother still looked her up and down as if appraising her. "Oh, that will not do. Where is your Malfoy cloak?"

"It's packed," Hermione said, not giving an inch. She gazed defiantly at her new mother-in-law. She hated to think of Draco growing up in a home such as this. No matter how grand it was; things were definitely lacking.

"We'll go into town this evening to *celebrate* of course." She said celebrate as if it were a foul word. "After, we will stop off to get a few things for you," she told Hermione, not caring she'd upset her. His mother looked at him.

"Draco, marriage by a Muggle in one of their ceremonies does not hold up in the Wizarding world unless you want it to. Of course," she coughed lightly, "you can file papers. I daresay if you change your mind before that, it can be reversed easily."

"I'll *not* be changing my mind," he retorted in an annoyed tone. "We will also have a Wizarding ceremony so that both families are satisfied."

"Yes, yes, of course, you will." Narcissa Malfoy's eyes gleamed. "You will do well to tell your wife how the Malfoy women behave, and you will show her how to present herself. No matter her background, if she is to be a Malfoy, she *will* act like one."

With that being said, she turned on her heel and walked off. Hermione was stung. He was right. They were definitely not like her family at all. "Do you want to leave?" he asked her softly. She shook her head. "Hermione, I'm so sorry. Her letters made it sound as if..." His face heated. "Just tell me if you want to leave, and I'll see it done. We don't have to stay here."

Hermione knew she would have to do this sooner or later, so she took a deep breath and got ready for whatever awaited them once they were inside. They went to Draco's room first to put their trunks away. She was just commenting on how nice it was when she heard his father come in.

"Ah, the happy couple. I trust you find everything in order?" He was smirking.

She nodded and tried to smile, but her face felt frozen. This man intimidated her. All the things he'd done to Harry, her, and her friends in the past had not left her mind. She watched in trepidation as he cocked his head to one side, appraising her. He'd not acted this way when he'd been in her home and in front of her parents. There was something different about him.

He walked around her so slowly that she felt as if she were on display. "Very nice. Good thinking, Draco. This will bring an unlikely alliance with Potter. We simply need a Wizarding ceremony to seal the deal." He stopped behind her. "She is one of his closest followers. Not hard to look at either, son. I *do* approve." The tone of his voice made her feel extremely uneasy. He boldly reached out to touch her hair, bringing a thick lock up to his nostrils. She couldn't read the expression on Draco's face, but she saw that one of his fists had curled up in anger.

"It's got nothing to do with an alliance, Father. It's how I feel, as I've told you already...many times." Draco's stony gaze didn't waver. "She is *my* wife. Don't even think of invoking the old Malfoy tradition."

Hermione gulped. *Tradition?* What in the world was he talking about? Draco moved forward possessively and clutched her to him. She nearly fainted when his father spoke again.

"Well, how am I to know if she is worthy of my name, boy? Surely you didn't think you could bring her here and not allow me to find out."

She couldn't meet his gaze, but she clutched at the wand in her sleeve. He and Draco were talking about him wanting to touch her. She would hex the bastard before he could even take another step towards her if he meant to put his hands on her.

"Make no mistake, Father. Your name means a lot to me, but I'll not have *anyone* lay a finger on *my* wife. If I have to unattach myself from this family, so be it." She could feel him shaking. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins no doubt.

Hesitantly, she looked up at Lucius Malfoy and saw the proud smile play upon his lips. "Well done, son. Apparently, I have my answer. If you've gone as far as to marry her amongst *Muggles* only and in their way without allowing us to be present, then she must be exceptionally pleasing. I'll not invoke tradition of course. I merely wanted to gauge things for myself." His father patted Draco's shoulder. "And, like it or not, there is an alliance now." He looked at his timepiece.

"Thank you, sir," Draco said.

"Well, I think we're safe to say you have an hour at most before we will make way to town. Do as you will until then while I go inform your mother."

Hermione watched his cloak swish around the corner before she looked at Draco. "Did you know that he would want to do that?" she asked, hating the hurt in her voice.

"I had heard tell of it, but I never dreamed he would actually try anything...especially since he didn't allow it to go on with my mother. Worry not. He was only testing us. I'll bet Mother was as well." He smiled and sighed in relief. "I thought we would have to leave. I meant what I said to him. I'd leave here before I'd let him touch you or have them mistreat you." He kissed her lips in reassurance. "I'll live with the Muggles if need be."

She grinned. "I was worried that I'd have to hex your father. Not exactly a perfect meeting, was it?"

