

Beautiful Disaster

by Darkrivertempest

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One

Chapter 1 of 2

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"Are you sure you can't come?" Hermione begged, though she felt like a heel for asking.

Ron just leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Mione, it's Valentine's Day!" He looked around the kitchen at the Burrow to see if anyone was listening. "Harry got us, Ginny, and Lavender reservations at this posh spot in London. I'm not about to back out now for some boring festival."

She smiled hesitantly. "Right, I forgot you four had plans."

"Yeah, well..." He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling uncomfortable. "You could always come with us. Harry would alter the reservation, you know he would."

Biting her lip, she shook her head. "That's okay, Ron. I really don't want to be the fifth wheel on a special day like that."

"You wouldn't be a fifth wheel and you know it," he admonished. "Sometimes I just don't understand you."

She crossed her arms defensively. "What's there to understand? I love books, I'm intelligent, I've helped you escape death and mayhem several times, and I helped you pass your exams." Her nostrils flared in irritation. "What more is there to Hermione Granger?"

He grimaced and backed away slowly. "Are your monthlies... you know..."

Rolling her eyes, she huffed. "Circe, you are so thick!"

"No need to get belli... belliger..."

"Belligerent?" she completed for him, hands now on her hips. To be honest, she was surprised he even knew what the word meant.

"You've really turned into a piece of work after the war, you know that?" he pointed out, nearing the back door to the kitchen.

"What, that I actually went to university to study instead of settling down and having kids? Is that your issue with me?"

Walking quickly away from the door and towards her, he hissed, "No! I knew you never wanted that lifestyle." He raised one hand as if to touch her then balled it into a fist, lowering it in frustration. "This is has nothing to do with a Druid festival, saving our backsides during the war, or choosing school instead of married life."

"What is it then? Why do you think I've changed?" she growled defensively.

"It's not you who has changed, `Mione," he said gently. "It's me... it's Harry. Hell, it's even Ginny. We're all older now; we want different things. But you? You still want the same thing you've always wanted to master in Magical Law and turn the Wizarding world on its bigoted bum." Taking her hand he squeezed it. "And that's what'll make us proud of you, not that we aren't already, but we know it's your dream and best friends like to be a part of that."

"I suppose."

Ron released her hand and stepped away. "You know I love you, we all do."

"But?" she prompted when he started to fidget, a sure sign that he was uncomfortable with the conversation.

"There's no *but*, honestly. We'll always love you," he assured her, then grimaced. "But... I think you need to figure out if that's all there is to your dream: just getting the Wizarding world straightened out and all." He smiled lopsidedly. "If it is, that's great, but you need to realize that we're all going our separate ways and when you want us to do something with you, it might not happen because *our* lives are mucked up at the moment. It has nothing to do with you."

He moved to hug her, but she retreated to the other end of the room, finally giving him a false smile. "Right. I get it now."

"Hermione..." He knew that look and that tone.

She held up her hand. "No, really, it's okay, Ron. I totally understand the position I put you in, and I don't want to cause a scene. I'm going to the festival by myself," she affirmed, raising her head a little. "I hope you four have a great time tonight, and eat a piece of chocolate cake for me." She smiled again, winked at him and left the kitchen.

"Merlin, the woman still needs to sort out her priorities," he muttered and headed out the back door.

Waiting until he was gone, Hermione sunk to the floor and let silent tears slip down her cheeks unchecked. She hated the fact that he was right, that they'd all been drifting further apart the past five years while she had been attending university, even though she owed them almost weekly. *Guess it doesn't make up for face-to-face time*, she mused. She acknowledged that asking Ron or even Harry to accompany her to the festival had been a bit short notice since it was that evening, but she'd thought she would be able to rely on their strong friendship to get past any disagreements.

Now she finally comprehended all that she'd missed while away. If she guessed right, Ron and Harry were on the verge of getting married to the people that suited them best. It just wasn't for her at present. People got on with their lives; they didn't stop and wait for Hermione Granger to graduate to fulfill their own dreams.

So why was she sitting on her backside wallowing in self pity? Why wasn't she out having fun while on spring break? Because she was Hermione nose-stuck-in-a-book Granger, that's why! Who else could be trusted to clean up the mess that was left behind? But that didn't mean she couldn't afford to be a bit reckless now and then... right?

Thumping her head against the wall in frustration, she vowed to have fun this evening, come what may.

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The Imbolc Rowan Festival in Salisbury was in full swing by the time Hermione Apparated to a secluded area and dusted herself off. It was a Muggle Celtic celebration lasting from January twenty-first and culminating on February seventeenth, with Imbolc celebrated on February second, and Valentine's Day especially being honorific.

Imbolc was a celebration sacred to Brigid, the goddess of poetry, healing, and smithcraft. It was a time to concentrate on what one wanted to manifest in the coming year, a time of infinite opportunity for the new cycle of life and creativity, when things stirred beneath the surface. She honestly couldn't think of a better way to start a different outlook on her life than to participate in the festival and shirk her need to feel responsible all the time.

In an effort to shake off her maudlin thoughts about where she was truly headed in life once she graduated, she'd decided to dress up a tad, curious to see if anyone would notice. A brief spell of warm weather graced the region, so she chose her outfit with comfort in mind.