He nodded. "I felt you move to grip your wand."

"I'll unpack our things," she said, hoping he didn't realize how disappointed she truly was about her reception.

"We've house-elves for that," he said quickly, pulling her over to the large bed. "Maybe we can just laze about and... uh... talk for a little while."

"Talk, eh?" she said incredulously, raising an eyebrow at the hand that moved up to cup one of her breasts. "Perhaps I'd like a tour of your house instead."

His cheeks reddened. "Sorry. I just can't help myself." His lips moved to press against hers, but a shuffling behind them interrupted the motion.

Narcissa Malfoy walked into Draco's room with a young woman at her side. "Go on then," she urged the girl. Then she turned to meet Hermione's eyes. "I'll have her fix you up in no time, dear. You will be absolutely stunning with your colorings in the Malfoy robes. I do hope you like what I have planned for you." She seemed much more affable than when Hermione had first met her. Maybe it was the prospect of having her way with Hermione, thinking that she could sculpt her into a perfect, dutiful wife.

"I think I'll search out my father and summon my robes from there. You two might be at this for a while," he said casually, but Hermione could see the pleased expression upon his face.

She smiled and stood still, uncertain about what they had planned. If it made him happy, she would do what needed to be done. The young woman approached and took her time casting spell after spell. Each time Hermione would feel a warm heat glide over her.

"I must know," began Narcissa snootily, "how it feels to land a worthy heir such as my Draco?"

Hermione blinked. "I love him. I don't care about his money."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about that. Lucius said you've always been around money, but surely since you see how things are in the Wizarding world, you know that we...above all others...have the most clout in society...under normal circumstances anyway. How does that make you feel?" His mother waited for a reply.

She chose her words carefully. "Well, ma'am..."

"Mother Narcissa. There is no need for such formality between family," Narcissa interrupted.

"Thanks," Hermione said, smiling uncomfortably. It felt odd to use a motherly endearment with another woman, especially when she did not have those types of feelings towards her. "If society ranking mattered to me, I'd be extremely honored that he is with me and not someone else, someone who cares about such rubbish... er... standings. However, I think what makes me happiest is that he chose me, knowing full well that I am not a pureblood, pushing his prior prejudices aside and seeing me for who I truly am."

This seemed to satisfy the woman, though she sniffed at the mention of Hermione not being a pureblood. "Oh, darling, you truly are beautiful. Well, now, I do see why he was drawn to you. Have a look." Hermione turned to the mirror.

She gasped. Her hair was down, yet it was no longer a bushy mass of waves and curls. It was straight with a few long curls near the ends, and it felt silky. She noticed a few light highlights throughout, blending with those she'd already had from the sun. Having been somewhat straightened, it lengthened considerably. Her face had just enough make-up on to look natural. She had never felt so pretty before in her life...save the time she went to the ball in fourth year with Viktor Krum.

"Exquisite," the mirror approved with a chuckle.

"I don't know what to say. I... I don't look like me."

For the first time, she saw a genuine smile on Draco's mother face, warming her demeanor greatly. "Just a few changes and it makes you someone else completely. I think you will do my son proudly. And us. Now, your new style will last roughly..." Her voice trailed away, and she looked at the young woman who had styled Hermione.

"Six months, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Yes, six months. You can change it then or have it renewed." She ran a finger through Hermione's hair. "Lovely, and the best thing is that you needn't do a thing aside from casting a drying spell after you wash it. The magic will take over."

"Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy. I really appreciate this."

"Mother Narcissa," she corrected her again. "You are bound to him in name already, and although not by Wizarding laws, we shall still consider you his wife until it's done the Malfoy way. Here. Try this." Narcissa summoned a silky, full-length, yellow dress that had a low dip in the front and small straps.

Nervously, Hermione shed her clothes, not liking that both women were watching, and put on the new dress as quickly as she could. After Narcissa's assistant flicked her wand, it fit to her body perfectly. "I love it."

"It was made by an exceptional half-blood designer who sells Muggle and Wizarding attire." She summoned a small pouch to her outstretched palm. "This is a gift from me. Do not take it off. It brings its wearer the ability to find something positive in each day. I have one just like it." She clasped an elegant gold chain around her neck. It had a rather large, yellow-tinted diamond pendant on it.

"Mother Narcissa, I don't know what to say." She was speechless. Though she'd never wanted for anything, she'd never had such finery before. Nor had she ever imagined such a necklace.