Before Apparating to her flat, she'd stopped by Luna's and borrowed a skirt from her that she absolutely adored. It was handmade by Luna herself and consisted of several mismatched strips of gauzy fabric that made it lightweight and exceedingly comfortable no matter what the wearer was doing. Just as she was about to leave, her blonde friend had shoved a bag in her hand and told her to wear the contents under the skirt. Looking at the sack, she'd shrugged and tried once more to leave but, at the last moment, Luna said to go ahead and keep the skirt since she'd borrowed it more times than she herself had worn it.

When Hermione got home, she opened the magenta-coloured silk bag and gasped as she pulled out a pair of 'Never Rip, Never Sag' off-white stockings, delicate lace surrounding the top that would encase her thighs. Where did Luna think she was going? To a dance club? She couldn't wear those out in public... could she?

After much agonizing and pacing, trying to decide if she would don the items, she bucked up her Gryffindor courage and slipped into the skirt. It was like heaven as the soft material brushed against her hips and legs, ending just above her knees. She was glad that Luna had finally given her the article of clothing, believing she would've made some excuse not to give it back to her this time.

Biting her lip in hesitation, she eventually sat on the edge of the bed and tugged on the stockings. Oh, Merlin! They felt even better than the skirt! Standing, she approached the full-length mirror and twirled around to see how it looked. Not bad! Not bad at all.

Slipping her feet into her navy-blue Mary Janes, she pulled a t-shirt over her head that Harry had picked up in America when he'd gone to New York two years ago. It laughingly read, *Magic is just stuff science hasn't made boring yet*. She snorted as she read the script once more, knowing the idea would be lost on most Wizards, but be worthy of a chuckle or two amongst the Muggles. The shirt was indigo blue and brought out the equally blue strips of fabric in the skirt, the ensemble looking tastefully chic.

Adding an almond-brown cardigan, she applied mascara and subtle hints of eye shadow, as well as nude lip gloss to complete the effect. She secured her tresses with a butterfly barrette and left the rest to hang about her shoulders, enough to keep the chill away. Looking in the bathroom mirror one last time, she put on a brave face and hoped she wouldn't run into anyone she knew.

Standing near a copse of ash trees in the waning sunlight, she surveyed the area, hyperaware of any Muggles that might've caught her Apparating. Seeing nothing amiss, she started walking towards the entrance of the festival, reflexively touching her left forearm and making sure her wand was safely secured within its sheath.

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"One, please," Hermione said to the vendor, her mouth practically watering when she spied the candyfloss booth.

Leaning against the counter, she watched as the man dipped an empty paper cone in the machine, swirling it around until there was a large mound of pink cotton on top. Taking the confection, she paid him and turned, slowly meandering around the carnival-like grounds and studying the people that flitted here and there.

There were rides and attractions, and someone actually touting themselves to be the greatest wizard of all time. She snorted at that thought. If only Muggles really knew about magic then they wouldn't be fooled by the charlatan.

She was about to sit on a nearby bench when a flash of white caught her eye near one of the gaming booths. Moving covertly, she tried to act innocuous by pretending to

stand in line for the Ferris wheel. Inching her head around the person standing in front of her, she couldn't contain her gasp.

Arm poised to throw a dart, Draco Malfoy let it go and hit the balloon for which he was aiming. This earned him a hysterical squeal from the red-headed girl standing next to him, who jumped up and down and pointed to the gaudy, poorly stuffed orange unicorn hanging from the rafters of the stall. But what surprised her the most was the person off to his right.

Standing on the other side of Draco was his father, Lucius Malfoy, wearing the most long-suffering look she'd ever seen on a person. Every time the woman screeched ... for that's all it amounted to ... Lucius grimaced as if someone were running their nails down a chalkboard.

The urge to laugh was uncontrollable. At one point, the teenager in front of her watched her with a wary expression, ready to flee if she started cackling.

It was no secret that Lucius and Narcissa had had a very public divorce one year after the war was over. Rita Skeeter loved gossip more than she loved air, and the dissolution of their union had just been rife with whispers of blame and resentment on both sides, with Draco caught in the middle. Hermione even had it in her to pity the younger Malfoy because she'd seen her aunt go through the same thing and didn't wish that on anyone... not even the Malfoys.

After the dust settled, however, Lucius became somewhat of a recluse while Draco immersed himself into the Muggle world, much to his father's dismay. She and Harry or Ron had run into the Malfoy men on occasion over the years, and while the interactions were swift and to the point, there had been no animosity on either side, with both parties mature enough to know they'd lost a great deal in the war. Of course, Lucius toned down his dislike of Muggle-borns, but it was still there, lurking beneath the surface. There were even rumours that Draco had taken up with a Muggle girl some months ago, but Hermione had dismissed that notion as utterly preposterous. Now, looking at the obviously besotted pair, she had to wonder if the rumours weren't true.

It surprised her to see that Draco was dressed as a Muggle as well, complete with somewhat baggy jeans, a purple shirt that was casually rumpled, and tennis-shoes. His father, on the other hand, was robed in clothing more suited to his usual tastes. A cerulean blue dress-shirt, impeccably pressed, draped his torso, though it was not tucked into the charcoal gray slacks he wore, and black loafers rounded out the outfit. His hair was left flowing and free, the ends lying on a buttery soft black leather coat that reached mid-thigh in length. She could tell it was soft because it was almost right in front of her eyes.