Narcissa's eyes watered. "I remember my wedding day. I had such high hopes that I'd live happily ever after and that each day would be filled with such joy." Her eyes clouded over. "I found out soon that I was but a pawn in a game. I learned to do my duty, and as such, I have lived an acceptable life. I sincerely hope that you will be more fortunate with your husband than I have been with mine."

There was no reply that Hermione could give her. She suddenly felt very sorry for the woman in front of her. How many years had she suffered? Did she ever have good days and find something positive to live for on her own, or did she always use her pendant?

"Now, remember," Narcissa continued, "do not do anything that would displease Draco or his father publicly. As the senior Malfoy, his father still has a lot of say in things. I'd not want to see you or Draco punished for something avoidable."

"Punished?"

"Lucius can sometimes be... overbearing and quite adamant about how things should be done. We make certain to not upset him," she said quietly. "He seems pleased with your match, however, so I think that you'll do all right. And, honestly, Draco seems to adore you."

"I promise to make him happy," Hermione said. "We get on well."

"This pleases me greatly. It's all I could ask of my son's wife. I admit that I was looking forward to his nuptials with Pansy Parkinson. I had some things planned already, but I do believe that he's made an excellent choice. I'd also like to thank you for helping him escape from those... pursuers last year. Regardless of what people think of me, he's my only son, and I love him like nothing else in this world." She smiled beatifically. "I'd never want to see him hurt or suffer."

"Thank you." Hermione felt guilty about this. The woman was grateful for something she didn't truly do. They'd simply made up that story so that people would think they'd been together much longer than they truly had been.

"Now, we mustn't really discuss things such as posture or attitude. Common sense will guide you there. I want you to think for yourself and act accordingly." She took her robes from the young woman who'd helped, quickly pulling them on and keeping them partially open to show off her dress. "If it helps, you can question yourself by asking: What would Mother Narcissa do in this situation?"

"Fair enough," Hermione agreed.

Narcissa nodded. "Come. They are likely waiting on us."

The advice she was given sunk in slowly. She knew Draco would not ever hurt her, but she was not so sure about Lucius. The man was cold and calculating. She'd put nothing past him. She put on the clear slippers that had been set out before her, and she donned her thick Malfoy robes. She immediately felt more confident about herself. Beautiful. As if the world were at her feet. She looked down at the ring Draco had bought for her. Looking into the mirror one last time, she saw a completely different person and felt truly as if she was born to be Hermione Jane Granger Malfoy.

Narcissa went ahead of her to the flight of stairs and descended regally as if she were a queen. Hermione easily picked up on her style and held her head just as high. She'd not give Lucius Malfoy anything to be displeased about. When she approached Draco and Lucius, she noted that two sets of blue-grey eyes were watching her every move. Both seemed pleased.

Lucius approached her first and placed a kiss upon her hand to show approval. "Very nicely done." She nodded graciously. He turned to his wife. "Well done." She nodded as well.

Draco kissed her cheek and whispered, "My God. You are beautiful, Mrs. Malfoy."

She blushed slightly and took his extended arm. After donning their cloaks, they used a Portkey to get into town. She tried not to look around the fancy restaurant as if she'd never seen such a beautiful place before, but it was hard. Draco helped her take off her cloak and gave an appreciative glance at her dress when she pulled off her robes.

"Ah, who do we have here?" A sophisticated looking man had approached Lucius; his eyes were on Hermione though. He had a much younger woman attached to his arm. She didn't seem to take notice of much and just smiled blankly.

Lucius stood and bowed. "Parkinson. Narcissa and Draco you know, but may I introduce the newest Malfoy? This is Draco's wife, Hermione."

"Wife..." The man choked for a moment.

Hermione suppressed the urge to giggle. *This must be Pansy's father.*

"I see..." He tried to compose himself. After all, she was the girl that Draco had run out on his daughter for...according to the story they'd all told. "Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Likewise," she said in a casual tone.

His airy wife spoke. "Oh, is she the one that filched Draco from Pansy? Why, she is adorable."

Narcissa looked up, expression of distaste apparent. "Surely you could keep such comments to yourself," she said disdainfully.

The other woman just smiled.

"Of course, she will. Won't you, my dear?" her husband admonished as if speaking to a child. She began humming loudly as if keeping rhythm with the beat of a song.

When they walked away, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, but she couldn't help staring at them with a look of dislike...one that mirrored that of Narcissa's.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked.

"What was wrong with that woman?"