Wait. What?

"Miss Granger, what a surprise," Lucius greeted in his usual drawl.

"You clean up right smart, Granger," Draco added, smirking while clasping the hand of the girl next to him.

"Mister Malfoy." Hermione acknowledged him with a polite nod and then turned to his son. "Draco."

"What brings you to Salisbury, Miss Granger?" Lucius asked, his curious gaze nearly burning a hole in her head.

She arched a brow and gestured all around her. "The festival." Turning her attention to the girl, who bore a striking resemblance to Ginny Weasley with her red hair and blue eyes, she then looked at Draco... waiting.

A cuff to Draco's ear nearly set her to laughing. "Introduce your *companion*, Draco," Lucius hissed. "I've raised you with better manners."

Wincing, he mumbled, "I hate it when he uses that bloody cane." Shaking off the obvious discomfort, he stood taller, pulled the hesitant young woman forward, and presented her. "This is Elise Withers, my girlfriend."

The young woman was shaking like a leaf, she was so nervous. Hermione immediately clasped her hand. "Very pleased to meet you, Elise. I'm Hermione Granger. I went to school with Draco."

Elise's eyes widened and her jaw dropped in awe. "*The* Hermione Granger? The one that saved the Boy-Who-Lived?" She squeezed Hermione's hand tighter. "I'm a Muggle, but even I've heard of Harry Potter!"

Ah, so the rumours *were* true. "You know about the Wizarding world?" Hermione was shocked as well.

"Draco tells me everything, especially about the Golden Trio that saved his rather nice arse," she said with a shy laugh.

Groaning could be heard from Lucius' direction, and Hermione had to bite her lip to keep from snickering at his predicament. "Well, I don't know about Draco having a nice arse," she offered with a moue of disgust at the blond.

"I'll have you know I have a delectable arse, Granger."

"Draco..."

"It's quite all right, Mister Malfoy." Hermione chuckled. "I've heard far worse from Ron and Harry."

"Oh my God! You know Harry Potter!" Elise whispered much like an adoring fan.

She tried to hide the brief look of disappointment, but feared she failed miserably. "Yes, he's part of the trio, hence I know him." She hadn't meant to sound snarky, but it couldn't be helped.

"Elise, I think it's time we indulged in the Tunnel of Love. What do you say?" Draco coaxed his girlfriend, obviously afraid she would say something that would just come across the wrong way.

"But, what about Hermione?" the red-head asked petulantly.

Draco blinked. "What about her? I'm sure she's here with Weasley, or..."

"She's here alone, Draco," Lucius said enigmatically.

Tilting her head in confusion, Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "How do you know?"

Lucius smirked. "If either Weasley or Mister Potter were upon the premises, I would've felt their magical signatures." He raked his gaze over her from head to toe. "They would also be loitering about your person."

His pointed perusal of her left Hermione feeling unsettled. She didn't have time to contemplate his behaviour however, when Draco suggested something wildly different.

"Why don't you keep my father company, Granger?"

"What?"

"Out of the question!" Both objected at the same time, glancing at each other, and moving slightly away.

Grabbing his father's elbow, Draco inclined his head towards Hermione. "I'll just be a moment. Entertain Elise for me, would you?" He didn't wait for her answer as he pulled

Lucius several metres out of earshot from the women.

Observing the two blonds bicker from afar, and noting the flush of irritation on Lucius' face and the grimace lining Draco's mouth, was highly amusing for Hermione. Every so often, the elder Malfoy would pound the tip of his cane upon the pavement to punctuate a point, but his son's gestures and sneer would counter said point.

"He looks very distraught," Elise murmured, her gaze firmly on both men.

"Draco's been distraught ever since his sixth year, to be honest," Hermione mused aloud to her companion.

"Oh, I don't mean Draco." The girl turned slightly towards her. "I meant Lucius."

Arching a brow, Hermione studied the other woman. "How so?"

Elise pointed to herself. "Well, having to deal with his son's Muggle girlfriend is not high on his 'things to do before I die' list. Plus, there's the fact that ever since the divorce he's been reluctant to socialize with anyone, including his business partners."

"That could have adverse affects on his future profits," Hermione said. "I didn't realize he pined so much for Narcissa."

"He doesn't, not really," Elise said with a shake of her head. "I think reality has left a bitter taste in his mouth, and if he doesn't change his perspective, his life will leave him with nothing tangible. He's resisting as much as he can, and it causes Draco a great deal of heartache."

The brunette studied the redhead. "You're a very wise person, Elise."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You have to be on your toes around those two."

Plucking a piece of floss from her confection and popping it in her mouth, Hermione agreed. "I have to give you credit. You're a brave person to take on Draco Malfoy." She smiled to herself. "You would've made a perfect Gryffindor."

Snatching a strand of Hermione's candy, Elise smirked. "I would much rather be a Slytherin, if it's all the same."

There was no time to answer as both Malfoys approached them, the younger wearing a thin smile, the older with a tinge of red about his ears and a haunted look lingering in his eyes. For some reason, Hermione's heart lurched in her chest to see such an expression on Lucius; he seemed like he felt lost.

"Ladies," Draco cooed taking Elise's hand. He then turned his gaze on Hermione. "I would be in your debt if you would keep my father company while Elise and I pursued *other* delights the festival has to offer."

"Draco, I do not see why I cannot just leave..."

"Father..." the younger Malfoy cut him off in a beseeching tone.

"It would be my pleasure to spend time with Lucius," Hermione quickly offered. "That is, if he has no objections."

What the bloody hell was she thinking? This was Lucius Malfoy! Ex-Death Eater Lucius, the scourge-of-all-Muggle-borns, Malfoy! She admitted that her earlier conversation with Ron about the path her life was headed had some weight to this sudden urge to be reckless, but really... wasn't this taking it a bit *too* far?

A twitch to the corner of his eye was the only indication of Lucius' emotions concerning the situation. "None that I dare voice," he muttered harshly, darting a glare in his son's direction.

"Good," Draco said with a genuine smile. "Then I leave you in her capable hands, Father." He clapped him on the shoulder and pulled Elise with him as they made their way towards the more love-oriented distractions.

Once they were out of sight, Lucius tugged on his shirt cuffs, sniffing. "If you don't mind, Miss Granger, I find myself rather weary of this gathering. Do tell Draco not to worry." He turned to Apparate, but Hermione's hand on his arm halted his progress.

"Wait a minute," she said, gesturing with her candyfloss filled hand. "He wants you to stay, for whatever reason that may be, but I told him I'd stay with you."

"Let go of my person, Madam," he practically snarled, trying to withdraw from her grip.

In a moment of desperation, Hermione used Slytherin tactics. "I'll tell Draco you cursed me and left me to die."

His eyes widened almost comically. "So you're blackmailing me as well? Shameless witch."

"Blackmail?"

"Yes, blackmail, Miss Granger... do look it up." He was finally able to escape her hold on him. "That is why I'm here at this infernal festival."

"Draco blackmailed you into attending?"

"To rephrase his indelicate choice of words, if I ever want to see my future grandchildren then I'd better embrace Muggle society." He rubbed his forehead and sighed. "I believe he plans to ask Elise to marry him this evening."

"And you don't approve?" she asked quietly.

He tapped his cane lightly against his leg. "For a Muggle, the girl is quite adept at high society." Bowing his head, he caressed the silver serpent with a graceful thumb. "She will make him happy," he admitted softly.

"Isn't that what you ultimately want for Draco?"

A look of exhaustion stole across his features and Hermione's compassionate heart lurched once more. "I am... tired, Miss Granger," he confessed, as if it were a dirty secret. And she supposed to him, it was. "I want Draco to experience life. If this is his path, then so be it. I cannot stop him, not if I wish to remain on speaking terms with him."

Without giving it much thought, she patted his back comfortingly. "I understand more than you could guess." Her look of sympathy soon turned to one of horror when she realized the hand patting his back also held what remained of her candyfloss, only now the strands of sticky sugar were entwined with his blond locks.

"Miss Granger," Lucius growled in a low voice, "either you've sighted the Dark Lord himself, or something has gone terribly amiss."

"Erm, I... erm..."

"Well?" he barked, making her jump. This left even more cotton fibers snarled in his hair.

How could he not feel it? "Nothing." She hesitated. "It was nothing, honestly."

He turned his gaze to look in the direction she'd been staring so he didn't notice when she dropped her jaw in shock to see all the pink stuck to his hair. She closed her mouth just in time when he returned his attention back to her. There was no way in Hades she was going to tell him he had half a cone of candyfloss attached to his head.

"Shall we see if there are any attractions worth experiencing?" Hermione offered, trying to change his mind about leaving.

"You're still determined to keep me here, are you not?" He rolled his shoulders and brushed imaginary lint from the sleeve of his leather coat.

"Well, seeing as we're both alone on Valentine's Day, I don't imagine that it could hurt," she grumbled, picking the last flyaway pieces of floss from the cone and laying them on her tongue.

Lucius' gaze deliberately lingered on her mouth, his pupils dilated with an unknown fire as he watched her lips close over the pink sugar, his nostrils flaring. "If I must stay, then you should ... as Draco suggested ... keep me company and... *entertain* me."

A peach-coloured flush rapidly tinged the skin around her collar bone and neck, making her feel breathless. "I will do my utmost to comply with his wishes," she assured him.

Holding an outstretched palm, he indicated she was to walk ahead of him. "Lead on, Madam."

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"No."

"Well, I'm going to play, even if you're not." Hermione huffed, handing over the money to the game attendant. "You can follow me."

Lucius arched a brow. "There are only nine holes."

She rolled her eyes. "That's why it's called *miniature* golf." Peering into the wire basket, she chose a neon orange golf ball.

"Does that account for the pathetic excuse for a course as well?" He paused in his disdain when a Muggle woman looked at him oddly, laughed, then moved on. "And why are complete strangers staring at me as if I've sprouted horns?"

Glancing at the now congealed pink sugar coating a good portion of his hair, she shrugged and grabbed a putter. "I have no clue," she lied. She wasn't about to tell him his perfect coif was... well, less than perfect, and that it was her fault.