Lucius chuckled. "Got in the way of a bad potion, I'd say. More like a child than a woman."

Narcissa smirked while Draco grinned openly. "And, you father, wanted to place me with her daughter."

"Yes, well, I was thinking of adding to your inheritance, now wasn't I? However, you've found someone with something just as powerful as money. She's got connections." Lucius saluted Draco with his wine glass.

She hated feeling as if she was not even here. How did Narcissa stand it? She decided to speak. "And just what are those connections, sir?"

He raised an eyebrow at her, but he merely looked amused. "Harry Potter, of course. Dumbledore. Ministry Connections." He smiled innocently. "Thanks to you, our name is once again respectable. After all, would the pure Miss Granger, friend of Harry Potter, dare to marry the son of a Death Eater had his family not reformed?"

He was toying with her, and she knew it. She saw Draco's eyes narrow, but she couldn't help but to ask one more question. "Have you truly reformed, Father Lucius?" she retorted, sipping her wine slowly.

He leaned forward and smirked. "Define reformed," he said, polished voice taking on a playful tone.

"Enough!" Draco said hotly, unconsciously scooting his chair closer to his wife. Lucius simply shrugged while Hermione looked slightly abashed.

They dined virtually in silence for the rest of the meal, and then it was time to leave. At the exit, they bumped into Cornelius Fudge. He had two other wizards with him. Fudge seemed very uncomfortable. Though he was no longer the Minister of Magic, he still worked there as one of Scrimgeour's advisors. He wouldn't want to be seen mingling with a Death Eater gone free.

"Well, hello, Cornelius," Lucius drawled, extending the gloved hand not holding his cane.

"Ah... Lucius, hello. Had dinner, eh?" He seemed nervous. The other two wizards were looking at Draco and his father with contempt.

"We're celebrating." Lucius said casually. "Draco's been married recently."

"Oh, how nice to hear. Who is the lucky young lady?" Fudge asked, eyeing Hermione oddly, lime green bowler hat nearly tipping off his head.

"Oh, my, Cornelius. Have you never met Hermione Granger...now Malfoy?" Lucius said, tone politely incredulous. "I would have thought that everyone knew her on sight. Why, I do apologize." He motioned to Hermione.

"Eh?" Cornelius replied dumbly. "Hermione Granger, did you say?" He put on his glasses for a better look at her. "Oho."

"Hello, Mr. Fudge. I've not seen you in over a year," she said cordially, extending her hand. He took it and shook it rapidly.

"Why, it *has* been a while. Look who is a Malfoy now," he said turning to his companions. They looked at her with interest. "Hermione Granger. She's Harry Potter's friend."

The attitudes of the two men changed drastically. They warmed to the Malfoys immediately.

"Nice to finally meet you."

"Great wandwork...read about how quick you are."

"Pleasure," she said softly.

Cornelius patted Lucius' shoulder. "I'm right glad of it, Lucius. Right glad. Bout time you saw things our way. Have a good evening."

Hermione saw Draco's father give his wife a look of triumph as he took her arm to lead her out. Draco smiled oddly at her and shrugged. She took his hand in hers, and they followed his parents into the street.

"We'll go right across here to buy her things," Narcissa instructed her husband.

Draco watched in disbelief as his father and mother pawed over Hermione. Apparently, they were both impressed with the affect that her name had with those Ministry jerks. Hermione had never looked more beautiful or poised before. He could really get used to this newfound confidence that she had, but she was no longer the same Hermione that he had fallen in love with. She had changed in only a matter of hours. He knew that she was just trying to give his parents a good impression, but she shouldn't have to work so hard for one. They should have welcomed her openly as her parents had welcomed him.

He could see his father looking at her as if she were a new toy. He'd kill him if he ever touched her. Why, his father had taken to openly flirting with her at the table...or as much flirting as he'd ever seen him capable of. His father was giving him credit for thinking of an alliance with Potter. That had been the last thing on his mind. He loved her. As she was. She didn't need all of this. They were buying out the store. New dresses, new robes, new shoes. And her new hairstyle was enough to make him want to get lost in her long locks, but he'd grown found of her thick mass of waves. Thankfully, they would be off to school the next day. Things would hopefully revert back to normal.

Once at home, his father called them into the study. "I've come to the conclusion that we mustn't wait another moment to bind you as Wizarding man and wife." He opened a small box on a shelf and pulled out a small dagger with a bone handle. "Narcissa?"

"I have it," she said softly.