"Where are the other clubs?" he asked, eyeing the putter. "I have the finest woods and irons Mister Titleist ever crafted."

"No doubt," she snorted, placing her ball on the Astroturf and lining it up with the hole several metres away. His words made her think for a moment. "You play golf? Muggle golf?"

He stood next to her, practically shoulder to shoulder, studying her stance as if he were her instructor. "Yes, of course." He visually measured the distance from her starting point to the hole. "I often play with Severus when he's not busy trying to perfect the Wolfsbane potion."

Hand on hip, she stared at him. "I thought he was just as much a recluse as you are?"

"If you've known the same man that I have for these many years, then you would know how often he makes a public appearance."

"Almost never," she agreed. "So one would reason that the *Daily Prophet* would capture some photo of you two hitting the links, but that's never happened."

Standing with the ball at the tip of his shoes, he relieved her of her putter, ignoring her splutter of outrage. "Of course not. The press cannot come within thirty kilometres of my estate."

"You have a full golf course on the Malfoy property?" she asked, shocked.

He lined up the head of the putter with the ball and tapped it gently, sending the orange sphere travelling to its destination, making a plunking sound as it dropped into the cup at the end. "I have three golf courses." He handed the club back to her.

"You miserable sod!" she ground out. "That was *my* shot!"

Smirking, he pointed to the people waiting behind them. "You were dallying, Miss Granger."

Her nose wrinkled in disgust, and she walked to the end of the first course, retrieving her ball and missing Lucius' quirked lips while he watched her bend over. He quickly followed her as she made her way to the second hole, which looked like it required a heftier swing to pinpoint the ball in the right direction.

"Stay there!" she ordered when he was half a metre away from her. "I actually want to play the game I paid for."

"If I may suggest..."

"No, you may not." She spread her feet apart and straightened out her arms, gripping the handle of her club.

Lucius realized that when she would hit the ball it would fly wildly, probably to land in someone's drink with the way she was standing. Though she refused his guidance, he felt compelled to warn her of the impending disaster if she continued with her untutored stance.

"Hermione, I think if you were to" There was a loud crack. "*Fucking bloody hell, Granger!*" he roared, clutching his left eye.

"Oh my God!" she cried, dropping her putter and rushing over to his bent form.

The children in the group behind them started sobbing in response to Lucius' menacing litany of colourful metaphors, promising to annihilate all Muggles, especially ones with golf clubs, given the first opportunity. Hermione wrapped her arm around his shoulders and moved them away from the crowd, apologizing profusely for scaring the children, leading the partially blind Malfoy to a bench where he could sit down.

"Oh Merlin! Oh Circe!" Hermione fretted, trying to pry Lucius' hand from his face. "I didn't mean to hit you with the club!"

Removing his hand, he winced at her gasp. "What exactly did you mean to do then, Miss Granger?" He'd sneer, but it hurt too much. "Extract my eye and sell it in Borgin and Burkes?"

Touching the area around his socket lightly, she sighed. "I don't think anything's broken." Watching the flesh quickly turn a deep shade of purple, she added, "And I don't think I'd make that much selling your eye, so it wouldn't be worth it."

"Why you impudent..."

She interrupted his tirade. "Let me get you some ice for that."

When he frowned, he also grimaced. "Just hand me my cane and I'll Episkey the bruise."

She held his staff out of reach. "You can't, this is a Muggle area. No magic."

"You mean to tell me that I can't simply spell away a bruise because some filthy Mug..." He halted midsentence at her stricken look.

"I'll be right back," she murmured, biting her lip to keep it from quivering. She made her way to a concession stand that sold food and drinks.

"Damn that boy," Lucius groused, gingerly pressing his fingers against his tender skin. "These hypothetical grandchildren best be worth going blind in my young age."

After several moments of snarling at anything that came near him, he sat there with one eye swollen shut, while several young adults paused on their way towards the amusement rides and gawked at him, sniggering and pointing. Oh, how he wished he could hex their bollocks off! Was the Malfoy glare losing its touch these days? Even if they were Muggle, they should at least have been trembling in their shoes.

Eventually they left, having tired of their juvenile sport, and he bowed his head, massaging his temples to rid himself of the ache that had begun to take over. A cool cloth placed over his assaulted area brought immense relief, and he sighed in spite of himself.

"I hope this helps," Hermione said softly, her hand over the towel, pressing the ice to his abused eye.

Her kindness startled him. "Thank you, Miss Granger." He leaned his head back and rested it on the edge of the bench, looking at her out of the corner of his good eye. "I'm... ahem. Well, I apologize for my earlier comment," he offered hesitantly.

She waved off his apology. "To be honest, I'm surprised you lasted this long without sending a non-verbal curse into the crowd." She smirked somewhat. "I'm quite proud of your tolerance so far."

"The evening is still young," he quipped sardonically. "Give me another hour or two, and I'll have the whole lot of them turned into something resembling the contents of Snape's specimen jars."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said with a laugh. Withdrawing her hand, she had him replace it with his own to keep the cold fabric in place. "Here, I brought you something to eat." She broke off a piece of lightly salted soft pretzel.

He took it and sniffed at the baked dough. "This is plebeian at best."

Smiling through gritted teeth, she forced herself to remain calm. "That's one of the attractions of a festival, Mister Malfoy... experiencing the fair of the common people."

"Then *you* eat it, Miss Granger," he drawled. "I'm not quite up to *experiencing* that Muggle tradition just yet."

"Unmitigated arse," she grumbled under her breath, seething at his condescension. Snatching the tidbit from his fingers, she promptly began eating it, washing it down with the mead she'd bought to accompany the pretzel she'd acquired for herself.

"May I at least cast a spell to relieve my headache?" he complained a little while later.

Popping the last bite into her mouth, she finished off the mead and threw the cup into a trash receptacle on the left side of their bench. "No, not in front of Muggles," she reiterated. She then laid her fingers against his temples, rubbing slowly and gently in a circular pattern, chanting in a very low tone.

Five minutes later, Lucius removed the now wet cloth and stared at Hermione. "Thank you," he said quietly. "Severus was the only one in Slytherin that could perform those healing charms with any accuracy."

"Yes, well, he taught me only after I begged and pleaded, groveling on the cold stone of the dungeon floor." She laughed to herself. "I think he took sadistic delight in my torture, but I never had a more proficient professor."

Standing slowly, he turned and looked down at her averted face. "I believe he would be quite proud of you, Miss Granger," he stated with conviction.

Her smile was brilliant. "Really?" She cleared her throat and tried to look humble. "I mean, really? That's good to know."

Hiding his smirk, Lucius held out his hand in an effort to help her up. "So can you heal the black eye in the same manner?"

She shook her head. "No, I only progressed to aches during his training." Wrinkling her nose, she looked closely at his eye once more. "There are lots of things I can handle, but leeches are not one of them, and you wouldn't believe what he wanted me to do with them."

"I can hazard a guess."

"Please don't."

Inclining his head slightly, Lucius scanned the crowd. "What havoc are you going to inflict upon me next, Miss Granger?"

"Hermione," she corrected, smiling.

"Ah, yes." He gave her a mock bow. "Hermione, then. And you must call me Lucius."

"If I must," she sighed, teasingly. Noticing the strange glint in his good eye, she focused her attention elsewhere. "I believe the rides are something everyone should experience."

"Rides?" He followed the path of her gaze. "Rides..." he whispered, his already pale skin going ashen when he spied the large contraptions flinging people to and fro, hearing their screams.

It was going to be a long night.

Two

Determined not to feel sorry for herself on a lonely Valentine's Day, Hermione decides to indulge in a little reckless behaviour, catering to herself instead of others for once. So how did she get stuck 'babysitting' Lucius Malfoy? One would think he enjoyed the tortures she made him endure, but when he takes his revenge, it's sweet for both of them.

"Let's try something low-key at first," Hermione suggested, pointing to the carousel they were approaching.

Lucius watched as the replicas of imaginary creatures meandered in a circle, the animals slowly rising up and descending to their original position on long vertical rods of steel. "That Pegasus is sadly lacking."

Ignoring his comment, she steered them to the end of the line. "I'll be sure to tell the artists next time they're looking for inspiration." Paying the attendant, she chose an overly large purple and pink striped cat and perched herself upon its back.

Unwilling to be parted from the only other person he knew, Lucius had no choice but to sit on the animal next to her... a brown hare dressed in a formal jacket and holding a cup of tea. He turned sharply to glare at her the moment she tried...and failed...to hide her laughter. "Say Jabberwocky, Hermione, and you'll find new meaning to the phrase 'mad as a hatter'."

As the ride began, she studied him, beside herself with curiosity. "You're constantly surprising me, Lucius," she admitted after several rotations of the carousel. "You spout pure-blood supremacy...though not so loudly anymore...yet you know who Lewis Carroll was."

"Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, to be correct," he tasked her, smirking. He tightened his grip on the metal pole in front of him as his mount rose. "And I believe the phrase 'know thine enemy' comes to mind."

"Ah." She nodded, rising as he was lowering. "Keep your friends close, your enemies closer." She noticed him staring at her thigh when a small gust of wind tossed the edge of her skirt higher, revealing the lacy top of her stocking. Embarrassed, she tugged the hem down to her knees.

More sniggering drew his attention away from the perusal of her leg, and he turned to sneer at the people behind him, only to have the chuckles turn to outright laughter when they saw his black eye. He faced forward once more, lips firmly pressed in a thin line until there was no colour left in them.

"Are you sure there is nothing wrong with my appearance this evening? Barring the grievous injury to my face, of course."

Forcing herself not to glance at the sugary mess in his hair, she shook her head. "They're just... giddy, happy about the festival." His arched eyebrow told her he didn't buy her explanation for one moment.

"When will this mind-numbing pursuit end?" he growled.

It was as if his words alone brought the ride to its conclusion. Sliding off the wooden animal, he took Hermione's hand and helped her down from the cat, his fingers lingering. He dropped them after she peered at him in a surprised manner.

Swallowing, she smiled hesitantly. "Would you like something to drink before we brave more rides?" She didn't understand why she was so hot all of a sudden.

He did not offer his hand as they stepped off the platform. "No, thank you, but if you are parched, then by all means."