Draco saw Hermione eyeing the dagger warily. "Are you ready for this?" he asked. She nodded. He squeezed her arm reassuringly. He watched as his father took three empty vials out.

"Draco," Lucius said. "You first." Mumbling something, he brought the dagger to the inside of Draco's palm and made a cut. He gathered up a small amount into a vial then his mother came forward with a dark green ribbon. "Hermione," his father called. They did the same thing for her. She had a white ribbon tied around her wound instead.

He watched as his mother swiftly tied their hands together, both ribbons melding together via magic. His father opened a cabinet and took out a liquor bottle...or so he thought. He poured a bit into the last remaining vial. Lucius then added just a drop of Hermione's blood and just a drop of Draco's blood. He shook it up and poured half into a goblet and half into another goblet.

"Drink it all. Both of you."

He saw Hermione grimace, but she swallowed her drink entirely. He followed suit. Lucius summoned a parchment from his shelf. He cut his own palm without flinching. He took his quill and dipped it in his blood easily. Draco saw that he signed his name as witness. His mother moved forward and did the same. "All right. Now each of you dip this quill in your own vial, and sign your names." After they signed the parchment, Lucius rolled it up and sealed it with the Malfoy insignia. Holding his wand at both of them, he bellowed, "*Matrimonious Completio!*" A blinding purple light hit them both. Draco's eyes closed.

Hermione was silently watching Draco. He hadn't spoken all that much since they'd boarded the Hogwarts Express for school. They had nearly missed the train, waking at the last minute. She hadn't seen Harry or Ron yet even. Something was wrong. "Draco?"

"Mmmmm?" he said not looking at her.

"Is something wrong?" He didn't reply. "Draco, please look at me. Have I done something to displease you?"

"You sound just like her. Don't you see it?" he said irritably.

She blinked. What was he going on about? "Who?"

"My mother! In only a day, you've become one of them, Hermione. Where is the woman that I love?"

His eyes met hers, and she was startled at what she saw. "I'm still me, Draco. I was only acting the way I thought I was supposed to. The way I thought *you* wanted me to."

She frowned. She thought he would be pleased.

"I don't want a perfect wife or a docile little woman to control. I want Hermione Granger back. The one who would tell me to sod off if I said something she didn't like." He sighed. "Don't get me wrong. I love you, and I love how you look. But I loved you before the alteration. You don't have to change anything to make me happy."

"Draco, I will always be me underneath. I just don't think it hurts anything to make them think that I am what they would have liked as your wife. It will certainly keep your father off of me, and your mother will have a friend to confide in. Lucius won't make you suffer for my blunders." She scooted closer. "Can't you understand that? Who cares if I have to shake hands with Ministry people or smile at arrogant family friends? It's still me."

He smiled sadly. "I just wish they would be like your parents. Warm. Accepting. I didn't have to become anyone other than who I was already when I met them. You have become..."

"Your wife, Draco. Hermione Malfoy. I'm still me. I'm just wrapped a bit differently is all." She kissed his cheek. "Besides, I thought you would have liked my new look. I like it. It makes me feel good about me."

"I love it, but you didn't have to change a thing. You should have been confident already. You are the cleverest witch of the age, Hermione. Everyone says it. You are good on the inside. You see everything as it should be seen. I've learned so much from you." He kissed her. "I've lived my entire life being the dutiful son, and this past year I've been trying to do my own thing. I just thought that with you I had escaped them. I don't want you to be like them."

"You have my promise as your wife to never change on the inside. Only when we are near them will I assume my new poised, Malfoy personality. Agreed?" She giggled. She could understand how he was feeling. It had been a big change for her as well and in such a short amount of time at that! Some insane part of her liked the way it felt to walk into a room and command attention...just as when they'd walked into the restaurant. She'd have to be sure to keep that hidden. She didn't want to change on the inside. Just how she appeared on the outside.

"Who the hell is this?" a voice asked from the door of their compartment. It was Ron. She smiled at him when she saw recognition in his eyes finally. "Bloody hell! Hermione! What's his lot done to you?"

He walked in uninvited and sat down across from them. Pansy, Harry, and Ginny followed him in. "Hi," Pansy said softly. "Father tells me that you two have been... er... married?"

"That's right." Draco said evenly as if waiting for a challenge from someone.

"Well," Harry said with a chuckle. "That would explain the big picture on the front page of the *Prophet* then." They all started laughing. "I guess congratulations are in order." He met her eyes questioningly. She smiled trying to show him this is what she wanted.