Fanning her face, she indicated a booth that sold honeyed mead, and they made their way to the counter. After purchasing her beverage, another pretzel and more candyfloss, they strolled along the grounds taking in the sights and activities. Well, at least Hermione did.

"What *is* that?" Lucius asked, eyeing the blue floss atop the paper cone.

"You mean to tell me that you've never had candyfloss?" At the shake of his head, she offered him the fluff. "Here, have some, it's delicious!"

He drew back, his lip curling in disgust. "I think not."

Pulling a few strands free, she laid them on her tongue, taking great satisfaction in how his fascinated gaze followed the movement. "You don't know what you're missing."

"Perhaps I've been too hasty..." he mumbled, still staring at her mouth.

Pinching another morsel between her fingers, she brought the cotton to his lips, prompting him to open them. Once he did, she carefully slipped her thumb inside and nearly gasped when his tongue curled around the pad. Her heartbeat became erratic as his eyes closed in bliss, his lips refusing to release the digit.

"Uhhh, Lucius," she said a little breathlessly. "May I have my thumb back?"

Startled to find that he was, indeed, sucking on her thumb, he gently wrapped his fingers around her wrist and slowly withdrew it. "My apologies," he purred, though he didn't sound repentant in the least. "It seems I was wrong in my prior assumption." He released her wrist and gave her a heated look. "It was utterly divine."

Oh, the butterflies were flitting like mad in her stomach! Her previous fumbblings with boys hadn't prepared her for a man of this calibre, especially one that was quite adept at flirting... dangerously so. Panic began to rise within at knowing she was way out of her league, and she became desperate to find another distraction.

"The Ferris wheel!" she exclaimed, breaking the trance they both seemed to have fallen under.

He blinked then quickly adopted a neutral expression. "Where you lead, I must follow."

Frowning, she laid a hand on his forearm. "If you don't want to, you don't have to, Lucius."

"The sooner we are done with this farce of an event, the sooner I can go home and take care of this," he snarled, pointing to his eye.

Her throat closed up at his abrupt change in emotion, and she reminded herself that this was, at one time, one of the most treacherous men in Wizarding history, next to Voldemort. "One more ride then," she murmured, her skin flushed. "After that you may leave, and I'll tell Draco you thoroughly enjoyed yourself."

Snorting, he shook his head. "He will know you're lying, Hermione."

"If you want to leave now, I won't hold it against you, and I'll explain to Draco that you had a little accident," she hedged, swallowing reflexively.

Observing her crestfallen expression made his good eye twitch in response, and he thinned his lips. "If it will please you, Hermione," he said with a faint tinge of irritation, "I would accompany you on one more ride."

"Really?" She honestly didn't want to force him to endure any more humiliations this evening.

"Really," he answered, tucking a stray lock of hair behind his ear. He then froze. "What the bloody..." Separating several sticky, matted tresses from his mane, he gasped in horror. "What is..."

"Look at that," she said, feigning innocence. "Pink is definitely *not* your colour."

Snarling, he turned accusing eyes on her. "Miss Granger..."

"Now, now, Lucius," she interrupted, trying to divert his attention from the congealed mass on his head. "You promised me one more carnival ride."

He glowered at her. "Have I been walking around all night with this... this..."

"The sooner we choose one, the sooner you can go home," she reminded him, smiling mischievously.

Eyes narrowed, he hissed, "It is *very* fortunate for you, Miss Granger, that we are in a crowd full of Muggles."

"Or what?"

"I'd bend you over my knee and smack that pretty arse of yours raw." He added to his threat by looming over her.

"You'd have to catch me first," she huffed, and quickly fled... with his cane.

"Infuriating chit!" he growled, jaw clenched. He watched her trounce towards the circular machine that seemed much like the carousel, except inverted.

Arriving at the end of the line, Hermione glanced over her shoulder to see if Lucius had followed her. He paced within the shadows, probably debating whether to retrieve his wand and hex her, or just give in and indulge her in this last ride. She didn't let him see how his earlier comment about spanking her had affected her to the point of wanting to lift her skirt and tell him to 'get on with it'. Smug bastard probably thought she would enjoy it. The problem was, she knew she would.

"May I please have my cane?" Lucius asked in a dangerously low tone, his lips brushing against her ear.

Closing her eyes and biting her lip, she shook her head. "Not until after the ride is over." She was mentally kicking herself for letting him sneak up on her, but then again, her frame of mind was shot all to hell from the tension and casual flirting they'd been engaging in the entire evening.

Apparently, he wanted to up the stakes. Moving her thick curls to the side, he pressed a kiss to the back of her neck. "A compromise then. I'll let you keep it... if you promise to hold it between your thighs," he purred, nuzzling just underneath her hairline.

Turning to face him, she quickly pressed the serpent head cane into his hands. "Here." The word came out panted. "That's not something I'm willing to negotiate."

Leaning closer, he brushed his nose against hers. "Has your courage abandoned you, Gryffindor?" he taunted.

"Next!" the ride operator yelled, holding the lap-bar, waiting for the couple. "Come on, I've not got all night!"

Anxious to escape his intrusion of her personal space, she moved away swiftly to the car and sat off to one side, wringing her hands nervously.

"Well?" the greasy looking Muggle man pressed, looking at Lucius and gesturing to the padded bench.