"Thanks and what are we doing on the front page of that ruddy paper?" she said softly.

Draco had an idea. "I wouldn't put it past my mother to have tipped them off."

"Wow, Hermione, you look great. Married life must change a person!" Ginny said, ogling her.

"It does indeed," Draco drawled, but he looked at her with a wry grin and squeezed her hand tightly. "I'm the luckiest bloke alive."

"Anyone ever been married while still in school before?" Ron asked, putting a candy in his mouth. "Will you get your own room?"

"I just assumed that we'll share my room," Hermione said, shrugging. "This sort of just happened. Our parents thought it would be a good idea," she explained. "Each for their own reasons," she added under her breath.

"Wow!" Pansy snatched at her hand. "It's beautiful. All of it. The ring. The hair. The make-up. The Malfoy robes. Thank you, Hermione. You and Draco have shown my father that good can come of odd alliances. I think Ron and I will be next."

Ron gulped. "Eh? What's that?"

"To be married of course. My father wants to devote more time to my mother, what with her illness. You will be needed to run things, but I want a grand wedding. We'll have to wait until school is out at least. My father has more time during summer months."

Ron looked at Draco and Hermione as if he had no idea what she was going on about, but at the same time, he looked pleased. "Er... all right?" he replied apprehensively, though it sounded more like a question.

Hermione looked to Harry. "And you two... All right?"

"Yes, but we are taking things much more slowly," he said quickly. Ginny just giggled.

Hermione smiled at her friends. They'd all overcome so much these years. Draco and Pansy had each made a stand on their own. Ron had finally gotten over her. Harry and Ginny finally realized what they were missing out on and became a couple.

~~~~~EPILOGUE~~~~~

Draco woke before his wife and kissed her naked back softly before rising. He walked over to the room adjoining theirs. His young son, Dylan, lay sleeping comfortably in his toddler bed. The past eight years of marriage had done him well. Hermione had given him a son three years before, and she would hopefully be expecting another child soon. They sure put in enough practice. He smirked.

He owed most of this to Harry though. It wasn't until Harry had strong words about loyalties with Lucius that his father had finally realized the value of Hermione and her friends. He ceased seeing them as connections and saw them as an extension of his family. Proudly, his father had given Harry and the Order a bit of information to finding missing Death Eaters. Draco would always be grateful for that. Perhaps, though, it was Hermione's change that had changed them all. She walked into their lives and showed them that all witches and wizards were equal. Purebloods were not better than everyone else after all.

Harry and Ginny were married with a child one on the way. He had gone on to play Quidditch for England and was still their Seeker. They rarely lost in all the years he'd played for them, giving England the Quidditch World Cup for six years in a row. Harry was pretty much his best mate now. Ron came close, but it was mostly Harry that he conversed with. Crabbe, Goyle, and Zabini all seemed to drift off, each doing their own thing. It was interesting how the Gryffindor lot made it a point to stay in touch and remain close.

Ron was quite busy keeping up with Weasley tradition and didn't visit as much as he'd have liked, although the Parkinson estate bordered theirs. They had three little Weasleys already. Motherhood suited Pansy well though, so Draco felt that she had done the right thing in choosing Ron as her husband. It turned out that Ron had an extremely good business sense. Pansy's family business was finally thriving.

No matter how busy they all were with their own lives and their own families, they came together at least twice a month...usually on a Sunday. He looked forward to those times. It did both him and Hermione some good to see their mates.

Draco crept back to bed and snuggled next to his wife. She was still the most beautiful, cleverest witch in the world in his eyes. True to her word, she'd never wavered from his side nor changed her views, but in the eyes of the public, she was the perfectly poised Malfoy Princess. She had done his family proud. When she held their son or

showed their son new things, he could nearly burst with the emotion he felt. That fateful day that they'd made the mutual deal to get rid of their possible futures had sealed their fates. He couldn't be happier. He gathered her close and drifted back to sleep

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**Southern's Notes:** Quite fluffy, but... I like it. Happy endings always make me smile. \*\*Picks up OOC Draco and Hermione and cuddles them.\*\* Had I realized that this was the last chapter, I would have tried to get it out sooner. I was thinking that there were two chapters left. Hmmm! Oh, well.

Thanks so much for reading the story. I hope you liked this bit of fun.

**Christy's Notes:** I loved the fluffy goodness! Sad to see it end though. I just love happy endings, too! Well done, Southern!