Sneering in disdain at him, Lucius took his seat next to Hermione, their thighs touching. "Isn't this cosy?" he drawled, scowling when the metal bar was snapped shut across the top of his stomach.

Any further conversation was stopped as the machine moved backwards and Lucius grabbed the bar to keep from falling forward. "Are you sure this is safe?" he asked cautiously, peering over the edge at the ground below.

"Quite," she assured, not looking at him. She was afraid he would see something in her eyes she didn't want him to see: desire. "It just goes around, nothing more." When had this fun excursion turned into a romp through Muggleville with an ex-Death Eater? Oh, that's right, back when she agreed to show Lucius the festival at his son's behest. Real smart, Granger.

The car moved back and up again as another couple was loaded into the seat below them and they were soon midway to the top. "Does the proverbial cat have your tongue?" he teased after several moments of silence.

Beginning to turn in earnest, the ride picked up speed as the giant wheel spun. "No," she muttered, pressing her fingers against her eyes. "I don't have anything to say."

"That's unusual for you, isn't it?" He was taking great pleasure in this ride as the breeze generated by the movement lifted her skirt once more, allowing him more than a glimpse of toned flesh. Eyes riveted to her legs, he almost missed her moan.

"Oh, Gods..."

Shifting his gaze to her, he quickly realized she looked very green. "Hermione?"

Clutching her abdomen, she pressed the back of her wrist to her mouth, squeezing her eyes shut.

His eyes widened in comprehension. "Don't you dare..."

But it was too late. Stomach rolling from all the sugar and mead she'd consumed, combined with the rapid motion of the ride and the stress of uncontrolled emotions proved too much for Hermione's intestinal fortitude. The contents of her belly landed all over Lucius, the crowd below, and her beloved skirt.

Since the sick-up fell onto the operator, he immediately slowed the ride until it stopped, hastening the filth covered occupants out of the car and away from the premises, and banning them from any further riding. This was quite all right with Lucius, who now looked like what Muggles called a 'vagabond', and probably smelled like one, too.

Hermione was embarrassed to the core, tears fringing her lashes. She moved towards the exit, leaving Lucius standing there, covered in sick while wearing pink in his hair, and sporting a black eye.

"Miss Granger!" he shouted to her retreating form. He grumbled when she either refused to listen to his call or was completely out of earshot. "Hermione!"

She slowed somewhat until she stood shaking in the evening chill, waiting on his words of condemnation for her behaviour. Wiping the tears away, she watched as he approached her. "I'm s-so sorry, Lucius." The words were barely audible through her hiccupping. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

Trying hard not to smirk, he went for a dour look instead. "I suspect that if you did mean for this to happen, it would've been in retaliation for some offense in our past."

For some reason, that caused her to cry harder. "I'm not like that!" she sobbed.

Taking her elbow, he pulled her into an awkward hug. "I know you're not," he cooed softly. "That's how I know tonight was just... well, let's just call it a beautiful disaster, shall we?"

Sniffing, she withdrew from his arms, tentatively smiling. "Beautiful?"

The back of his cool fingers caressed her cheek. "Yes." He tilted his head and studied her. "We're a thorough mess," he observed, indicating her outfit and his. "Is it

possible to Apparate now?"

Grimacing, she swiped at a deposit of what she assumed was pre-digested pretzel on his shirt lapel. "Yes. We're out of range for any Muggle contact, so I think it's safe for you to go back to the manor."

"I insist you accompany me, so that we may clean ourselves." He sounded adamant. "It would be such a waste if you were to have ruined your unique skirt. Plus, it would be very ungentlemanly of me if I did not escort you home."

Touching the hem, she took stock of the damage. "It was a gift from Luna Lovegood." Tears filled her eyes again. "She'll never forgive me if I destroyed it the very day she gave it to me."

He rubbed the cloth between his fingers. "I highly doubt that, Hermione." He then looked at her with hooded eyes. "She is your friend, no?"

"Yes," she whispered, unable to break the pull of his hypnotic grey eyes. She retreated in an effort to sever the connection, but found herself tripping over an exposed tree root and falling backwards.

A loud ripping sound filled the night air.

"Oh, for Morgana's sake!" she groaned, sitting on her backside in the dirt, staring up at a now practically shirtless Lucius.

His jaw ticked and nostrils flared as he looked down at his chest and the remaining shreds of his dress shirt. In her fall backwards, Hermione had grabbed hold of his lapels to keep her balance. It hadn't helped, however, because as she went down, she popped all the buttons and tore most of the fabric from neck to waist, the two strips of cloth still clutched tightly in her hands.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Lucius heaved a long-suffering sigh, much like the ones he'd issued at the beginning of the night. "I guess I should be fortunate that you're *not* hell-bent on my destruction, Miss Granger," he mused. "For you surely would've achieved it this evening."

"I'm sorry?" she offered timidly, cringing when he bent low and pulled her up to stand next to him. It was a monumental effort not to look at the sculpted chest that was laid bare by her clumsiness.

"You owe me a new shirt," he said.

Securing her against his body, he Apparated them to his manor, intent on scrubbing every inch of his sorely abused person. And if he were lucky, she might help him with those hard to reach areas.